



Edward U. Demmer
Memorial Library
6961 W. School St.
PO Box 760
Three Lakes, WI 54562

Phone (715) 546-3391
FAX (715) 546-3914

demmer@demmerlibrary.org

DATE: October 5, 2020

TO: Mark Arend, MCPL Task Force Library System Inquiry Committee Chair

FROM: Erica Brewster, Director, Edward U. Demmer Memorial Library, Oneida County, Three Lakes

RE: Marathon County Public Library Task Force Library System Inquiry: use of SWOT analysis

I am curious about the methods being used by the task force as they work toward a decision about which library system best meets their strategic needs.

For your next meeting you are using a SWOT (Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats), a common tool that many people have heard of or have used as a way of reviewing and analyzing a situation. However, in this scenario, I would not be surprised if the members of the task force feel incapable of fully participating in this meeting and exercise and find themselves confused.

Prior to becoming a library director, I earned my Master of Public Health degree and employed my training for more than ten years in facilitation and community development - six overseas and five as a family living educator for UW-Extension in Oneida County (2010-2015). I have guided multiple groups through long-range strategic planning and difficult decisions. The priority is always to make sure all members of the group fully understand all aspects of the situation so they are capable of contributing to the discussion and decision.

As I reviewed the questions for the SWOT analysis, I agree these are key questions that need to be answered. However, I would be challenged to answer even one myself despite my experience as a library director and having followed the task force.

As the Marathon County Public Library does not have a current strategic plan, many of these questions about a system's ability to respond to a library's strategic needs become impossible to answer, including:

- "What services do they provide that would allow MCPL to reallocate resources to other projects and services?"
- "Do they have expertise to that help [sic] MCPL enhance its services?"

If a library's director and trustees do not know and cannot communicate what services need outsourcing or enhancing, no system can be judged able to perform better or worse in providing opportunities for the library.

Several of the questions rely on the viewpoints of other libraries within a system outside of MCPL.

- "Have they earned a good reputation for service and support?"
- "Do they have solid relationships with member libraries?"
- "How willing are they to improve their service?"
- "How professional are they in helping you enhance your services?"
- "How does the system support libraries' advocacy efforts with local officials?"



Edward U. Demmer
Memorial Library
6961 W. School St.
PO Box 760
Three Lakes, WI 54562

Phone (715) 546-3391
FAX (715) 546-3914

demmer@demmerlibrary.org

- "How stable is the system? Does there seem to be a lot of internal discord? This could be between system staff, between member libraries, or between system staff and member libraries."
- "Do libraries seem happy and satisfied with system services?"

At no point in the process have other libraries in WVLS, or, to my or other WVLS directors' knowledge, libraries in SCLS, been asked to respond to those questions. Absent direct inquiry to librarians at the grassroots level, it is unfair to expect task force members to assess from afar how things "seem" to be going in either system. Unedited comments responding to these questions from library directors and library trustees from both systems' libraries would be the only way of assessing these questions.

The task force has heard some limited reports from WVLS and SCLS staff that could help them respond to some questions, but leave them short of being fully fleshed out:

- "How innovative are they?"
- "Are their staff experienced and capable?"
- "Are there opportunities that MCPL might miss out on by choosing this system?"

These questions are a small minority of the list, and these three questions alone could be worth an hour's discussion.

In my experience, SWOT questions would be presented at the first or second meeting and it would have taken seven or eight meetings or more to explore them. As a facilitator, I would have charged individuals on the task force to research questions and report back to the committee members. Then, with full participation, the members could begin to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats (constraints) of each possible future. These would be discussed by the whole group using the time necessary to reflect the weight of the decision.

Alternatively, there are other methods that could be far more useful and more efficient to helping participants make a major decision between two service providers, and all techniques would benefit from a trained and experienced outside facilitator.

When any situation this complex is misunderstood or under analyzed, the result is far too likely to come from the thoughts of the executive or administration of the organization and not from the independent understanding of the public representatives appointed to provide governance to that organization.

I am curious as to why are you choosing to use the SWOT method at this point in the process? Will the task force, library trustees, and members of the Marathon County EEE Committee truly have confidence in the results of the discussion to date?

Like you, I want all stakeholders to have a clear picture of both futures, with WVLS or SCLS.

Thank you.