

Building from the Ground Up

A Path Toward Co-Creation

ALEXANDRIA ABENSHON AND KEVIN KELLEY

Through a co-creative methodology, we have worked to foster a shared sense of ownership and purpose between branch staff and leadership. We utilized a variety of familiar strategies to build a vision for New York Public Library's (NYPL) children's department that centered on patron and branch staff perspectives—including active listening, returning to the vision, and building a community of practice that centers on appreciation.

We spent 2022 and 2023 listening to library patrons and staff to hear what programs and services they needed most. We have myriad ways for our community, patrons, and staff to share and create with us. Our vision incorporates the nuanced lens of the neuroarts (science-backed ways that tell us how the arts impact our brains, bodies, and behaviors). Because this particular lens was new, but the concepts familiar, we leveraged consistent ways to incorporate voices other than our own.

One of the most critical elements to come from our vision work is the Children's Advisory Team, otherwise known as CHAT. CHAT is composed of branch staff members from libraries across the NYPL system, and the staff work in a variety of branches: small, large, busy with babies, busy with older kids.

We worked closely with the team throughout our strategy development, soliciting feedback from members as we worked. This engagement with the advisory team ensured that the vision remained aligned with identified staff needs and perspectives. CHAT continues and members continue to provide their invaluable perspectives on a variety of topics, provide input on projects and initiatives, and remain critical representatives of the branch libraries.

To foster widespread understanding and adoption of the new approach, we implemented a comprehensive communication plan to highlight our work with all of our stakeholders. This included presentations and meetings with senior leadership, library management, and frontline children's staff. We also built opportunities for peer-to-peer networking, and shared resources were utilized to reinforce key messages. We take every opportunity to reinforce our vision by being explicit about how our actions relate to our vision.

Even in our informal meetings, we planned ways to tie our activities and learning back to our focus on authentic relationship building and the way the arts can change us. We used a deck of social skills cards for kids to practice on-the-fly fun relationship-building strategies and talked about the way process art can benefit *all* makers while we made process art ourselves. Every moment is an opportunity to tie your actions back to your message.

But it's not just about professional development or the focus groups. Successfully subverting the top-down approach includes cultivating a community of practice among staff—a community that celebrates, uplifts, and rewards. One of the pillars of our



Alexandria Abenshon is the Director of Children's Programs and Services at the New York Public Library. **Kevin Kelley** is the Associate Director of School-Age Children's Programs and Services at the New York Public Library.

community of practice is our seasonal, branch community-sourced storytelling initiative called Illustrate Your Impact.

Everyday Magic

Illustrate Your Impact began in Summer 2022 to celebrate a true return to in-person programming—we reached our “new normal.” *We were nervous! Would people come back? Would our programs be full like they were pre-pandemic? What if things weren't the same?*

We asked staff to submit stories and photos of their work that made them smile. And after three summers of Illustrate Your Impact, we now encourage all staff to submit their stories, regardless of what age group they work with. Children's staff are also called to share stories and photos in November and April in an effort to keep highlighting the everyday moments that lead to big memories in our patrons' lives outside of those summer months.

Collective storytelling allows us to share ideas, show appreciation, and bring joy and levity to our work. We celebrate each participant by sending a handwritten note about their first submission that is specific, speaks to what they have shared, and

acknowledges their work. This note is accompanied by stickers, erasers, and other small goodies.

Illustrate Your Impact further serves as a regularly updated repository for qualitative data used to inform our reporting and storytelling. Since we began collecting our stories, we have received more than 700 responses from staff highlighting the everyday magic of the library.

Of course, none of this work happens without a healthy dose of reflection on our end. We continue to listen, come back to our core vision and beliefs, and rely on our community of practice to guide our work forward.

Change doesn't happen overnight, and it's rarely easy, but there are a lot of ways to take small steps to incorporate staff voice into your planning and design to garner grassroots support and incorporate new ideas and initiatives.

What resonates with you, and what strategies have you implemented already to build your plans for service? We look forward to hearing the many ways you've built visions and strategies with your community in places where everyday magic occurs—the library. &

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