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Breaking up is Hard to Do — Ending a Partnership

by **Maggie Farrell** (Dean of Libraries, University of Nevada Las Vegas) <maggie.farrell@unlv.edu>



Many partnerships have a conclusion to the relationship as the project is achieved but some relationships have long term agreements. While we have focused these articles on partnerships, a discussion regarding ending relationships can apply to different types of relationships within librarianship. A partnership may end due to a variety of reasons — the project is completed, personnel change within partner organizations that may shift the priorities, or changes in needs occur requiring different solutions or partners. If the partnership has been effective for developing a solution, the partnership may continue but at a different level. The relationship may also evolve from one of deep engagement to a typical vendor-customer relationship. Some partnerships just naturally cease so endings are not always a negative parting but an evolution of the relationship. In some cases, a partnership fails and is no longer effective. The failure may occur for a variety of reasons such as unexpected costs, unrealistic expectations, poor planning, non-delivery of services, lack of communication, over expenditures of resources, etc. Regardless of why a relationship ceases, there are some steps to take to end a partnership.

Hopefully when a partnership is not working well, steps to resolve problems have been taken. These steps include working through situations as outlined in previous articles in this issue. If a relationship is on rocky ground, then attention to resolving the situation is required. This should be a professional approach documenting the problem, attempting with good faith to resolve differences, working through the communication protocol to report and resolve the situation. But if the partnership is no longer working or is no longer viable, then the partners should seek ways to effectively end the partnership — just as the beginning is documented, the ending should also be a thoughtful process.

Within librarianship, the vendor and library circle is quite small. The industry is small enough that it seems vendors and librarians know each other quite well. For partnerships and any type of relationships, the library industry is very familiar and becoming more so as the market sees further consolidation. Instead of working with many integrated library systems (ILS), librarians have just a few options for managing internal operations. In addition some publishers are combining with software companies and other services further consolidating the marketplace with larger

companies selling content, access, delivery, and management of information. The industry has collapsed to such a degree that librarians are working with individuals who previously worked at other companies. And librarians often switch libraries so while a librarian might have a very close relationship with one company, in a few years, that librarian might be working closely with a different company due to a professional change. It is a small industry and it behooves librarians and vendors to not burn bridges as they end a relationship. In addition, a librarian who is successful with a partnership may either bring that relationship to a new position or start a similar project at another library. It makes sense that partners understand that due to the size of the industry, keeping the relationship on a professional level will serve all parties well in the future.

If the relationship is ending due to difficulties or disagreements, the partners hopefully have documented the issues. This will aid the partners in why the relationship is ending but may also be necessary if there are legal requirements. Even with informal relationships, such documentation is helpful to brief others in the future as to the cause of the dissolution. This may serve as a lesson for future partnerships or provide materials to prepare for a new partnership should the project be restarted or a similar one considered.

Hopefully at the start of the relationship, details regarding ending a project or partnership are clearly stated. Details may include notification of ceasing a partnership with a time frame such as six months or sixty days. The details may also outline the specifics such as notification to whom and how that notification is to be provided. If there are assets, the division of resources, payment, or other financial details should be outlined in the original agreement. If the original agreement does not provide guidelines for ceasing a relationship or if the project did not include a formal agreement, then care should be taken to consider the investment and any possible dispersal of assets. The details should be documented and clearly communicated so that all partners are informed — and hopefully in agreement. In unusual cases, legal action may be necessary. In such situations, there usually is a legal office for libraries to consult such as a city attorney or university legal counsel. Should one of the partners choose legal action, then previous documentation is essential. Understanding that need throughout the project is good stewardship even for successful

partnerships as circumstances may shift. Ensuring that established agreements are adhered to is a good foundation for effective relationships. Documentation throughout a partnership helps to guide the ongoing relationship as well as to document the conclusion.

Throughout a project or collaboration, partners need to approach the relationship in a professional manner which seems obvious but surprisingly, the vendor-library relationship can be very negative in which librarians are suspicious of vendors and vendors are disrespectful of librarians. Understanding that close nature of the library industry and that librarians and vendors are dependent on each other should guide the relationship. “All librarians have inherited various relationships with vendors, and their successors will inherit their relationships. Because of this fact, librarians must take the long view...these relationships themselves should be considered an important investment” (Thomas, 2013, p.4). While some librarians are suspicious of the profit motive of vendors and some vendors may not respect librarianship, respecting the roles of each partner and valuing the expertise that each contributes to an initiative will set a professional tone for the relationship that will serve the current collaboration and future endeavors.

The ending of a negative relationship or a failed project is discouraging for partners. But not all endings need to be disheartening — it takes courage to try new endeavors and failures can be learning experiences. The project may have been ahead of its time, the right people may not have been involved, or it just did not work. But learning from failure has its benefits. What is more critical is the professional attitude that guides all relationships. Focusing on our future with partners who share our vision will shape our services and together we will advance librarianship.

Within our industry, relationships are critical to the success of our libraries. Vendors and librarians have shared interests in furthering access and use of information that contributes to community dialogue and new knowledge. The relationship between librarians and vendors is vital to our mutual success. These relationships depend on clearly articulated goals, agreements, strong communication, and attention. When a relationship concludes, either by choice or circumstance, it is just as critical to conclude the relationship on the same professional level as when it started. In so doing, librarians and vendors are modeling the very values of respect and professionalism that librarianship honors.

References

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Author Bio

Maggie Farrell is the Dean of Libraries at the **University of Nevada Las Vegas, USA**, serving over 30,000 students in a diverse and energetic community. Previously, **Maggie** was the Dean of Libraries at **Clemson University** and the **University of Wyoming**. **Maggie** also worked at **Montana State University**, the **U.S. Government Printing Office**, **Arizona State University**, and **Dalhousie University**, Canada. **Maggie** earned an MPA from **Arizona State University** and MLS from the **University of Arizona**. This varied experience contributes to **Maggie’s** interest in library leadership and management. 🐾