

Leader Profile



Leader Profile:

Siobhan Reardon

President and CEO

Free Library of Philadelphia

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First female CEO views challenges as opportunities

Siobhan Reardon finds her position as the first woman president of the Free Library of Philadelphia to be representative of the industry. “The profession is largely made up of females — many who are mothers and heads of families,” she says. “Women can relate to why it is so rewarding since many are responsible for their children’s education.”

In September 2008 — just four days after stepping into her new role — Reardon faced her first strategic challenge. “I had to come up with a way to cut one-fifth of our operating budget,” she explains. “My recommendation was to close 11 of our 54 branch libraries.” Although the ratio of libraries to the population is significantly greater in Philadelphia than in other larger metropolitan areas, public reaction to the recommended closings was fiercely negative.

In the face of the community’s resounding “no,” Reardon worked with the mayor and other stakeholders to develop alternatives that would save money without closing branches. The resulting interim solution kept all libraries open with reduced hours of operation, and Reardon went to work on addressing upcoming budget issues. “Our funding for next year is tied to a proposed sales tax increase, which is being challenged in the state legislature,” she says. At the same time, Reardon must find a way to complete a four-year central library expansion project, stalled by the same economic woes that threaten the library operating budget.

With corporate and foundation support down and an endowment shrinking along with declining financial markets, Reardon is prepared for more belt-tightening. But she remains optimistic: “Individual donations are up and our annual gala exceeded expectations,” she notes. “Our programs are meeting their targets and we’re continuing our very important early literacy initiatives to reach our youngest children.”

Reardon shares her philosophy of challenging the negative and seizing opportunity with the people she manages. “My door is wide open,” she explains. “I believe every idea has the potential to be a good idea. Ideas and contributions are what bring opportunity to an organization.” With the Free Library anticipating many retirements in the next five years, Reardon plans to seize that opportunity by developing good, strong leadership programs and engaging younger staff members with potential in new roles and initiatives. And while she needs to know what is happening, Reardon believes in allowing people to fulfill their responsibilities in their own ways. She values creativity and innovative thinking: “It blows me away when I hear, ‘That’s the way it always has been done,’” she says.

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Great leaders serve as role models for those they manage and Reardon’s career path serves as an ideal roadmap for people with leadership ambition. Before joining the Free Library, she served in roles of steadily increasing scope and responsibility for library systems in Westchester and Brooklyn, N.Y. and for the New York Public Library. For the Westchester system, she increased county support by 45 percent. During her tenure at the Brooklyn Public Library, she tripled the size of the library’s foundation and raised \$15 million for a new auditorium and plaza.

She has managed successful public relations and branding efforts, technology improvements, fundraising initiatives and financial departments. “When you’re running a \$70 million business, you must have a financial background, be a good communicator, have a lot of patience and a sense of humor,” she says. “You can’t take everything seriously and you need to be realistic.”

And it may be obvious, but this woman who has spent more than two decades in library management loves libraries. For Reardon as a child, the library was a place she could go after school and on Saturdays. She treasured the Saturday morning children’s plays. “I didn’t miss one play,” she notes. “I even asked the head librarian for her autograph!”

Fast-forward to her life today, and Reardon still loves libraries and is fully engaged in her work, but now faces the personal challenge presented by a commuter marriage. She and her husband, now empty nesters, are apart during the week and share weekend travel, meeting sometimes in New York and other weekends in Philadelphia. “The personal adjustment has been more difficult than I expected,” she says. “To help manage it, I work out and read a lot. There is nothing better than a good read through the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times* to keep things in perspective.”

From this female CEO’s point of view, the future holds both great challenge and untapped opportunity for the Free Library of Philadelphia. As that future unfolds, she’ll rely on her experience in making things happen. She’ll seek new roles for the library in the community, like partnering with art institutions to preserve the library’s collections or working with Philadelphia’s Project H.O.M.E. to provide library services to the homeless. And she’ll count on the contributions of the young leaders she manages.

Witt/Kieffer is proud to have consulted with the Free Library of Philadelphia on this important executive search assignment.

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