

# The Town Librarian and the Latchkey Children

## *Understanding Opportunities for Value Creation in the Public Sector*

### *Practitioner Guide*

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### Overview

A case study is a story about how a person or group of people faced and dealt with challenges or opportunities. It is based on desk research and interviews with key actors but does not provide analysis or conclusions. Written from the perspective of the protagonist(s), it is designed to raise questions and generate discussion about the issues they faced. Cases are meant to help participants develop analytic reasoning, listening, and judgment skills to strengthen their decision-making ability in other contexts.

A case-based conversation is a way to anchor a conceptual discussion to concrete examples. It can bring a case to life and allow participants to place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s), while also allowing a variety of perspectives to surface. This guide is designed to help you lead a conversation about the case, “The Town Librarian and the Latchkey Children: Understanding Opportunities for Value Creation in the Public Sector.”


### Role of a Facilitator

The facilitator leads a conversation with a clear beginning and end, ensures that everyone is heard, and keeps the group focused. The conversation can be broken into three distinct segments: exploring the case, applying the central questions of the case to your organization’s challenges, and formulating takeaway lessons. Some facilitation tips and tricks to keep in mind are below.

#### **BEFORE the discussion**

Make sure everyone takes the time to read the case. Participants also have the option to fill out the attached worksheets to prepare themselves for the case discussion. If you choose to use the worksheets, make sure you bring enough printouts for all. When setting up the room, think about situating participants where they can see you and each other. Designate a notetaker as well as a place where you can take notes on a flipchart or white board. Plan for at least sixty to seventy-five minutes to discuss the case and takeaways and have a clock in the room and/or an assigned timekeeper. Mention that you may interrupt participants in the interest of progressing the conversation.

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**DURING the discussion**

Encourage participants to debate and share opinions. State very clearly that there's no right or wrong "answer" to the case—cases are written so that reasonable people can disagree and debate different ideas and approaches. Be careful not to allow yourself or others to dominate the discussion. If the conversation is getting heated or bogged down on a particular issue, consider allowing participants to talk in pairs for a few minutes before returning to a full group discussion. Do not worry about reaching consensus, just make the most of this opportunity to practice thinking and learning together!

**Case Synopsis**

A town librarian was faced with the decision of what to do with a daily influx of noisy young people in need of a safe indoor place to stay after school while their parents were working. *Should she have sent them home with a note to their parents saying that the library is not a daycare facility? Used the burden on staff and space as justification for demanding more funds? Started an after-school program and charged a fee? Urged parents to pitch in as volunteers in the library?*

The librarian considered the problem as well as the opportunity that the latchkey children presented: *How might accommodating them fit into the mission of her organization, and how could she make room for these new "clients"?*

The case explores tensions between prescribed organizational mission statements and changing social, political, and practical realities. It is designed to facilitate discussion about the challenges and opportunities associated with adapting missions and organizational capacities to changing circumstances.

**Conversation Plan****Part 1: Exploring the Case** (30 minutes)

Ask if a participant will volunteer to summarize facts of the case and the question facing the reader, without stating their opinions. The goal of this part of the conversation is to review the case from the point of view of the people involved. Suggested questions:

- *What is the mission of a public library?*
  - (Optional) Enter responses on a flip chart or board
- *Did accommodating latchkey children fit into the mission of a library?*
  - (Optional) Do a straw poll
- *If you were the librarian in the case, what would you have done?*
  - *If you would have accommodated the children, what challenges might you have faced?*

Sample answers:

- Getting funding to support staff, programming
- Getting the public to buy in
- Getting the board to buy in
- Assessing needs and developing programming
- Managing change/disruption
- Etc.

- *If you chose not to accommodate the children, what challenges might you have faced?*

Sample answers:

- Restricting use of library possibly unlawful
- Having to offer children another option
- Facing angry parents
- Etc.

Introduce the general questions this case raises:

- *How do missions act as a guide and/or a constraint in organizational strategy and operations?  
How do you know when it is time to make a change?*

### **Part 2: Application** (20 minutes)

Invite participants to break into pairs or work as a group to apply the concepts discussed to their own managerial challenges. Suggested questions:

- *Have you experienced or are you experiencing a change in focus or mission (planned or unplanned) within your organization? If yes, why? If no, can you imagine a way for your organization to create more value using its current resources?*
- *Does implementing these changes require new resources? New partnerships? New capabilities?*
- *Where would you go to secure the support you need to implement the changes effectively?*

### **Part 3: Formulating Lessons** (15–20 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the lessons of the case that participants may continue to reflect on and apply to challenges in their work. High-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion might include:

- Missions can act both as a guide and a constraint when opportunities to make a difference present themselves.
- Problems that show up uninvited and seem outside of a public manager's mandate may be opportunities to make their organization more vital and valuable to the community.
- As organizations adapt and evolve in response to new challenges and opportunities, they must consider the values at stake, the need for new capabilities and/or partnerships, and the challenge of securing the necessary support to implement changes.



