

CASE STUDY 1: FOR THIS WE GET A MASTER'S DEGREE?

Introduction

The key challenge at Handgrove College Library is to determine who is responsible for taking care of computer, printer, and technology problems in the library. They clearly need to discuss and implement a process for how to resolve these issues.

Background

Of course, there are several other factors that are contributing to this issue:

- **Communication.** It's clear that Ms. Cloud has not created the best working environment for her staffers. They are afraid to approach her with this problem even as it continues to take the reference librarians away from the desk. And while Ms. Reid has brought this problem to Ms. Cloud before, it sounds like she simply dismisses all proposed solutions and doesn't pause to consider or discuss other solutions.
- **Leadership.** Both Ms. Cloud and Ms. Reid are not the best examples of leaders. If a staffer describes Ms. Cloud as having a "volcanic temper" that they try to avoid, it doesn't encourage open communication about problems, as mentioned above. And Ms. Reid knows that her team wants to discuss this problem, but instead of asking one of the lower-level staffers (Ms. Bindloss, Mr. Vedder or Ms. Warne) to take care of the technology issue, she ducks out and helps the student, leaving her team to confront Ms. Cloud about the situation without her. But at least she supports her team when she returns to the meeting.
- **Morale.** There seems to be a lack of community in this library. The narrator, Ms. Warne, tries to avoid her boss's exploding temper, expects her supervisor to avoid any confrontation, and even discusses her immediate colleagues with contempt, thinking "I didn't think you had it in you," when Ms. Bindloss speaks up, and referring to Mr. Vedder as a chicken. It feels like everyone is out for themselves, or, at the least, creating us/them dynamics where it is difficult to solve problems as a team. And the reference librarians seem to think this work is beneath them, which adds to the lack of community as well.

Alternative solutions

It sounds like Ms. Cloud has already rejected using the circulation staff to fix these problems, as well as asking the cataloguers to take care of them. (Where are the cataloguers? They're only mentioned once here.) I'm guessing the cataloguers are somewhat distant from the desk, and that they do not usually work with patrons, so I agree that they would be an unlikely solution.

I'm also curious – where is the IT staff? Do they reside in this building, or do they have a staffer in the building? I would think that having an IT staffer on call would be a great solution as it sounds like most of the problems are technical, and they would probably be solved more quickly by IT personnel.

Proposed solution

If IT is not in the building or nearby, which I'm guessing is the case if they have not been mentioned as a solution by this staff, then I believe the non-professional circulation staff would be the best people to help with these technical issues. Despite Ms. Cloud's retort that they can't leave the circulation desk unattended, she also points out that there are four reference librarians at the desk. One of them can help with circulation if someone needs to step out to help a patron.

Next steps

The librarians working at the circulation desk should go through some training. The reference librarians would need to learn about basic circulation tasks and policies, and the non-professional circulation staff should work with IT to learn how to resolve the most common problems that are popping up in the library. (And there should also be a process that delineates when to call IT for help, so that the circulation staffers are not facing the same problem that the reference librarians are facing – spending all of their time solving technical issues in the library.)

More than anything, though, this staff needs to work on open communication and team building. Perhaps they need to talk to HR about additional training over the summer, while traffic is lighter. Or find ways to connect away from the desk, like a day of service (again, in the summer or on a day when the library is closed). The entire team needs to find a way to work together to solve problems, rather than simply hurling witticisms without improving situations.

CASE STUDY 2: DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT?

Introduction

The challenge at Fairmead Library is that Robert feels he's being treated differently.

Background

This is manifesting in a few different ways, but **communication** seems to be the biggest problem. It sounds like Ms. Price is not great at direct communication, particularly with Robert. Micromanaging him from a nearby desk, directing him through other employees, checking up on him via email, and leaving Post-its with how to request vacation do not seem like the best way to talk about what needs to be done in the library.

I would put some of this on Robert's plate as well. While he prides himself on his experience, it's not clear whether the accounting suggestion he made was approved, which might explain how Ms. Price reacted to it. And his first reaction to the Post-it about vacation is to email Ms. Price, which is probably not the best idea, for a couple of reasons – tone is harder to convey in an email than in person, and if he really is concerned that Ms. Price is building a case against him to fire him, emails leave a trail. I suspect his frustration would come across in an email, and that would allow her to continue to build a case.

Differential treatment is certainly a possibility. I would be concerned with the fact that Ms. Price treats all men differently compared to her treatment of women, as Robert suggests. I hate to go so far as to term it "sexual harassment," as that often presents as too much attention, and this seems to be the opposite. I wonder if Ms. Price herself has been harassed herself in the past, or mistreated or abused in some way, something that would cause her to be wary around men – and perhaps lead to the indirect communication with Robert, fearful of direct communication.

Alternative solutions

They could go on communicating in these indirect ways, and Robert could continue to tip-toe around her and talk to other employees about his situation. But that's not the best for morale – for anyone in the library, but especially for Robert and Ms. Price. This tension would certainly affect everyone at some point, and it would most likely be sensed by the patrons as well.

I would be reluctant to have him go directly to HR, because that might cause even more problems with Ms. Price, particularly if Robert accuses her of sexual harassment, which I don't think is quite the case here. If they'd continue to work together afterward, it would be even more awkward than before.

Clearly Robert and Ms. Price need to communicate directly about this situation. My question would be if the city or county government (wherever the library's budget comes from) has some type of conflict management counselor. (The example that pops into my head is Jeffrey Weinerslav, from *30 Rock*, someone that isn't a manager or HR but can help employees work through a problem.)

Proposed solution

My hope would be that Robert and Ms. Price could talk about this together in a rational way without any accusations or negativity. The best way to accomplish that would be to bring in a third party to help

encourage positive conversation. If they don't have a conflict management counselor (which would be unlikely in a smaller government setting), perhaps a fellow employee can help these two talk through what is happening.

Maybe Ms. Price feels threatened by Robert's taking initiative for the accounting training. Perhaps she has some past issues with men that make her feel uncomfortable around them, and she needs to learn some ways to protect herself while improving her communication with and treatment of them. But only through direct communication between them will they be able to create a better working relationship and a more positive work environment.

Next steps

Whether through outside training or counseling, or simply making a more concerted effort to be present and polite, Robert and Ms. Price need to work on open, positive communication about how to work together in the library and make it more productive. I think they also need to work on team building, as Robert mentions his colleagues, but only in passing. If he felt like he was a part of a team, perhaps he'd be able to see Ms. Price as its leader, once the passive aggressive communication goes away.

CASE STUDY 3: A DIFFICULT DECISION

Introduction

The Library Director at Pine Valley Public Library, Christine Lavery, feels indebted to her mentor, Amy Williams. When a job position opens up, and Amy's son Brian applies for it, Christine considers him for the job, but out of 30 applicants, she has ranked him as the fifth best candidate for the position.

Background

Mentorship creates a strong bond between people, particularly when they work in the same space. I can understand Christine's hesitation about this situation, as she feels indebted to Amy for her leadership and her experience at the library.

But it's clear that Brian is not the best candidate, with a variety of jobs on his resume and middling performance evaluations. If he were a stronger candidate with equal skills and experience to her other top candidate, I could see wanting to choose him over another person. But it doesn't seem fair to the library and other staffers to put a lesser person in a position over better candidates that have applied.

Alternative solutions

Christine could hire Brian for the position, but she would know that he wasn't the best person for the position. And if he were to fail, and she'd have to search again later for a new person for the position, she might lose the chance to hire the better candidates that were passed over for the position. In addition, if these other candidates figure out that someone was hired due to favoritism, it could tarnish the library's and local government's reputation.

Proposed solution

If I were Christine, I would look at my staff and see what positions might be better suited to Brian, whether or not they are currently open. Perhaps there is a position that might be better for him, like something related to interlibrary loan (making deliveries between library branches) or doing reshelving work. I would try to find a couple of positions to keep in mind for Brian the next time they are open.

Next steps

Before making the job offer and announcement of the new hire, Christine should call Amy to let her know that she felt Brian was not the right person for the job, but there are several other positions that might better fit his skills. She could offer to let them know when those positions open so that he could apply. This shows that she honors Amy's contributions to the library over the years, and that she would love to support Brian in his career when he fits the job opening, but that she is not going to hire him when he is not the best candidate.

Then Christine can call to make the job offer to the chosen candidate, and, once the job has been accepted, she can make the announcement to the staff.

CASE STUDY 4: IS THIS A PUBLIC LIBRARY OR A REFUGE FOR THE HOMELESS?

Introduction

The library in Bridges Bay is having a continuous issue with homeless people congregating in the lobby to avoid bad weather and sit with some shelter.

Background

The city of Bridges Bay has a high level of poverty as compared to the rest of the U.S.; almost 16% of their residents live below the poverty level, as compared to nearly 8% across the country. The problem with the homeless people is unlikely to abate on its own.

The library workers don't agree on a solution. Bridget feels it is their duty to help these people who cannot help themselves, and recent court cases support their rights of free speech and assembly, despite a local law banning begging or vagrancy. Another staffer argues that the library is for tax-paying citizens of the town, and that as homeless people, they are not contributing to the upkeep of the library and thus should not be allowed to congregate there. Patrons have also complained several times to the staff, and even the mayor has heard about the issue and requested a call with the library director, Joseph Calenda.

This is clearly not an isolated problem for libraries. The ALA has a [collection of resources](#) for working with homeless patrons. And it's not surprising that people in trouble see the library as a safe space – it is a civic area associated with learning and public service, rather than government (like City Hall) or punishment (like the police station). Libraries have begun hiring social workers to help patrons access social services like Medicare benefits or financial assistance (Lloyd, 2018). And Mars (2013) notes that the ALA encourages librarians to remember that libraries are for everyone. Poor or wealthy, all citizens have a right to access information.

Alternative solutions

While these people have the right to a public space, it does not sound like they are using the library's resources. What are the library's policies with regards to vagrancy or patrons that are in the building but clearly not using the facility, like the woman standing in the lobby and having a muted conversation with her reflection? It sounds like if the library does not have a policy or procedure for how to work with the homeless in their community, they need to create one.

They should also consider hiring a social worker to work with their community. Such a staff member could help to create the necessary policies and procedures for working with rather than against their community, whether or not they are homeless. Perhaps having such a staffer to approach or work with would also help these individuals improve their own lives.

Proposed solution

Even if the library cannot hire a social worker, the staffers (including Joseph) need to complete some training or continuing education on how to work with people without homes. They need to consider how to approach the situation with understanding and remember that these citizens are still a part of the community, whether or not they pay taxes. If adding a social worker isn't an option, they should consider partnering with other organizations in the area that work with the homeless.

Joseph needs to consider how to reach out to these homeless patrons and offer assistance through the library, or perhaps enable Bridget to do this, as she seems to have the most empathy for the situation. Ask them what would help – explanations of how to access public services, including Medicare or local homeless shelters? How to apply for a job or public housing? My guess is that these people don't even know where to begin looking for help; having someone help them access these services could help them tremendously. I doubt they would feel comfortable asking for these services in a group setting, but creating a time of day (maybe like the first thing in the morning, before the library gets busy with other patrons) when they can come in to work on these applications or to discuss their needs would be helpful.

Next steps

Joseph needs to do some research on what the library can afford – online learning or an in-person seminar? A social worker that can reach out to the homeless patrons directly, or more education for Bridget so that she is more informed on what is available within their own community? And the team should work together to create policies and procedures that find ways to work with the homeless population with empathy while also respecting the needs and concerns of their other patrons.

References

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