You Gotta Have Work Friends

by Heather Groves Hannan and Janna Mattson

*I*t seems like such a simple concept, repeated often by our mothers and grandmothers: "you catch more flies with honey." Robert Fulghum stayed on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for nearly two years expanding upon this concept of playing nice in the sandbox in his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten:*

> Wisdom is not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.[1]

He is correct. We do not learn these things in graduate school because we should know them already. So why do interpersonal skills seem elusive so often in the library world? As library students, we learn how to conduct a successful reference interview, choosing phrases "in ways to avoid patron angst."[2] It would be difficult, however, to find a graduate library science program that includes lessons on interpersonal skills with co-workers. The most well-trained reference staff may create "negative tension that is noticeable by patrons and make the desk itself unapproachable"[3] if that staff lacks interpersonal skills. The authors will outline a workplace incident during which a new librarian observed an argument among library staff, how her supervisor chose to address the problem, and ultimately how library staff used the incident as a learning opportunity to improve interpersonal skills at work.

A new academic librarian, "Marion," only a couple of months into her new job at a university library, witnessed an argument between staff members during a meet-

> ### … the objective of the meeting was lost because of the extremely uncomfortable dynamics in the room.

ing that came as an unwelcome surprise. The meeting attendees, including those that were arguing, were people she did not know particularly well and had not worked with before. Since the university has a distributed library system consisting of five libraries in three different counties, librarians on different campuses often go for weeks or months without working directly with their peers. This is an additional challenge to the development of library staff relationships. Finally, Marion's supervisor was not in attendance at this meeting.

The argument seemed to Marion to be about something relatively benign, but clearly the arguing staff members were bigger stakeholders in the issue. Both sides had valid points, but the objective of the meeting was lost because of the extremely uncomfortable dynamics in the room. When other staff members started to stand up and head for the door, Marion decided to as well, but everyone was stopped by a senior staff member who wanted to resolve the issue at hand. A rushed decision was made and all of the meeting attendees seemed disgruntled and unhappy. Marion also felt frustrated that she had not spoken up, perhaps offering the valuable opinion of a new staff member with "fresh eyes."

Clearly some old office politics were rearing their ugly heads here and Marion was not the only one made uncomfortable by them. Bob Keiserman points out in his article "People Matters" that "Allowing conflicts to fester only promotes sabotage within your organization and the breakdown of optimum service to those using your library."[4] Marion knew this instinctively, but was unsure of her ability to do anything about bad office dynamics between other staff members. However, her silence could be construed as acceptance, and she felt that she had become part of the problem. Lorraine Pellack points out that the "workplace climate is not only the responsibility of the reference supervisor or manager; it is also the responsibility of each individual librarian in the unit."[5] If the ultimate goal of library staff is to provide the best service possible

Heather G. Hannan *is Head, Mercer Library, Prince William Campus, George Mason University, and* ***Janna Mattson*** *is the Social Sciences Liaison Librarian at Mercer Library.*

to patrons, any negative action or failure to respond to that action is a step away from that goal.

So how does a new librarian balance personal responsibility while wading through complicated office politics? In this particular case, Marion did not want to be perceived as a whiner or gossiper, but felt that the incident had to be addressed. There was simply no good reason for the lack of civility displayed in the conference room. In fact, any potential learning opportunities or new ideas that could have been revealed during the meeting quickly evaporated as soon as the staff members engaged in the hostile exchange. Pellack discusses the notion of what professionalism is in libraries and argues that it "should also include standards for behavior among co-workers."[6] This standard of behavior is perfectly defined as collegiality, which "takes courtesy to respect, community to trust, acknowledgement of an individual's presence to acknowledgement of that individual's contributions, and conversation to consultation and sharing of knowledge."[7] What happens when collegiality is missing in the library conference room? Clearly it can have a negative impact on staff morale and library services. In a case like this, mentoring was definitely needed either from a trusted peer or Marion's supervisor. Marion chose the latter.

A seasoned academic library supervisor, "Pat," many years into her career, listened intently as Marion shared what she had witnessed at the meeting. Marion shared her feelings of regret for not speaking up, her feelings of responsibility for workplace climate, but more importantly Marion shared her desire for guidance to deal with this type of situation in a more informed and empowered manner the next time. As Pat pondered her response to Marion, she remembered a quote

by Peter Drucker that seemed to fit the moment:

No organization can depend on genius; the supply is always scarce and unreliable. It is the test of an organization to make ordinary human beings perform better than they seem capable of, to bring out whatever strength there is in its members, and to use each one's strength to help all the others perform. The purpose of an organization is to enable common people to do uncommon things. [8]

Marion did not want to be perceived as a whiner or gossiper, but felt that the incident had to be addressed.

Pat understood that how she responded to and handled this contentious situation would reflect her perceived effectiveness as a leader by not only Marion, but Pat's entire team. As Michael Kinsman has shared, "Because the line supervisor is the one member of management to whom most people report, workers come to view that relationship as their official relationship with the company."[9] The ball was squarely in Pat's court, but what can a middle manager influence and what are the limits?

Numerous researchers have identified key influence tactics commonly used by supervisors, namely reason, assertion, exchange/bargain, courting favor, as well as coercion and partnership or building an alliance."[10] Any influence tactic when used by a supervisor is intended to change the behavior of a subordinate. However, with the situation just described there was

both a need for influencing the behavior of a subordinate and the necessity of influencing the behavior of colleagues and upper management. Ultimately, Pat needed to try to accomplish two things: bring out the strengths of her subordinate and employ the use of appropriate tactics to influence positive organizational citizenship by those outside her scope of authority.

Initially the anxiety of the situation needed to be addressed. If a subordinate's anxiety was left to fester and not engaged constructively, it could adversely impact her success on the job and future career advancement. Chuck Reynolds points out that supervisors must recognize how crucial it is for them to coach, and he shares what he calls "five ways managers can coach more effectively."

Listen to understand—acknowledge concerns

Give affirmation—show appreciation for the effort and confirm your confidence in their abilities

Engage the subordinate—ask what they think and provide opportunities for creative and innovative problem-solving

Help the subordinate make a plan—from a list of possibilities, ask which two or three are the most practical

Think holistically—consider the whole person.[11]

Additionally, Pat needed to make sure Marion understood how workplace conflict is created and how it can be used in both effective and ineffective ways. Kathy Washatka, owner of The Washatka Group, a consulting firm that specializes in leadership, describes the nature of group work:

One of the most challenging aspects of being a supervisor is helping people who are struggling in their relationships with each other. Any-

time there is more than one person in a room, there is the potential for disagreement. With today's emphasis on working in teams, that potential increases because people work together more closely and they become dependent on each other to complete their projects.[12]

Pat needed to help Marion see that conflict is a process. One individual may perceive a difference that matters to them and respond in a way that will achieve the individual's desired outcome. An overview of this phenomenon is articulated below from the article *"Conflict at Work and Individual Well-Being":*

How individuals respond to conflict issues depends on their concern for their own outcomes and for the opposing party's outcomes. According to Dual Concern Theory (see Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; see also Blake & Mouton, 1964; Thomas, 1992), conflict management is a function of high or low concern for self combined with high or low concern for other. High self concern and low concern for the other results in a preference for *forcing*—trying to impose one's will onto the other side. Forcing involves threats and bluffs, persuasive arguments, and positional commitments. Low self concern and high concern for the other results in a preference for *yielding,* which is oriented towards accepting and incorporating the other's will. It involves unilateral concessions, unconditional promises, and offering help. Low self concern and low concern for the other results in a preference for *inaction and avoiding,* which involves a passive stance, attempts

to reduce and downplay the importance of the conflict issues, and attempts to suppress thinking about them. High self concern and high concern for the other, finally, produces a preference for *problem solving,* which is oriented towards achieving an agreement that satisfies both own and the other's aspirations as much as possible. Problem solving involves an exchange of information about priorities and preferences, showing insights, and

---

These sessions … emphasized the use of firm but non-judgmental language and tactics when dealing with difficult personalities.

---

making tradeoffs between important and unimportant issues.[13]

Marion witnessed a situation of high self concern and low concern for other parties, which resulted in individuals trying to force their will onto others. Certainly, Marion was an eye-witness to someone using persuasive arguments and positional commitments.

After coaching Marion through her initial anxiety, Pat made a phone call to the university's Human Resources Office. Though Pat's organization provides supervisors with relationship-building workshops, it also provides one-on-one support through human resource (HR) employee specialists. HR specialists are trained to encourage positive, empowering conversations that will lead to building strategies employees might make

use of in responding to future high conflict situations. In addition to engaging the HR specialist to work with an employee, the HR specialist will serve as a resource to the supervisor, since s/he will need to dissect the employee's situation as well as the motivations of those outside the scope of the supervisor's authority. Partnering with an objective third party to discuss the issue and assist with role-playing activities to practice positive communication techniques and vocabulary is a vital component to reaching a constructive response.

As Pat chatted with her assigned HR specialist, she came to the realization that this difficult situation was going to take time to resolve and, as the supervisor, she needed to recognize her role and know her limits. Once she had done what she reasonably could do, she needed to accept the outcome and not beat herself up if the results were not totally satisfactory to each party. Plus, she must not let her subordinate's problem become her problem. A supervisor's job is to problem-solve, not to simply take on the team's problems. Pat decided she would do two things, arrange for "empowerment" sessions for her staff and role-play the critical conversations she would need to have with her colleagues and upper management. Empowerment sessions, led by HR, included both librarian and classified staff, but not Pat. Pat felt it was important that library staff talk freely without worry of repercussions. These sessions included role-playing and problem solving exercises that emphasized the use of firm but non-judgmental language and tactics when dealing with difficult personalities.

These decisions have had a significant impact on the organizational climate of Pat and Marion's library. First, the simple acknowledgement that staff must sometimes work with others who have

often challenging and difficult personalities helped to boost morale. Second, the empowerment sessions instilled confidence in the library staff that they have the authority to decide if a situation has become too hostile, and that they may choose to leave. Third, the session not only helped staff find ways to deal with difficult co-workers, but these skills also could be applied to effectively managing difficult exchanges with library patrons.

This quotation from Chucky Reynolds, President and Chief Performance Officer of Excel Group Development in Toronto, sums up effective leadership quite well: "The best leaders cannot make a chair, computer or desk appreciate in value over time. However, a great leader can enhance the value of her people by coaching them to be more effective, engaged and productive."[14] The suggestions proposed by Pat as well as those developed in the HR workshops put the power of evaluation in the hands of those who most need it—the employee and the supervisor. By accepting what is achievable, recognizing one's role, acknowledging one's limits, and taking appropriate action as well as setting achievable goals toward measurable progress, the supervisor will be empowering the team member, as well as him- or herself. When library staff are empowered with the idea that they are the first step to creating collegi-

ality in the organizational culture, it takes the feeling of helplessness to the implementation of positive action. While an individual may not have control over another person's actions or words, the individual has control over how s/he reacts. Instilling a sense of per-

---

While an individual may not have control over another person's actions or words, the individual has control over how s/he reacts.

---

sonal responsibility in library staff is crucial to the success of fostering a positive work environment.

Notes

1. Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003): 2.

2. Lorraine J. Pellack, "Interpersonal Skills in the Reference Workplace," *Reference Librarian* 40, no. 83/84 (October 2003): 67.

3. Pellack, 60.

4. Bob Kieserman, "People Matters," *Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances* 20, no. 4 (November 2007): 175.

5. Pellack, 59.

6. Pellack, 53.

7. Maria Anna Jankowska and Linnea Marshall, "Why Social Interaction and Good Communication in Academic Libraries Matters," *Reference Librarian* 40, no. 83/84 (October 2003): 133–34.

8. Peter F. Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York: Harper Collins, 1954): 145.

9. Michael Kinsman, "Relationship Management, *Network Journal* 15, no. 5 (March 2008): 52.

10. Tony Manning and Bob Robertson, "Influencing and Negotiating Skills: Some Research and Reflections, Part I: Influencing Strategies and Styles, *Industrial and Commercial Training* 35, no. 1(2003): 15.

11. Chuck Reynolds, "Wanted: Managers Who Coach Well in Crisis, *Canadian HR Reporter* 22, no. 3 (February 9, 2009): 23.

12. Kathy Washatka, "Dealing with Conflict Vital in any Office Setting," *Bellingham Business Journal* (December 2004).

13. Carsten K. W. De Drue, Dirk van Dierendonck, and Maria T. M. Dijkstra, "Conflict at Work and Individual Well-Being," *International Journal of Conflict Management* 15, no. 1 (January 2005): 8.

14. Chuck Reynolds, "Wanted: Managers Who Coach Well in Crisis, *Canadian HR Reporter* 22, no. 3 (February 9, 2009): 23. ◼