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Spotlight

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Ignored Too Long

The Benefits of Managing a Library with a Union: Part I

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When a union is a protection for incompetence, then you're losing sight of what a union is. When you represent a productive and hardworking workforce, unified, you're boundless.—*John DeLury, organizer of New York City's sanitation workers*

When the author's proposed this panel for the American Library Association Annual Conference, it was bounced from the Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA) division to LAMA's Annual Conference program chair to the Human Resources Section, bypassing the Library Organization and Management Section. The Human Resources Section passed it along to two subcommittees—Supervisory Skills and Staff Development and the Union Relations Group (URG).

The response—or indeed lack of response—was telling. It illustrates a longstanding avoidance and resentment of this subject. For instance, in a talk to MLS students, an Associate University Librarian with the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) described unionized and tenured catalogers as “impossible” to manage and supervise, and as a result he didn't even try. In the same speech he equated supervision with the quick ability to dismiss (incidentally, this librarian went on to direct another ARL library). Another library director deeply resented any limitation on his ability to assign work, rewards, and punishments as he saw fit. To bolster his own authority he used the rules of two respective bargaining units to pit librarians and support staff against one another. When this tactic backfired he “retired” early, citing his “growing disillusionment with higher education, libraries and [his institution] as central to his decision.”

Dealing with unions is *not* atypical for library managers. Yet a survey of topics at conferences and available literature will turn up little information about managing in unions. This article, like the panel, strives to change the approach to managing an academic library with a union. This topic is usually discussed behind closed doors, and the authors hope to strip away some of the myths and misconceptions of managing in a unionized environment.

Part I: Unions and Good Management Practices: Or, Why I, As a Manager, Can't Be Arbitrary and Capricious

Library managers, like managers in other organizations, often assume that effective supervision requires sweeping authority unchallenged by formal agreement or employee input. And if the manager indulges the staff with agreements and input, such measures are at the pleasure of management and may be revoked at any time. Because the manager presumably has the “big picture” and is free from parochial and petty concerns such as self-interest or vindictiveness, this freedom is “justified.” Admittedly, most staff *are* infected with parochialism and self-interest. But library directors are equally fallible, and when they lack sufficient knowledge of an issue or act in an arbitrary manner, that's where the union can be helpful.

For example, in May 2001, collective bargaining was extended to certain employees of public higher education in Maryland. As a result, 10 out of 26 of the library positions at one institution were now covered by the collective bargaining agreement. Importantly, union membership is voluntary; most of the eligible employees are not union members even though they are governed by the agreements negotiated by union representatives. This obviously has a

significant impact on the union's operation. After all, a union with a large number of active members is more effective at arguing for those members than is a union with less support. Yet despite the fact that union membership is voluntary at this Maryland college, several aspects of the collective bargaining agreement have been very positive.

Advocates

Unions give employees a forum for expressing views and provide a spokesperson to represent the employees' concerns to the administration. This spokesperson, or union representative, is especially useful when an employee is reluctant to speak directly to a supervisor, either from shyness or concern for retaliation. Furthermore, the union representative can be a liaison for issues that are not covered by the formal agreement, but that need resolution.

Clear Expectations

A library administrator may sincerely wish to cooperate with staff and acknowledge their concerns, but as discussed above, the staff's treatment is ultimately at the mercy of the administrator's whim. A new policy or a new administrator can radically alter work situations. Union negotiation results in a formal agreement of the expectations of each position. The collective bargaining agreement (CBA) gives a clear outline of what is expected and permissible in terms of employee job descriptions, benefits, and disciplinary procedures. Some areas of conflict are simply removed. With wages and benefits negotiated, the issue of arbitrariness in the treatment of a particular employee is moot. Both the employee and the administrator have some clear guidelines that ensure fairness and consistency in personnel matters. In the case of disciplinary actions, the CBA offers an alternative to an "all or nothing" approach to resolving problems. The agreement requires administrators to thoroughly document actions and follow a process of progressive discipline, avoiding arbitrary treatment of employees.

Employees and managers must also be mindful that in some situations the relationship between a director and library staff, *according to the union*, are not governed by their actual working relationship within the library. This means there may be two sets of expectations, one based on the CBA and the other based on what occurs in daily operations.

Accountability

A collective bargaining agreement requires administrators to be conscious of the repercussions of actions and to be sure that appropriate procedures are followed. Managers sometimes exaggerate the time and effort required by this level of accountability. Such accountability means only that the library administrator may not have total freedom in responding to conflicts. For instance, when library actions impact union-management relations elsewhere in the university and when managers are not sure of the repercussions of an action, they should consult the university's Human Resources department. Be aware that managers do not bear the sole responsibility for verifying union policy; union members should also be aware of larger potential implications.

Influence of Union Institutional History

A library may have a smooth or bumpy transition to a union environment depending in part on the relationship between the union and administration across the university. If there is a history of conflict, it can easily carry over to the library. Many places that experience difficult employee-management relations when unionized are actually seeing a campus history of mistrust being played out in a new environment. The transition to a unionized environment is much easier when the workplace has a history of honesty and openness. However, no matter how open and honest communication is within the library, the attitude may still be one of mistrust if employees mistrust the overarching university administration.

Negotiating Campus-Wide Issues

Many parts of the CBA are negotiated for all eligible university employees, not just for library staff, and those issues may not directly concern the library staff. As a result, the atmosphere in the library may be adversely affected by larger issues outside the library, and all sides (library staff, library administration and union members outside of the library) must remain aware.

The union and collective bargaining agreement can be useful resources for managers as well as union members. With experience and communication, cooperation and trust can develop. And while very little might seem to change between staff and management, a union environment can keep administrators accountable to the formal agreement with its staff, a staff now empowered to protect their own interests.

Watch for Part II, describing the rights and responsibilities of librarians who are university faculty, in January 2007 (volume 4, number 1).

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