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Spotlight

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Winners of 2006-2007 SirsiDynix–ALA-APA Award for Outstanding Achievement in Promoting Salaries and Status for Library Workers Announced

Three winners were selected for the 2006–2007 SirsiDynix Award at the ALA Midwinter Meeting. These three winners fulfilled the criteria for the award in exceptional ways:

1. Alachua County Library District, Gainesville, Florida
2. Connie Vinita Dowell, San Diego State University
3. Teresa McMahan, Sullivan County Library System, Blountville, TN

Watch for more information in an upcoming press release. Jury members were Barbara J. Ford, Chair, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Peter McDonald, Syracuse University; John Jessee, Jacksonville (FL) Public Library.

Ignored Too Long

The Benefits of Managing a Library with a Union, Part III

By John Buschman, Steve LaBash, and Dorothy Warner

(This article is adapted from the program sponsored by American Library Association-Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA) at the American Library Association Annual Conference in New Orleans on June 25, 2006. This article does not explicitly speak for the authors' employers, employees or coworkers.)

Nightmare Scenario or Fairness in Action?: A Dismissal

A unionized academic library suffered extraordinary turnover among evening circulation staff: over the course of several years, ten regular staff quit or transferred, and countless interim workers left prematurely. During this time the library administration heard horror stories about a particular circulation employee who worked without supervision. Human Resources (HR) hired an evening circulation supervisor so that the library administration could document these concerns.

Documentation revealed a number of problems. First, the employee repeatedly failed to complete basic circulation tasks. When confronted the employee would claim that s/he forgot/did not understand/had never been shown how to shelve current periodicals, un-jam a copier or reader/printer or check in an item. Numerous times, the supervisor had to remind this employee to shelve materials, security-strip periodicals, and abide by break and lunch schedules.

Second, the employee would conduct personal business at the circulation desk to the detriment of professional duties. This employee would keep students waiting while s/he composed e-mails, drew comics, placed personal calls and surfed the Internet. Attempting to curb the employee's behavior, administration disabled the internet connection at circulation computers. They were later surprised to find that the employee had re-installed the software and in fact was running a small Internet business from this computer.

Third, the employee harassed students to leave the library early so that the employee could leave before closing hours. To push the students out the door, the employee would cut power to lights, computers, copiers and printers. As a result, students would lose hours of labor and would be unable to print or copy their work.

The supervisor and various administrators began to carefully document all reprimands to this employee. The numbers are dizzying: on 61 occasions the employee received memos or emails cautioning him/her to amend behavior. The employee was informally reprimanded 24 times, and in addition received seven formal warnings. These formal warnings advised the employee that continued poor performance would result in formal discipline. Each warning was conveyed in writing and orally in meetings with union representation present and all stated that, without sustained improvement, the administration would proceed further down the formal disciplinary process, a process ending in termination.

Formal discipline commenced over the course of two years. First, the employee received an omnibus oral warning on general work performance, then a written warning, followed by a second written warning, a week-long suspension without pay and a final written warning.

In this way the process of progressive discipline was followed to the letter and was thoroughly documented. In fact, administrators added extra steps in the interests of fairness to give the employee every opportunity to improve and keep his/her job: in between the stages of the formal disciplinary process, the employee received two grievance hearings with University officers; two performance reviews explaining and documenting the problems; a 2.5 hour meeting with the employee, the union shop steward and the head of HR to walk through and explain that person's job; and a two-page memo about 4 months after the final written warning detailing more poor work performance. The employee was finally dismissed when s/he failed to discharge books and, as a result, a graduating senior was wrongly charged hundreds of dollars and could not receive her transcript.

As mentioned, the library was unionized, and the employee was a member of that union. Many managers are quick to blame union "interference" for the expense and delay in terminating employment. But a closer look at the circumstances of this case reveals that management, not the union, was responsible for the situation. In fact, the union expedited a slow and inefficient process.

From the beginning, the managers failed to provide and enforce certain standards. First, the employee worked without supervision. For years, HR neglected to hire an evening supervisor. An unsupervised problem usually remains undocumented, and without documentation a problem is hearsay. Second, prior supervisors and HR administrators avoided formal discipline for years. A minor, undocumented "talking to" was the usual choice, if indeed any action was taken. Clearly, this approach convinced the employee that the library and HR would, in the end, never embark on formal discipline—or make it stick.

Far from wasting the library's time, the union's insistence on documentation and procedure actually expedited the process. The union representative acknowledged that the employee's tasks were in the job description, that the expectations were reasonable and the employee was capable of doing them well and in a timely way. The union further stated in writing that "there is no dispute that [the employee] must consistently follow procedures ... and complete the work in a timely manner," and that university and library administrators were "open, honest, and followed procedures."

Because the communications with the employee (meetings, e-mails, private corrections, etc.) were all documented, the employee never grieved *formal* discipline. When the employee grieved the informal discipline, the hearing ruled in favor of the library. When the point of dismissal did come, it was not grieved—a highly unusual outcome.

The library's evening staff is now properly supervised and very productive. They are paid at the level of job they're actually performing, and they enjoy health insurance, pension and flexible vacation time. They work without harsh supervision, arbitrary rules or unreasonable work expectations. Far from a nightmarish conflict between union and management, this story illustrates the power of unions to speed resolution between management and worker.

Conclusion

There are as many kinds of conflict as there are people. Discussion of conflict often neglects conflict between staff, dwelling instead on the boss/employee dichotomy. And personality clashes can foster conflict that falls outside of the jurisdiction of a union contract. Methods of resolving these conflicts are the same whether in unionized or non-unionized environments (see the scenarios discussed in the *Conflict Management in Libraries: Strategies for a Positive, Productive Workplace*, by Jack Montgomery and Eleanor Cook).

Current management theory holds that a purely authoritarian management style does not encourage efficiency or high morale. Instead, managers should nurture a team ethos by listening to employees. Respect, openness and honesty yield a satisfied and satisfying organization. In *The Haves and the Have Nots: The Abuse of Power in the Workplace...And How to Control It*, Harvey Hornstein argues that rather than managing "them," we should focus on managing "us." He warns that sincerity and consistency are key: employees will rebel when a new campaign of inclusion reverts to the old command structure.

Cooperation and teamwork can falter in the face of conflict; a unionized environment is not a panacea for either managers or employees. But it is crucial, in times of conflict, to have formal structures and agreements to which both

employers and employees can turn. Documentation, mutual responsibility and elimination of bias in compensation issues benefit both sides.

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We would love to have your [feedback](#) on these articles!

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