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The Bottom Line

People Make Libraries

Dealing with difficult colleagues when you're the "new kid"

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to discuss strategies for a new library employee seeking to deal with difficult people at work, when the difficult people are his/her own colleagues. It seeks to provide a description of several types of situations that may arise, and general strategies for dealing with them.

Design/methodology/approach – The column is based on the author's substantial experience dealing with personnel matters in academic, public, and special libraries, including hiring for all types of positions. It is personal opinion, based on lengthy experience.

Findings – The paper addresses library personnel issues. This particular installment helps new employees of libraries identify various types of issues one may have with "difficult" colleagues, and also provides various strategies and options for addressing these issues.

Originality/value – The column is intended to help people to deal with all types of personnel issues overall; this specific column is intended to help librarians deal with the challenges of working with "difficult" colleagues.

Keywords: Librarians, Libraries, Academic libraries

However excited you may be about your new position, and however terrific it looks, all jobs have some good parts and some bad parts. One of the most challenging things with which you may have to cope, in virtually any position, is figuring out how to deal with people who are, for lack of a more comprehensive word, difficult. These may be your co-workers, your supervisor or another boss even higher up the food chain, or some of your customers/clients/patrons. In today's column, we will focus on some strategies to help you deal with difficult co-workers or colleagues, so that your time in your new position is as successful as possible.

Let us talk about some of the types of issues that may arise. This will not be comprehensive, by any means, but it is a good selection of several things that may drive you crazy at an otherwise great job.

1. *Rudeness* – Some folks do not seem well versed in one or more social niceties.

They might never or rarely say thank you when you help them with something, or please when they ask for a favor. They may walk right past everyone in the morning, and never say hello, even when they have made eye contact or when the prevailing culture of the work environment is to greet people this way. Or it may be worse. They may ignore hands outstretched for

handshakes. In meetings, they may show up late or walk out early regularly, or they may even fall asleep or make rude noises, or something along those lines. They may be rude, harsh, or impatient with clientele, resulting in lost business, lost support, or complaints.

2. *Annoying habits* – These could fall under “rudeness” in most cases, but they are common enough, I believe, to merit a special point of their own. Some examples of annoying habits may include: talking too much (especially in shared workspace), to the point where it distracts you from doing your work; distracting you with music played loudly enough for you to hear it; or having annoying habits that bother or distract other people or contribute to an unpleasant workplace. Some of these might include smacking gum loudly in an open plan office, not cleaning up after oneself in shared space (such as a staff kitchen), clipping nails or indulging in other personal grooming in public or shared workspace areas, showing up late for shifts at the reference desk and thus making co-workers cover past the end of their shifts, sending unwanted e-mail, taking things from a co-worker’s desk or taking the last of something without replacing it, etc.
3. *Inappropriate conversations* – Generally, at work, it is inappropriate to have discussions about things that are either controversial (and not related to the work) or highly personal. Some examples can include religion, politics, sexual matters, personal or family health matters, personal relationships/situations, finances, or personal career aspirations. Telling inappropriate jokes may fall into this area as well.
4. *Insensitivity to needs of others* – This category can include such behaviors as wearing perfume or scented products around co-workers who have environmental sensitivities or allergies, bringing pets or children to work without permission on a regular basis, etc.
5. *Constant complaining, or denigration of others or the work environment* – Again, this could perhaps also fit under “annoying habits” but is serious enough to merit discussion on its own. Almost everyone knows someone like this, and many people are unfortunate enough to work with him/her. This is the person who cannot stop complaining, and who seems to complain about just about everything to do with the job – co-workers, supervisors, the organization itself, the work environment. This person seems like the ultimate pessimist when it comes to the job – and maybe other things as well – and being around him/her can be downright depressing or upsetting. This person can have a very bad impact on morale.
6. *Asking co-workers to run errands unrelated to work* – This is a definite no-no. If your office culture is such that one person gets coffee for everyone in the morning, or one person each week buys donuts, then if you wish to participate, that is fine. But no one should be asking you to run out for coffee for them, to pick up their cat food while you are at the store, or to buy their wife an anniversary gift. This is just plain inappropriate, and could constitute illegal or harassing behavior.
7. *Asking co-workers to lie for him/her* – Again, this is a definite no-no. No one should ask a co-worker to lie for them, about anything.

8. *Delegating work to you excessively* – Many people are not good at delegating – they try to do everything themselves, either because they do not trust others to do it as well as they think they will, or because they do not want to bother other people or are uncomfortable asking them to do something. But then you have the opposite kind. Some folks are happy to delegate just about everything on their plate to others, even if they are at the same level/rank as those on who they are dumping the work. They may be doing this without the approval of the supervisor, or sometimes without even the awareness of the supervisor. Meanwhile, the supervisor may wonder why it takes you so long to finish your work, or may think the other person is just a wonder for finishing everything so quickly!

9. *Refusing to pull his/her own weight* – This may be related to no. 7, but it may also not be. Sometimes, people do not delegate – they just do not do their fair share of the work! Practically everyone who has worked on a group project at school has experienced this – there always seems to be one person who does the bulk of the work, and one or more others who are very happy to do next to nothing. The same goes for the workplace – in some teams, there may be a few people doing the bulk of the work or all of the hardest or most time-consuming work, while others coast.

10. *Taking unearned credit, giving unearned blame* – One of the most frustrating situations is when someone in the workplace takes credit for your work or blames others for their own mistakes. So, what can you do about these problems – especially when you are the “new kid on the block”? Perhaps more than you think. There are strategies for dealing with each of these issues. Some of the things you may try:
 - (1) Try to see the reason behind the behavior – Is the person actually not trying to be difficult, but perhaps dealing with something in their own life? For example, I once had a rather sensitive staff member come to me saying that another staff member was being rude by ignoring her. As it happened, the second staff person was not trying to be rude; she was dealing with a major family medical problem, and was so distracted and distraught by it that she did not always notice people saying hello or walking into her office area. In some other instances, I had numerous complaints about a staff member who, despite trying hard, simply did not or could not pull his own weight. He would go off onto long tangents and fail to complete the curriculum for an instructional session, he would give inappropriate advice in answer to reference questions, he would tell patrons that there was no money in his collections budget to accommodate their requests when there were thousands left unspent and the requests were both reasonable and appropriate. We strongly believed that there might be mental health issues. We were able to modify his behavior in some areas, for example by providing a script to follow for some instruction and randomly monitoring to ensure he followed it. But we could not do this for every problem area with this individual. But this was not something that could be handled by co-workers of the same rank – this had to be handled at several levels, by his direct supervisor, by the chief librarian, by Human Resources, by the union, and by other levels of authority. If you have constant problems of this nature, and especially if your

other colleagues have similar problems with this individual, you need to proceed to item no. 4 in this list.

- (2) Decide whether it rises to the level of something you cannot stand – Is it serious enough that it is preventing you from accomplishing your work? Can you put up with it, or should you even try? The answers to these questions will vary, depending on your own tolerance and the severity of the issue. But if you can put up with your colleague occasionally clipping his/her nails or applying makeup in a common work space, or with a colleague who never says “Hello” in the mornings, sometimes it is easier just to try to let the smaller things roll off your back. Do your best to stay out of office politics, especially as the “new kid”. You will not know much of the probably-extensive history of grievances or issues, and should not allow yourself to be used by someone seeking yet another body to just agree with them and take their side. Of course, you should not have to put up with serious problems, such as a colleague who denigrates you or takes credit for your work; in those types of instances, proceed to item no. 4 in this list! Or worse still, you should never have to put up with patently illegal matters such as sexual harassment or workplace violence. These should be documented and reported at once, first to your supervisor and then up whatever the appropriate path is in your organization. If you do not get relief, you ultimately have the right to take legal action.
- (3) Talk to the co-worker – Sometimes, your co-worker may not even realize that something about his/her behavior is a problem for you. If you have a colleague who tells everyone’s supposed secrets, first do not tell her any of yours, and if what she is saying makes you uncomfortable, try to tell her so, gently but firmly. If you have a colleague who complains constantly, try to avoid situations where you are trapped into listening, and if you cannot avoid it, perhaps try saying something like “I’m afraid I don’t feel the same way about that issue”. Then try to excuse yourself. If you have a colleague who tells inappropriate jokes, or sends a constant stream of chain or joke e-mails that you find annoying, tell them (again, gently but firmly, in a non-aggressive but assertive way) that you would appreciate it if they did not include you in these, as you do not particularly appreciate them. If the person is taking credit for your work, try talking to them and saying that you would appreciate it if he/she would ensure that everyone is credited for his or her contribution to the project – and if it continues, see item no. 4!
- (4) Talk to your supervisor, or, if necessary, their supervisor – If the issue is serious, and you are either uncomfortable approaching your co-worker about it or have had no success with that strategy, then you need to take your concern to your supervisor. Make an appointment to discuss the issue, bring any documentation you have gathered, and lay your problem out clearly and succinctly. Ask what your supervisor can do to help resolve this dilemma. Perhaps you can work with this person less, or perhaps your supervisor can talk to the person and try to resolve the issues. Try not to go over your supervisor’s head unless you absolutely must, because doing so will almost always lead to the supervisor being, at the very least, annoyed with you, and even in a fully unionized environment, where perhaps you cannot be fired for going over your boss’s head, it will still invariably be uncomfortable. But if you get no relief from your supervisor, after repeated requests or discussions, and the issue remains serious and unresolved, you may need to go further up the chain of command, either by talking to your supervisor’s supervisor or by going to a designated office such as Human Resources or an Ombudsperson – see item no. 5.

- (5) Talk to a unit designated to help with employee complaints – In some organizations, there are designated offices to deal with employee concerns, issues, and complaints. This may be a person or division within Human Resources or a separate Ombudsperson office. For issues of discrimination, there may also be a separate Employment Equity Office. You may also wish to speak to your union representative, if you work in a unionized environment. Again, it is very important to have clear documentation of your claims. It is even better, if possible, if you have someone else attest that they can verify one or more of the incidents, or back up your claim in some way.
- (6) If all else fails, look for another job – You probably want to avoid this if at all possible, especially given today’s economy. But if you have tried all other reasonable solutions, and this person is still making your life miserable, then you may want to start carefully looking for another job. It can be heartbreaking – especially if you have had very high hopes for the job, or if you made significant personal sacrifices, such as moving far from family and friends. But sometimes, you just have to know when the cost of staying far outweighs the benefits. Hopefully, by this time, you will have accumulated at least several months of experience, and there will be people willing to serve as a reference and attest to your good work.

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