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Problem-solving Skills for Librarians

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Introduction

Every time a librarian conducts a reference interview, performs research for a patron, or teaches an instruction session, that librarian is modeling good problem-solving skills. When the same librarian is faced with the challenge of working for a micromanager, collaborating with an uncooperative coworker, or is involved in a power struggle, are those skills used are does immobility set in? Librarians typically use discipline and strong coping skills to propel themselves through graduate school, along with having characteristics such as good oral and writing abilities, and analytical and critical thinking skills that they routinely apply as professionals. When challenged with human relations, budget deficits, and personnel problems, these same aptitudes can be used for strategic problem-solving. Librarians can use their training and experience as a framework for problem-solving.

History

In the 1940's and earlier, conflict within the workplace was considered something to be avoided (Kelly, 1970). In the 1950's, organizations took a more patriarchal view and considered it the purview of management to deal with problems (Kathman & Kathman, 1990). However by the 1970's, conflict was viewed as a "fact of organizational life." Conflict management, conflict resolution, problem-solving strategies, and change management are now all parts of a well-developed body of knowledge.

"Instruction on managing conflict effectively has not been part of formal training in librarianship" (Kathman & Kathman, 1990, p.145). Many library and information science programs have courses on library management; however, a more conscientious effort may need to be applied to adapt this knowledge to issues in the office.

Models

There are numerous models of problem-solving strategies that may be adapted to typical library environments. The challenge is approaching potentially emotional issues in a calm, objective manner. This will allow librarians to employ their analytical resourceful thinking to the development of solutions in an organized, sequential manner.

The basic steps to problem-solving involve recognizing there is a problem, defining the problem, breaking it apart into components or factors, determining who is impacted, establishing a dialogue with those stakeholders, brainstorming potential solutions, and securing involvement in change and participation toward a solution and implementation (Lumsden & Lumsden, 1993).

Sources of conflict may be a result of individual differences, interdepartmental competition for resources, lack of understanding of the job expectations, unclear or inadequate communication, overcrowding in the office, and myriad of other possibilities (Kathman & Kathman, 1990). There are a variety of responses available to these conflicts - one of the most popular of which is avoiding or ignoring the problem and hoping it will go away. A better, more healthy option is collaborating with

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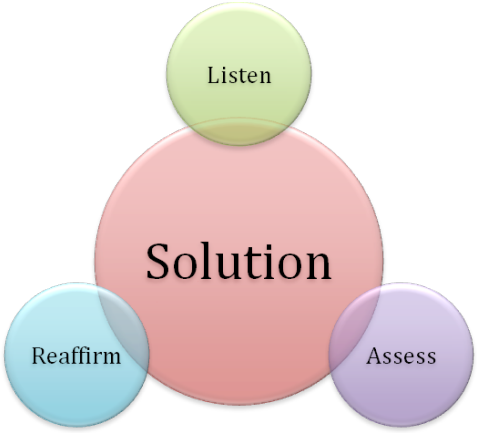
others involved to develop a compromise that will be most satisfactory (Kathman & Kathman, 1990).

Reference Interview

Information seeking strategies and the reference interview are two processes familiar to librarians; however, what may not be known is how these skills can be applied to other areas of work, such as employee management and conflict resolution. Librarians have the critical thinking skills needed to manage and resolve conflict; they just need to take the skills they have and apply them in new situations. Steps and methods librarians use in reference research can be applied when confronted with conflict between co-workers.

Co-workers often work toward common goals, but at times, frustration and conflict arise during the process. When these frustrations and conflicts begin to rise, librarians need to draw from reference experience to diffuse, understand, and resolve the conflict. Stueart and Moran (2007) state, "conflict situations often arise from problems in communication" (p.377). Clear communication is vital to the reference interview, so when confronted with a conflict involving a co-worker, draw upon those skills of listening, assessing, and reaffirming.



Stephen Covey (1999) acknowledges three skills for conflict resolution: "facilitation, getting the parties together; empathy, seeking first to understand and then to be understood; and synergy, arriving at a creative third alternative" (Three Essential Skills section, para.1). Librarians practice these skills every time they respond to a reference question. Listening, assessing, reaffirming, and solving problems are all part of a librarian's daily tasks. Librarians can transition those skills to conflict management with co-workers. However, this is easier said than done because with co-workers there is more emotional investment and egos to suppress.

To deal with conflict, one must be calm and able to think rationally. Think about solving a reference question - there is much rational thinking involved in discovering what the patron is truly seeking and finding. Draw on this skill to handle conflict management. Schwartz (1997) says to call time-out in order to be more constructive when dealing with conflict management. Take time to calm down and get control of rising emotions before confronting the conflict. Take time to listen to the individual and understand his or her point of view. Take time to assess what the conflict really is. Too often, people do not understand the true nature of the conflict - this is called "incrementalism," and it is when the actual problem needing a solution is never fully identified and its causes and effects are not analyzed (Cervone, 2006). Draw on the skills of a reference interview to gain composure, listen indiscriminately, and assess the situation in order to form a win-win outcome to the conflict.

Dealing with conflict takes practice. Librarians practice some conflict management skills every time they engage in a reference interview. They may calm down a frustrated patron, and they listen and then assess the situation. They reaffirm what the patron needs, and then they provide a solution. These skills can now be drawn upon when confronted with a conflict in the workplace. Having a plan of action for when conflict arises is a good tool on which to rely. "The first step to conquering corporate conflict is to make a plan of action" (Schwartz, 1997, Make a Plan of Action section, para 1). Simply by having a plan of action, it is a reminder to stop, calm down, and think before you act.

Bibliographic Instruction

Librarians are constantly teaching. Teaching takes place at the reference desk with just one individual and in a classroom presenting a workshop to 20 to 200 students. In teaching large groups, librarians quickly become adept at recognizing different personality types, their learning styles, and how to work with each of them. Teaching helps librarians learn to adapt, leave their pride at home, and deal with "difficult" people. The same skills used in these situations can be applied in handling tough situations with co-workers.

Teachers of all types routinely encounter the following personality types in classes:

- Hijacker: wants to control the layout and even the content of the class.
- High-maintenance: tries to control the class with too many questions.
- Talker: wants to socialize.
- Unprepared: wants basic material that is not scheduled to be discussed and may not have time to cover. They may also ask questions that have already been answered.

Case Study #1

During a hands-on instruction session a student asked the presenter if the order of the presentation could be changed because it would "make more sense." The presenter tried to explain the logic of the presentation's order. The "hijacker" did not say anything more. This made the presenter feel defensive and wonder whether her authority and expertise were being

challenged. The presenter finished but left feeling upset about the interruption and at herself for not explaining the order of the presentation better.

In work situations, it is always best to respond unemotionally and to remain professional. A professional will respond by giving a suggestion or question its due weight out of respect to his or her colleagues (Vander Meer, Ring, & Perez-Stable, 2007). Nothing should be rejected out of hand. This helps co-workers know their input is appreciated. Listening carefully will demonstrate to the other person that they are being heard and respected. When co-workers realize colleagues are not being dismissive of their opinions, it should help alleviate the tension.

It is also important to be able to consider other possible factors; in the example of the case study, perhaps the "hijacker's" learning style was different. Perhaps he was just confused and was trying to better understand. Hijackers are not always "hijacking" intentionally or to be malicious. Co-workers who seem to be challenging others opinions may be endeavoring to understand something better. This leads to the key idea in alleviating tension: leaving pride and ego at home. By listening to another's suggestion, perhaps the decisions made could actually be improved. The ability to adapt to change is the hallmark of a professional.

Case Study #2

During an instruction session it quickly became apparent that one student would be dominating the discussion. The student displayed several tendencies of the "high-maintenance" person. Whether dealing with students or co-workers, it is important to take a step back and consider the other person's viewpoint and how they are feeling and to try to understand their motivations. Are they upset because they are angry, worried, scared, etc? Tension will be alleviated if people take time to consider the other person's viewpoint and understand they are often not being malicious or intentionally provocative.

Librarians typically do a great deal of group work within their jobs, and professional associations and groups do not function as a cognitive unit, but as individuals. "Problem-solving seems to be even more complex when it is performed in a group-based setting" (Hyldegard & Ingwersen, 2007).

Generational differences in values and communication style often contribute to misunderstandings. It is important to consider colleagues and their generational traits to evaluate what are the various characteristics of their age group. What could be construed as a disrespectful response by a Baby Boomer, who is from a more formal orientation, would sound casual and appropriate to a Millennial. These generational differences can become problematic if not recognized and addressed (Barnes, 2009).

Improved problem-solving abilities will bring immediate results within the workplace. A side benefit is the opportunity to discuss these experiences in interview situations, where many questions are asked for examples of problem-solving challenges and solutions experienced. Interviewers are trained to ask open-ended questions asking for examples of conflict and what problem-solving skills were applied to the situation (Jenks & Zevnik, 1989).

Case Study #3

Our library staff was being inundated by requests for reference from one class; after several librarians attempted to conduct reference interviews with students who did not know what they were looking for, something had to be done. Librarians were spending a great deal of time explaining huge complex concepts and writing extensive answers to broad questions. The syllabus, once located, was confusing, which resulted in the application of problem-solving techniques to eliminate this duplication of effort by multiple staff members with no direction from faculty.

The problem-solving strategy involved required several steps:

1. Recognize there is a problem

   This was quickly apparent due to the bottle-neck caused in the work flow of the reference department, frustrated students and librarians, and an uncommunicative professor.

2. Analyze the problem

   a. Communication, building rapport, establishing networks

      Identify the course, faculty member, and syllabus and then determine if the syllabus and assignment instructions need clarifying

   b. Secure buy-in from stakeholders

      The librarians and faculty brainstormed ways to accomplish the objectives

   c. Develop possible solution strategies

      All inquiries from this class were directed to the librarian for this program who consolidated all the reference responses

   d. Become part of the solution

      Librarian developed a preliminary reading resources list, step-by-step guide for research, and a Research Consultation Form was developed, which made information gaps evident

   e. Implement solution

      i. Designating one Point Librarian simplified communication and created unified messages

      ii. Library overview instruction, class page, research guide, and research consultation

form provided materials for students to use at their own pace

iii. When reference interviews were conducted, the results were much more substantive because the student was successfully engaged in the research as an active participant, and not just a passive recipient of librarian's work

f. Measure results then adjust based on evaluation and assessment

Streamlined workflow, consistent message from point librarian, students' work improved, and faculty member accomplished teaching requirements

g. Periodic reassessment should be built into the process

Routine communication with faculty to review changes in the syllabus

Conclusion

The problem-solving skills involved often require a great deal of intuition, training, investigation, and experience. These skills may be learned and developed like any of the other abilities librarians require for their work. Problem-solving in the work environment is not any more difficult than locating that obscure article for a doctoral student.

Problem-solving in libraries is not necessarily negative, but should be viewed as an opportunity to reassess job duties, workflows, departmental overlaps, and communication channels. Use the steps outlined above in Case Study #3 as a framework. Break the situation down into identifiable parts and begin by bringing together stakeholders to work on solutions.

The same steps will apply whether the issue is two staff members or two departments. Tension will be relieved by the knowledge that problems can be evaluated and solutions developed and implemented. Stakeholders will be encouraged by the success of the changes, and a more engaged and participatory communication style may become the norm. The successful practice of problem-solving will create a positive environment for all concerned.

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