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LIS 707 Midterm Paper

Topic: Conflict Management

### **Simple Actions for Library Leaders to Take to Maintain Safety**

A crucial skill for any library leader is conflict management. It is essential to have this skill in order to feel safe and secure in a workplace that serves as a gathering place for members of the public. Conflict management skills can aid in problems among coworkers, safety concerns with the public, and dealing with upset patrons. No one should feel uncomfortable or unsafe at work. This skill takes much time, practice and concentration, but with an effective library leader, it can be done. It all begins with a strong commitment to safety from the library's management.

*The Black Belt Librarian: Real-World Safety & Security* by Warren Graham is a good book to start with. Warren Graham is a former security manager at public libraries for over seventeen years. His book provides librarians with tools and strategies for dealing with security concerns.

Graham begins his book by explaining the presence of safety issues at the modern-day library. Today, libraries are experiencing budget cuts and are understaffed. Meanwhile, the need for libraries is also increasing, and with this, patron problems also increase. Libraries are one of the few public places that almost anyone can be allowed inside. It provides a safe space for people suffering from homelessness, mental health issues, addiction, domestic violence, etc. It can be a wonderful thing to provide these members with a place to connect with others and receive help for their conditions. However, library management must keep in mind that these patrons are suffering from severe problems and may not be mentally stable. With less staff to

handle security concerns, it is paramount that libraries have policies and procedures in place. Without controlling problem behaviors in the library, regular users can be denied access to a safe learning environment. Graham expresses that there are rules patrons must follow and “If they don’t, they can’t use the library” (Graham, 2012, p.12). So, what should a library leader do to ensure safe, regular library use?

Graham recommends that every librarian should be sure they understand the current code of conduct policy and procedures. Regular training is helpful for staff to get experience with these protocols and to confirm that everyone is on the same page. In addition, library management should meet with staff a few times a year to discuss security measures. A library does not need a security department or a complicated policy in order to be secure. There are also simple changes that can be made, such as keeping the door to the staff area locked or not counting money in front of patrons. It is up to library management to decide how far they want to go to secure the library, but doing nothing is not an option. Libraries need effective code of conduct policies in place so that they are physically prepared for something to go wrong.

On the mental side of things, Graham has been trained in martial arts as a child, and has been inspired by the mental components. He uses these techniques and applies them to life and to his security duties at the library. Similarly, in "Zen and the Art of Dealing with the Difficult Patron," Louisa Toot discusses Buddhist philosophies including openness, mindfulness, compassion and beginner's mind. When applied to patron situations, these philosophies allow the librarian to focus on the patron and on finding a solution. Toot claims that a Zen technique "not only helps conflict between patrons and library staff, but also results in greater emotional and psychological well-being for library staff during and after the occurrence of what I am labeling 'conflict'"(Toot, 2002, pg. 222-223) These habits require self-reflection and thus enable the

librarian to remain calm and try not to aggravate problems further. She argues that sometimes the librarian can make the problem worse unintentionally. By staying rooted, the librarian is better able to approach an uncomfortable issue.

Toot also describes two different types of patrons: the problem patron and the difficult patron. A problem patron is one who engages in a prohibited behavior. The solution for this patron is straightforward: the problem must be solved or the patron removed. On the other hand, the difficult patron is simply dissatisfied, with or without merit. This time, "neither the patron nor the activity is necessarily banned from the library" (Toot, 2002, pg. 221). The difficult patron does not come with a solution, and librarians must work with the patron to find accommodation. This is the moment when Zen tactics are useful. Furthermore, these techniques can be applied when dealing with any issue involving patron misbehavior.

A large aspect of handling these situations is the librarian's actions and emotions. Graham uses a strategy called AAA, which stands for attitude, approach and analysis. Keep a positive and professional attitude in the work place. Approach a problem rationally and approach patrons in a friendly manner. Finally, analyze the response afterwards and learn where improvements can be made. To support these notions, Steven Slavick suggests that the best way to deal with upset patrons is for the librarian to manage their own emotions and not take things personally in "Problem Situations, Not Problem Patrons." Steven Slavick is a branch manager at a busy, urban public library with experience in dealing with difficult patrons. Slavick states that "Very few patrons walk into the library looking to start trouble" (Slavick, 2009, pg. 38). It is impossible to know what another person is going through. Anything could trigger a person to be angry and they may not even be upset about the current situation at the library. Slavick stresses

that patrons deserve respect and compassion in order to help calm them down. After all, the purpose of the library is to serve the public, even the difficult ones.

No two situations are exactly the same, so staff discretion is often needed to determine the best course of action. Always approach a situation calmly before deciding what to do. Slavick offers another option for confronting a patron. "If you feel uncomfortable confronting the group again, ask a colleague or a security guard to join you while you ask them to leave" (Slavick, 2009, pg. 40). Coworkers should always back each other up, especially in moments like this. If available at the moment, a manager or confident library leader is the best choice. Safety really does come in numbers, so it is a good idea to have a staff witness accompany another staff member when asking a patron to leave for the day. It is impossible to predict or control others actions. Therefore, librarians must control their own emotions and actions when approaching a patron. It is important to pay attention to tone, facial expressions and body language. Active listening is key when speaking with a patron. Make sure to verbally acknowledge that they are upset.

Most patrons are calm, but if something goes wrong, like they owe fines, they could quickly become anxious, hostile or aggressive. Recognize the problem and that they are upset about it, but remain concentrated on solving the issue at hand. These patrons may be able to settle down if the librarian assures them that they are listening and there to help, but some may not be so reasonable. A library leader should ignore minor insults, avoid arguing and keep focused. If they are out of control, "Now is the time to call your security or the police. The patron has checked out of Hotel Reality..." (Graham, 2012, p. 42). Graham continues to emphasize that security or the police should always be called when the staff feel unsafe or wary of a situation. Furthermore, at the time of an incident, staff must follow security procedures even if they do not agree with

them because doing otherwise can put staff and patrons in danger. Anyone who confronts a problematic patron should be confident, yet cautious and keep a safe distance. The best way to do this is by standing with a table or chair between you and the patron, and always keep an eye on them in case they choose violence as their next action.

In an excerpt from Ryan Dowd's book, *The Librarian's Guide to Homelessness*, Dowd recommends developing a relationship with your local police. Ryan Dowd is the director of a large homeless shelter for several decades, and offers training for libraries and other public places. Both Graham and Dowd feel that as a community hub, the library should be checked on from time to time. That way, when a major safety concern arises, the police are already familiar with library staff and policies. However, librarians should still be proactive and do not assume problems will go away on their own. Librarians should be aware of what is happening around them at all times and rely on their own skills to address patron problems before resorting to security or the police. Many issues, for example, a patron ripping pages from a newspaper, can be resolved simply by the librarian saying no, this behavior is not allowed in our policy.

Throughout *The Black Belt Librarian*, Graham states that simplicity is best in the aspects of policy word choice, behavior rules, security uniforms, emergency plans and documentation forms. Dowd states that "Less is more when it comes to rules" (Dowd, 2018). Simplicity makes rules easier for both staff and patrons to understand. Dowd follows this statement with an example from the Dallas Public Library, which found increased compliance after issuing a reduced list of only five rules (Dowd, 2018). Dowd's preferred method of approach is empathy and treating all people with kindness and respect, especially people who need it most. Graham also believes that people should all be treated equally, and librarians should avoid bias or favoritism when dealing with patrons.

Another step that librarians should take is to simply document any and all security concerns. Checklists should be made to ensure that opening and closing the library is done in a secure manner. For example, it can say something like “lock up the key to the money drawer” or “double check the bathroom for any lingering patrons.” There can also be a monthly checklist to ensure that safety measures are in place. These items are basic checks to know that a first-aid kit is stocked and available, security lights are working properly, etc. It is imperative that all library staff are aware of the location of these items. According to Graham, some other simple forms a library should keep handy are a list of banned patrons, and a security log for both established problems and potential problems. These lists should include as much detail as possible about an incident, like names of patrons and police officers, dates, and a description of the problematic behavior. The documents should be kept for future reference or, if necessary, for police records.

Many times, public places add policies and procedures only after a problem has occurred. Dr. Steve Albrecht, well-known for training schools and libraries in safety and security, suggests that library leaders create a report as a team that addresses the building’s security concerns and potential solutions. “The site security assessment process of your library is a challenging project, a necessary one (every few years), and a worthwhile effort. You can gather the information and create the solutions, without having to hire security consultants” (Albrecht, 2021, 118). Dr. Albrecht’s article, “Assessing Library Facility Security: No Consultants Required,” recommends that this study go beyond library staff, but not beyond library budgets. The final Site Security Assessment should be reviewed by law enforcement, human resources, IT, facility maintenance, legal attorney and city council in addition to the library’s management. The result of this document should yield new or improved security equipment, first-aid kits, emergency evacuation

plans, and possible security guards. The extent of implementation is largely dependent on budgetary constraints.

Since libraries are facing budgetary constraints, only some libraries may be able to invest in state-of-the-art security systems with cameras, guards, and alarm systems. Fortunately, by no means are these required to maintain a safe library. For hardly any cost, library leaders can develop a relationship with local police, document security concerns, update code of conduct policies for easier comprehension, hold staff training, and avoid exposure of money, keys and staff belongings to the public. Library leaders should never avoid conflict by not enforcing the rules. If a library staff member or a patron expresses feeling unsafe, something must be done immediately. Above all, library leaders should avoid making assumptions, good or bad, about patrons. These judgements can not only be incorrect, but they can put staff in harm's way. Library leaders must always keep the best interests of the library and their staff at the forefront of any situation.

References:

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