

Executive Summary:

A county library system with six service locations recently terminated one of its five branch managers. The manager was dismissed due to inappropriate behavior toward staff and patrons and for blatant disregard of explicit instructions from the director and assistant directors. However, this manager has decided to claim race discrimination and is suing the county for wrongful termination under the Equal Opportunity Employment Act. Because of this situation, the library director and assistant directors have been made aware of several important facts. Although the director and assistant directors kept careful documentation of infractions, the county has now been informed that any patron complaints are only considered hearsay, and management reports are only credited if a supervisor personally witnessed the event. They have also been told that only problems specifically indicated on the manager's written performance improvement plan are grounds for termination. A significant problem that has been discussed in conjunction with this case is that the library system does not have a current employee handbook. A handbook is available for county employees, but the library system's handbook has not been updated in many years. The library system wants to avoid legal problems in the future through the use of appropriate documentation, an updated handbook, and improved strategies for central managers to successfully supervise offsite staff and branch operations.

Recommendations:

➤ **Immediate:**

- Create an updated handbook (Flynn, 2000)
- Ask for staff feedback on handbook (Sosnin, 2001, p. 70)
- Continue to keep careful documentation to demonstrate equitable treatment of staff
- Make sure tasks for branch staff are "clearly defined" (Putnam, 2001, p. 55)

➤ **Long Term:**

- Increase the quantity and quality of interactions with branch staff
- Create opportunities for branch staff to interact with staff at other locations through informal meetings and opportunities for "more time away from other duties" (Bottorff, Glaser, Todd and Alderman 2008, p. 344)
- Help branch staff to "get better in their work" through "genuine coaching" (Lubans, 2006)
- Meet individually with branch staff and invite discussion of problems and issues as well as suggestions or ideas for changes or improvements in library programs or services
- Involve library board members in assessing branch staff and atmosphere
- Invite patron comments and suggestions

Interactions with Branch Staff:

It is difficult to achieve rapport with colleagues who are not frequently seen. In addition, the staff member who sees administration infrequently and only when things are going badly will likely not be pleased to see an administrator. This situation could be improved by increasing the number of visits and making sure that some visits are to report praise, to help the branch meet a need or achieve a goal, or simply to check in. Of course, fitting visits into an already busy administrator schedule may be extremely difficult. In fact, a survey of librarians at multi-campus institutions found that the main deterrent from greater communication and collaboration is a “lack of time due to other duties” (Bottorff, Glaser, Todd, & Alderman 2008, p. 354). When semi-frequent visits are not practical, email or phone calls may be useful for preventing a drop-off in communication. These various communication methods are not a one-size-fits-all, and a combination will probably be most useful. “For both managers and workers, the trick is knowing when to use email and when to use voicemail, when a teleconference will be effective and when a personal meeting is necessary” (Putnam 2001, p. 58).

Staff may also be invited to have a one-on-one meeting with a manager, assistant director, or director at a set interval, separately from a performance evaluation. This could be done anywhere from monthly to annually depending on the staff position or need. Establishing this open communication would allow staff to seek help in improving their skills, discuss frustrations and how to handle them, present ideas, and receive advice in a non-threatening situation. In addition, each member of the library staff would feel that their feelings and opinions mattered. Another valuable method of increasing positive interactions and communication is through an attempt at coaching. Although Lubans indicates that “few library staff *want* to be coached, many are uncertain, and some *won't* be coached,” he also notes the value of coaching rather than supervising, using the example of a sports coach to whom all team members want to listen (Lubans 2006, p. 87). He mentions that those resistant to the concept of coaching or those who see no personal need for improvement may “ask us when to find the time, in an already impossible schedule” (Lubans, 2006, p. 87). This complaint is similar to the one mentioned above, that of too many tasks and too little time to improve skills, complete training, or collaborate with others. Possible suggestions for relief of duties include closing the library for staff training days, making slight adjustments to public service hours, or floating a librarian or manager to another branch for a day or a few hours to temporarily relieve the branch manager of supervisory duties.

Teamwork and Communication:

Branch staff need to understand their importance to the organization instead of feeling that they are on the less important side of an “us and them” situation (Kelly, 2005, p.123). This can be improved by increased interaction with management, as discussed above. Putnam (2001) indicates two essentials for effective distance management: “the worker’s tasks and responsibilities must be very clearly defined, and both worker and manager must pay extra attention to keeping in touch” (Putnam 2001, p. 55). In addition, it is important that staff are able to interact with employees from other branches. Having staff from the various branches work together on Sundays is one way that employees get to know the rest of the organization, but

perhaps more could be done to change the branch mentality into a system mentality. A member of a remote library consortium stated that, “even though you may be part of a team, there is still the potential to feel isolated if you are working in a one person library” (Kelly, 2005, p.120). Even though the branches in this particular system are neither remote nor consist of a single individual, the same feeling may apply. The single librarian, the single youth services specialist, or even the single shelver at a branch may feel isolated from their equivalent peers. Events such as the monthly meeting of youth services staff may a good model for negating this feeling of isolation.

In the common situation of a centrally located headquarters and outlying branches, meetings and training tend to be held at the central location. Academic librarians at regional campuses noted that they “hosted visits from main campus librarians far less often” than the regional librarians visited the main campus (Brandt, Frederiksen, Schneider, & Syrkin, 2006, p. 45). Perhaps occasionally holding meetings at another location would help the staff member who feels grumpy or inconvenienced by the need to travel to a meeting. In addition, any local branch staff who consistently forget or refuse to show up would have no excuse.

Involving Patrons and the Library Board:

It is important for a library to know the needs of the community and whether the library is fulfilling those needs. As a complete needs assessment survey is not practical at this time, other options may be useful. For example, some patrons currently put suggestions in the suggestion box and a number of patrons completed the website redesign survey. Perhaps a patron satisfaction survey would help managers to determine whether the branches are succeeding. If such a survey were to be distributed and collected by volunteers rather than library staff, there would be no need for patrons to feel pressured into choosing “correct” responses or for staff to feel that they should send only the good responses on to the director and assistant directors. This might also give useful feedback for other aspects of the library, such as satisfaction with programming or book selection.

Another valuable resource for ensuring that branches are operating well might be the members of the library board. Most staff members are on their best behavior when they see the director approaching. However, a board member is less recognizable – in fact, some staff may never have met any of the board members – so they are more likely to see the natural behavior of the staff and their normal interactions with patrons and staff. If a branch had a specific service goal to meet and a board member visited that branch with that goal in mind, she would be able to give the director her impressions of whether the branch was meeting that goal as well as any positive or negative things she noticed on her visit. This could be a monthly visit or a quarterly visit or even a casual observance whenever the board member decided to drop in. If board members were too busy to make visits or lived too far from a particular branch, the director and assistant directors might make use of volunteers similar to department stores’ use of “mystery shoppers.” A volunteer could be assigned to ask a reference question, check out a book, register to use a computer, or a similar task, and then report on the quality and ease of their experience. Perhaps, given the known number of nearby students in MLIS programs, these students could be asked to participate as volunteers. The advantage here would be that these students have at least a little background and would be able to give recommendations based on known best practices for libraries.

Handbook Update:

As has already been mentioned, the importance of an updated employee handbook has become evident through this situation. Most of the literature on drafting or updating a handbook expresses a need for the use of disclaimers, particularly statements that “preserve status as an at-will employer” (Flynn, 2000, p. 132). From a legal standpoint, it is also wise to indicate that the handbook is not a contract, as noted by Pedersen: “Handbooks often serve to shape employee expectations about disciplinary procedures and job security, and thus many courts have found them to be binding under an implied contract theory” (Pedersen, 2008, p. 106-107). In addition, the handbook creators should not “include minute details about day-to-day life at [their] company” or mention detailed disciplinary procedures that will not be enforced (Sosnin, 2001, p. 68). After a draft of the handbook is completed, it may be wise to have a group of employees, both professional and paraprofessional, “review the draft to make sure it is clear and concise” (Sosnin, 2001, p. 70). This group may discover items that need clarification or even identify areas where more information might be useful. Alternately, the creators could seek staff input before the draft is complete, asking what questions they would like to see answered in the handbook such as protocol for severe weather situations, organizational policy on receiving personal gifts, or clarification of paid breaks. Once the handbook is completed, each employee must sign an acknowledgement form that states that they have received, read, and understand the manual. Management must make sure that they follow any disciplinary measures noted in the manual and keep careful documentation to eliminate the possibility of appearing to allow one employee to slide while strictly enforcing the rules with another.

Bibliography and Recommended Reading:

Distance Management and Teamwork:

Bottorff, T., Glaser, R., Todd, A., & Alderman, B. (2008). Branching out: Communication and collaboration among librarians at multi-campus institutions. *Journal of Library Administration* 48(3/4), 329-363. doi: 10.1080/01930820802289391

Although the article deals with academic branch libraries, there are many aspects that would apply to a public library system with branches. Particular aspects of interest include the survey responses of librarians regarding obstacles to communication and collaboration with other librarians.

Brandt, J., Frederiksen, L., Schneider, T., & Syrkin, D. (2006). The face of regional campus libraries and librarianship. *Journal of Library Administration*, 45(1/2), 37-61. doi:10.1300/J111v45n0103.

This article outlines a study of regional and main campus academic libraries. The important findings for this topic may be found in the sections on communication between the campuses and on staffing.

Kelly, T. (2005). Where is my team? A manager's point of view on working with a team of remote information specialists. *Quarterly Bulletin of the International Association of Agricultural Information Specialists*, 50(3/4), 119-123.

This author explains some solutions to the problems experienced by her geographically dispersed team. She also includes useful tips for remote practitioners as well as managers of a decentralized team.

Lubans, J. (2006). Coaching for results. *Library Administration & Management*, 20(2), 86.

This article shows the difference between supervising and coaching and shows some ways in which coaching can be a success. The author also mentions some obstacles to coaching, such as the direct supervisory relationship, and gives conditions that must exist for feedback to be positively received.

Putnam, L. (2001). Distance teamwork: The realities of collaborating with virtual colleagues. *Online*, 25(2), 54-57

This article discusses teamwork where one or more team members primarily participate virtually. Although the focus is on virtual distance, the ideas and hints are also applicable for teams at a physical distance. The article includes both general tips and tips for team leaders.

Employee Handbooks & Policies:

Bandow, D., & Hunter, D. (2008). Developing policies about uncivil workplace behavior. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 71(1), 103-106. doi: 10.1177/1080569907313380

This article suggests creating an official policy about uncivil behavior, as well as the consequences for the perpetrator and the victim. Of specific interest might be the lists of uncivil behavior as defined by three different organizations.

Flynn, G. (2000). Take another look at the employee handbook. *Workforce*, 79(3), 132-134.

This article mentions the two essential items to include in any handbook, things that should be left out, the level of detail to use, and the use of certain words or phrases.

Pedersen, N. (2008). A subjective approach to contracts?: How courts interpret employee handbook disclaimers. *Hofstra Labor & Employment Law Journal*, 26(1), 101-161.

This interesting article uses six court cases to show the legal interpretations of an employee handbook. Unless one is interested in the particulars of the six legal cases, the important sections will be the introduction through part III as well as part V.

Sosnin, B. (2001). Packaging your policies. *HRMagazine*, 46(7), 66.

This how-to article will help managers create or update an employee handbook, and lists important disclaimers and recommended handbook sections.

Websites:

<http://blog.winningworkplaces.org/blog/open-communication-in-the-workplace>

This blog from Winning Workplaces, a consulting, training, and information organization, has many interesting success stories, tips, and concepts for improving workplace communication.

<http://www.business.gov/business-law/employment/hiring/employee-handbook.html>

This portion of the U.S. Small Business Administration website provides a template and tips for creating an employee handbook.

<http://www.libraryworks.com/BestPractices.aspx>

This website's "Best Practices" section is full of articles written by information specialists, and includes such topics as "Strengthening Your Staff" and "Being Part of a Team"