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Managing the Workplace Culture:

Common Sense
Compassionate Support
Creative Strategies

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Introduction

"If only someone had impressed upon us in graduate school how much we needed to learn about staff relations."

"Never in a million years could I have imagined how crucial it is to understand how to be a leader -- until I became one."

"Hire for the attitude. You can always teach technical skills to a new employee -- but it is almost impossible to repair a poor attitude."

"Staff morale is the top priority. If it's good, you can perform miracles. If it's poor, no amount of money or technology will let you reach your goals."

Such typical quotes from real life echo a simple yet fundamental observation I have made through decades of work in the information profession: While technical and professional skills are of course indispensable, success on the job depends on excellence in "the people department". Were I in charge of the curricula of faculties of information science, I would take a good long look at the emphasis on people management skills. My experience as a consultant tells me that the greatest challenges in today's work environments are associated with managing the relationships between "the library" -- however that entity is defined -- and its clients. In turn, the quality of those relationships depends on the quality of the relationships among the library staff, which further requires the presence of a capable leader conscious of the need to nurture workplace health.

A workplace where employees come to work excited and leave with energy to spare doesn't just happen. Savvy managers know that productivity goes through the roof when staff are happy in their jobs, just as it plummets when they aren't. It is no surprise that the "management industry" is burgeoning -- just think of the number of management related books you'll find on Amazon, and of the simple fact that Career sections in major newspapers are commonplace. There is plenty of awareness that the health of the workplace culture is a, if not the, key to organizational success.

Let me comment briefly on the concept of organizational culture. Every organization larger than one person has a culture. My personal definition of it is "the sum total of the perceptions, motivations, ambitions, and apprehensions that drive behavior". Said another way, culture is the answer to the question "what's it like to work here?" Culture determines how people behave by establishing the parameters of what is or is not tolerated and of what is or is not encouraged. In a positive culture, people feel safe, empowered, and supported in using their creativity; typically there is a strong sense among employees that they work together for the overall goals. In a poor culture, people are fearful and distrusting; typically employees look to protect themselves before they consider organizational goals, and they can easily end up obstructing those goals as a result.

As library leaders, our responsibility is to deliver on our mission vis a vis the clients. To do so, we need the contribution of all our staff; and to maximize that contribution, we need to ensure a healthy workplace. My message here is that before we work on budgets and before we deal with installing a new library system and before we tackle the electronic journals situation, we need to work on the culture in which we ask our staff to work.

Meet my Friend David: A Natural Leader

Libraries are similar in many ways to other types of workplaces, just as there are some special features. Let me use my friend David as an example of the common, simple principles that support a good workplace culture anywhere. David shared with me the challenges and rewards of being a flight attendant, pointing out how satisfying it was when he'd had a good day. In David's definition, a good day was one when he felt appreciated by the pilots; when his suggestions were taken seriously by his team mates; when the traveling public appreciated his service; when he has free to use his creativity to give the most appropriate service under the circumstances, and conversely when he was free to make changes and exceptions when conditions warranted. (You can just imagine the stories from a bad day.) When David retired, he built a house. You can bet that he made all the trades people feel appreciated; he pitched right in beside them and asked them to teach him; he made everyone feel part of a team and offered praise on a regular basis. You can bet that he asked them for guidance when a decision had to be made and made it very clear that he relied on their professional experience; in short, David provided for the trades team the type of work environment he himself had appreciated. (And oh yes, the following summer he put on a garden party for the team as a thank you for a job well done.) I was on the building site from time to time and heard many a comment about how nice it was to work on David's house. It wasn't any special magic -- it was just David being a natural leader.

In the following, I comment on some special challenges for libraries; suggest some strategies for building a good work environment; illustrate how human nature impacts work behavior; and summarize some basic leadership practices that will serve us all in our work. Just as with David's house, there is no special magic -- just a lot of common sense.

Special Challenges in Libraries

Naturally, libraries are not hospitals or airlines. Generic staff relations guidelines are applicable to one degree or another, and some of them are uniquely appropriate. One key distinguishing factor (among others) causing special staff relations challenges is the presence of multiple, and very different, stakeholder groups. Library staff serve their multiple groups of direct users -- students, faculty, knowledge workers, researchers, government employees, business professionals, and so on -- but at the same time, library leaders must keep an eye on the demands and priorities of indirect clients such as, for example, a university administration (those who pay the bills) and the future employers of a university's graduates (those who pass judgment on the quality of the university). Such multiple loyalties can cause some challenges as divergent priorities must be juggled.

Another key factor is the pronounced vulnerability felt by many libraries. Budget pressures, a sense of invisibility, and the risk of closure are common concerns voiced by librarians, and it is no surprise they add that staff are feeling insecure and tense.

But let's say a given library is not threatened by imminent closure. At the very least, it faces significant change and must adapt to a rapidly evolving environment: Clients have alternatives and must be wooed with extra effort; new technologies and tools drive the need to offer new services and therefore the need to develop new skills. The capabilities and excellence of the

past aren't cutting it in the present. The pressure on leadership and staff to figure out how to succeed in a changing world can be considerable.

In my view, the key factor making staff relations such a challenge in libraries is their "people intensiveness". Work procedures are complex; the high degree of high-pressure interaction with clients generates a need for making quick decisions without recourse to any "manual"; and the realities of IT, budgets, and vendor policies dictate sophisticated expertise in planning, negotiation, and relationship management. For that reason, I believe that the Chief Librarian need not be the world champion of librarianship -- that's what staff are for -- but he or she had better be the world champion of staff relations.

Special Challenges in Canada

In Canada, special challenges are associated with the interaction between typical staff groupings and with classification policies in certain types of environments. For example, job classifications in government libraries tend to limit career mobility, leading to frequent turnover in clerical positions. Such turnover presents a significant training burden for the remaining staff. Another example is the fact that while the standard types of library staff are well defined -- professional librarians with MLS degrees, library technicians, administrative and technical staff, and support staff -- the types of functions they perform are often very similar. Moreover, significant working experience on the part of a library technician may render him or her more skilled than a more recent MLS degree holder. All in all, a library can contain a fair amount of sensitivity about who is qualified to do what -- and for what level of salary.

In addition, Canada's mixed demography, especially in urban areas, produces non-homogeneous groups of staff and clients. Cultural differences then add to the sensitivities about job functions; for example, staff members must be aware that their colleagues' behavior may be influenced by what is considered permissible in their original culture. While in some cultural groups, speaking frankly in front of the boss is perfectly acceptable, members of other cultural groups may hesitate to do so.

All the above challenges point to the need for a conscious strategy for building a productive library workplace. "A good place to work" is very much the result of a detailed strategy -- it is never an accident.

A Foundation for Building a Productive Library Work Environment

Any time is a good time to take a look at the culture in the libraries or library departments we lead. Arriving as a new manager is a natural occasion, but many established managers have been amazed at the results when they undertook an assessment "just because".

My work as a strategic planning consultant confirms that an "audit" of the match between client requirements and library services is a helpful platform for examining workplace culture. Such an audit -- culminating in the formulation of a strategic plan for the library's services and how to deliver them -- will yield not only pointers for strategic reprioritization of library services, but also insight into the dynamics of "how things are working now and how they can work better". The analysis of client priorities sheds light on areas where the library is successfully meeting its mandate, on areas where new services are called for, and often also on activities that are no longer necessary (they might have been once, but time moved on).

I stress that it is important to let client priorities drive the discussions about "how things ought to be working" -- it would be untoward to begin discussing that topic without the context of what clients need. The last thing we want is to focus inward on existing services based on an assumption they are appropriate on the strength of having been implemented at some time in the past. (It is not uncommon for library staff to be convinced of the inherent justifiability of traditional library services and to advance a view that users "ought to" do this or that; such an attitude is not in the interest of long term success.)

The beauty of performing an audit of client needs is that there is no implicit criticism of the work currently being performed. In other words, there is no suggestion that "something is wrong and needs to be fixed". Of course, the audit will in due time bring to light any matters in need of attention -- and this is where the skilled library leader ensures that staff have the opportunity to discuss and discover among themselves what should be changed.

The process for conducting the audit -- interviews, focus groups, possibly some form a survey based on initial findings, benchmark checks on what is working well in similar libraries -- is well described in the literature. It is essential that all staff understand that the client needs study is not an exercise in "how much do they love us" -- in other words, it is not a client satisfaction study (except to the degree that satisfaction or lack thereof will be evident in the results). Naturally, it can be painful for library staff to discover, for example, that there is a low level of awareness of the services being offered; but the skilled leader will position such findings as an opportunity to improve client relations. Better client relations mean a stronger understanding of client needs, which in turn allows staff to shape services that are indeed relevant for clients. When efforts are directed where they deliver the most important results, everyone stands to gain greater job satisfaction.

The findings of the audit point the way to an articulation of a strategic plan that meets client priorities while leveraging existing staff skills and providing for skills upgrades. It must be geared to win support "upstairs" by spelling out the anticipated benefits to be had from the planned initiatives, thus giving the powers that be a reason to say yes.

I stress again that close involvement of all staff in the analysis of findings and the development of recommendations is paramount. Imposing a "management plan" on staff who had no input is a recipe for trouble. A sense of staff ownership in the strategic plan growing out of the audit is the best insurance that the plan will work -- staff will see to it that *their* plan will succeed.

In an ideal world, the plan provides for a productive culture by creating opportunities for all staff to develop and grow in their jobs. As the team moves through the implementation of the strategic plan, individual and team successes are experienced; everyone shares in the collective sense of achievement; everyone is energized, and an atmosphere of trust and enjoyment prevails.

But the world isn't ideal. Human nature often gets in the way!

Human Nature

I have found an almost magic key to getting to the bottom of many challenging workplace situations. It consists simply of asking "what is the motivation? Where is the person coming from in saying or doing this or that?" Once I understand "oh, he's worried about looking foolish" or "the last time she volunteered a suggestion, someone else took the credit later" or "the team

members are so distraught about the rumors of upcoming layoffs, they can't concentrate on their work", a constructive approach quickly suggests itself.

Every action a person takes is rooted in a personal "view of the world" made up of assumptions, aspirations, hopes, fears, and concerns. Let me offer just two small examples to illustrate:

A newly promoted Department Head is concerned about succeeding in the job, especially as some staff members have more experience than she does. Understandably, she does what every librarian would do -- she hits the management books. Her honorable motivation to understand the ins and outs of being an effective manager leads her to adopt, without "digesting" them in her own context, some of the principles she reads about. In other words, she is unsure of her own instincts and "plays a part". Not surprisingly, the results are disappointing. The more she tries to act according to the literature, the worse it seems to get. One day, on the verge of concluding that she will have to resign, a chance remark falls: "We liked it much better when you were yourself". Fortunately, she had the presence of mind to say "can we talk?". What she heard turned everything around: "Your natural, authentic personality and gut feeling is ten times more effective than anything you could find in the so-called experts' books!" There was nothing wrong with her motivation -- but it had untoward effects. The lesson here: Being open and honest, making it clear to staff "there are things I'm not certain about; what would you suggest?" would have been a much better approach. It is unlikely -- as she feared -- that any staff would have faulted her for such openness; in fact, on the contrary, helping a newbie boss succeed is in everyone's long term interest.

A new employee's parents are in a serious accident. As the probationary period isn't completed yet, he feels he can't be so bold as to ask for time off and says nothing. The motivation not to jeopardize the job is understandable -- but the consequence is that his performance is not optimal because of the stress. He makes mistakes that cause grief for other team members who have to step in and deal with the mixups. It isn't until the end-of-probation evaluation, when the supervisor points out those problems, that he brings up the accident as a reason why he couldn't concentrate on his work properly. The supervisor -- whose motivation in not calling in the new employee for a chat as soon as the problems started might have been that she wanted to give him a chance, or that she did not want to exert undue pressure on him -- feels let down in three ways: "First, you didn't trust me enough to confide in me that a personal difficulty was causing you stress? Second, had you only been open, I could have dealt appropriately with the situation, giving you time off so that you could come back later and be more focused. Third, had I been able to act in that manner, the rest of the team would have been better off." The lesson for the new employee here is twofold: One, there is a responsibility to acknowledge and communicate appropriately about personal limitations (in this case, "I'm under stress and can't focus") so that untoward consequences for the team are avoided or minimized. Two, it is a usually mistake to withhold information -- instead, present the facts and give others an opportunity to act accordingly. But there is a lesson for the supervisor too: Why didn't you call the new employee into your office for a chat? Couldn't you see the poor guy was having some kind of trouble? If information isn't forthcoming, it can be necessary to go looking for it.

Just two vignettes from life in a typical workplace -- every day presents new ones. Being human, people create a lot of challenges for themselves and for others ... on the strength of the best of intentions.

Guess What: People are Human -- and Small Things Count

The humanity of each staff member and colleague is a central theme we all ought to keep firmly in mind as we go about our daily work. It helps to remember, for example, that people prefer appreciation over money and will expend huge efforts to achieve public recognition. And it's a good idea to keep in mind that feeling left out and badly treated is a terrible experience for anyone.

Interestingly, seemingly minor matters have a disproportionate effect. So the door squeals? Hardly a calamity, you'd think. Well ... if it takes a year and 33 requests to get it fixed, the message is pretty clear: It is not of concern to management that eleven people are terribly bothered by the constant noise, day in and day out.

In the following examples, it is painfully obvious what the alternative would have been:

- The Head of Reference learns from a casual comment by the janitor that the reference area is about to be remodeled -- with significant consequences for his staff. (What was the Director thinking, not letting the Head of Reference know of such plans?)
- A staff member sends in a request to attend an intensive training course relevant to her position, detailing the significant benefits for the function in question. When there has been no response after two weeks, the request is resubmitted. The Supervisor never responds. (This is worse than a "no".)
- At the same time, the Assistant Director sends off to a "plum" conference (sunny location, lots of attractions, not much professional value to the library) a staff member who is widely known not to pull his weight, leaving others to do his work. (What does that tell the people who pick up his slack?)

Conversely, it is almost embarrassingly simple to score small victories that resonate with staff. In each example below, it would have been easy to do nothing:

- A new employee makes a suggestion about relocating some equipment. Colleagues agree "we never thought of that, what a good idea", and the Department Head says "go ahead!" The move is done the same day, everyone realizes the positive results, and the new employee is singled out for praise at the next staff meeting.
- The Department Head notices that a screen left over from a previous office configuration is unnecessarily blocking daylight for an employee. He orders it removed and the employee can now see out the window. (Note: This is a Canadian example. In libraries closer to the equator, the example would be "puts up a sun screen".)
- The Department Head notices long lineups of students at the workstations. Regardless of having some hunch about the reason, he calls in staff to discuss the matter without the slightest suggestion they are at fault -- on the contrary, he starts off the meeting saying "that must be stressful for you. Tell me what you think".
- The Department Head makes sure to have a private conversation with each staff member before going off to management meetings. He knows that he can accurately incorporate the concerns of his staff into the meeting, and staff know they have an ambassador. (Of course, the final decision may be different from what staff wanted -- but they know their case was put forward and considered.)

Helpful Practices -- for All Types of Library Staff

Each stage of a library career calls for specific skills -- and for efforts to generate learning both up and down. While everyone has an obligation to help the "next generation" learn, newer generations can assist senior colleagues in some areas such as (for example) the opportunities of new technology. The overall philosophy here is that "we are all in this together, and rank has no bearing". That's the way they do it in Military Special Forces.

There is a mission to be accomplished. The lieutenant explains to the team what needs to be accomplished. Each member of the team has some special expertise and experience to contribute. The team works out an action plan, relying on the individual areas of expertise. It is understood that lives are at stake unless everyone does his part, according to the plan. The team goes out and "does it" -- and if a team member has trouble, another steps in; there is no room for "not my job".

Libraries, thankfully, are not military units with dangerous missions. But they have missions nonetheless. In order to succeed, library work teams must devote "military" diligence to their obligations: They must demonstrate their commitment to the overall goals; they must communicate in all directions; they must help and support colleagues; they must serve on committees and task forces; and they must be proactive in bringing ideas and solutions to the team table: "Here's something I found that might be of interest in the context of our project."

Ultimately, all good advice for managers applies to staff -- after all, staff are but leaders in training. Here are a few tried and true recommendations that all library staff can adopt:

- Take the larger view and dig deeper. Is there something behind a surprising new initiative that makes sense even though at first it looked peculiar?
- Shift vantage point from "me" to "organization". What is it the organization needs to accomplish, and how can I participate?
- Rather than just complaining, prepare the *business case* for doing something differently.
- Be active in the professional networks, read widely -- not just in the library literature but in related disciplines too, and bring in new ideas. Ideally, a work team organizes that "you check out this, you monitor that, and you organize an exchange meeting". In other words, learning is the responsibility of each employee just as much as it is the manager's job to arrange for training.
- Ask questions of colleagues to stimulate exchange: "I'm curious why you say that. Can you elaborate?" In other words, the goal is not to defend status quo -- rather the goal is to understand a colleague's approach and to determine how it might benefit the library overall.

And of course, managers reward such "incipient leadership" behavior! They reward suggestions and new ideas, and they actively solicit input for planning. Regardless whether an idea is adopted, the offering of the idea is rewarded. The objective is to keep the ideas flowing ... regardless which ones happen to get adopted.

Good Leaders are Made of This ...

In the following, I list some basic behaviors good leaders find natural. I have seen how effective they are in the special workplaces libraries are. While they are intuitive in their simplicity, it can't hurt to make a conscious effort to follow them in everything we do.

Leaders listen: They set up opportunities for learning from staff about "what is really going on" and make sure to solicit actively from those who may not volunteer their views. Then, they take special care to get back to each person with a reaction: "When you pointed out the bottle neck at the workstations, I looked into it and here is what I think." It is not good enough just to "sit there like a stone wall" -- employees need to see that something resulted from their input -- even if it's only an explanation why their suggestions aren't practical just now.

Leaders communicate: They see to it that all staff know what they are doing and planning. If staff know what subjects are going to be on the boss' mind for what meetings, they can plan to supply the appropriate ammunition in time. When the boss can't bring staff members to senior management meetings in person, she does so "in spirit" by collecting all affected individuals' opinion beforehand, and by circulating a summary: "Here is what I propose to share with the other managers concerning the bottlenecks at the workstations". That way, any misunderstanding can be cleared up in advance. Subsequent to the meeting, the boss distributes a note explaining the outcome -- "Here is how the discussion went and here is what was decided in the end, for these reasons."

Leaders don't hide in the Boardroom -- they show up on the floor. Staff have a deep respect for leaders who "keep a hand in the game" by taking the odd shift at the Reference Desk or just turning up at odd hours to observe the activity. Mind you, there is a risk staff may see such observation as needless interference and lack of trust; it is important that staff experience a positive result whenever the boss comes around.

Leaders give credit: In Japan, the practice of giving credit is institutionalized; we could do well by following the example. A simple "thanks to the research done by John and Susan, we now have a plan for rolling out the first distance learning classes" will keep John and Susan working on new projects with pride and enthusiasm; taking the credit will kill their creativity and enthusiasm before your coffee gets cold. Arranging formal and meaningful award ceremonies to honor those making an extra effort goes a long way toward building morale. Be careful, though, that such events do not become insincere rituals (staff can see through that). An award ceremony should be staged only when there truly is something to celebrate.

Leaders take responsibility: While they dish out credit, leaders do not assign blame. After all, the final approvals were ours to make. We make the decisions -- and if something doesn't work out well, we deal with the situation professionally as our responsibility. It is, of course, appropriate once again to consult with staff: "What do you think we might have done differently?"

Leaders are like Canadian grizzly bears protecting their cubs: We would be in dire trouble if it weren't for dedicated, loyal staff. In turn, we are dedicated and loyal to them, and go to bat for them when it's necessary. I have seen it make a huge impression on staff members when their supervisors stand up to their peers, essentially saying "I will not allow such and such to happen to my team". Acting in a protective manner proactively is particularly valued: "I notice you are shaking your wrists a lot -- shouldn't we take a look at your schedule to see if we can cut down the length of time you are typing at any one sitting?"

Leaders "get personal": Leaders know the fine line between treating everyone as a human being on the one hand and showing favoritism on the other. Leaders greet everyone by name, and courteously show up where staff normally gather, say in the coffee room -- just long enough for someone to have the opportunity to make a comment. "Oh, hello, I have been meaning to mention to you that the printers are breaking down so often now that repairs are getting very expensive." "Why don't you send me your calculations later today?"

Leaders make it safe to speak up: Secure leaders create safe ways for teams to examine their own work domains on a regular basis in order to identify challenges or come up with improvements. They "make it OK" to discuss issues openly. Secure leaders welcome being made aware of problems *before* they get out of hand. They make a point of encouraging staff to be on perpetual "trouble control" and publicly thank those who bring to light something in need of attention. They have no concern about losing face, and they never -- ever -- punish the messenger. Of course, there's the old saying "Don't come to me with problems, come to me with solutions" -- but I believe it can be taken too literally. It is better to encourage communication: "If you see something that's not right, by all means develop a plan for dealing with it -- but come to me immediately so we can get all the right people on it."

Leaders avoid the trap of lenience: Turning a blind eye to untoward behavior is extremely damaging to morale. Not only will such behavior be repeated (why would anyone want to change if there is no request for doing so?); it will have a strongly demotivating effect throughout a team or department. Here's why: When members of a team or department see that a colleague gets away with poor behavior -- or see a slacker colleague get sent to a "plum" conference in a sunny location -- they will feel doubly betrayed: Once by the offender, and then again, in much greater measure, by the supervisor. People find it very difficult to deal with the experience that "the boss will not take action with someone who is causing problems for the team" because it is impossible to get around the conclusion that the boss does not care about the team.

Last but not least: Leaders don't leave things to chance.

Now Let's Go Out and Teach ...

Workplace health is the result of dedicated, conscious efforts inspired by the basic principles I have outlined above. I am a strong advocate of "catching someone doing something right" and allowing others to benefit from the discovery. For example, a post-mortem to illustrate what succeeded -- or didn't -- is extremely effective: "Did you see how effectively Frank made the case for the new rotation schedule by systematically listing the problems and the corresponding solutions?" "Did you notice Caroline's body language when Simon blamed her for the delay in the new system? How would you have dealt with Caroline with respect to that delay?"

Good leaders create healthy workplaces. Great leaders teach their staff how to one day do the same.