

Poor Leadership and the Toxic Environment

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Whether you are the director of a large academic library or a public library associate with supervisory responsibilities, being cognizant of your skills as a leader will go a long way towards determining if a library's staff considers its workplace a model institution or a toxic dump. Those that have experienced the latter know that working in one of these environments can be perpetually demoralizing and weigh heavily on the psyche, affecting one's daily work enthusiasm and production. And while there are several varieties of toxic sludge that can contribute to low morale in the workplace, the one that is noticed most prominently is that of poor leadership.

A library can be flush with funding, have the greatest collection of resources, and be equipped with all of the latest technologies – but with poor leadership at the reigns, work production and cohesiveness of staff members will steadily decline down a slippery slope. On the opposite end of the morale spectrum, a supervisor working in an old dusty library with a leaky roof and a budget that is one-third the size of its nearest competitor can get the most out of his or her staff by maintaining the skills required of good leadership. Whether your library is on the high morale end or the depressingly low side, supervisors and rank-and-file employees alike should make an attempt at evaluating their workplaces so as to maintain or improve a level of morale that is conducive to maximum service capability and an overall pleasant work environment.

One of the best ways to avoid poor leadership and its toxic fumes is to simply become aware of it where it is present. In Buddhism, the practice of mindfulness is often employed to help achieve maximum focus and concentration through meditation. Being mindful ultimately means to be aware of small details so that one can focus on the present. In librarianship, mindfulness can be incorporated to help us to notice the smaller details that may reveal how well we are supervising. There is an abundance of signs around the workplace that can portray what the state of morale may be in a library. Thus, it should be stated that the first step in reversing a toxic environment is to survey our workplace and pay attention to fine details.

The surveying of one's jurisdiction in the library can quickly reveal how good of a job of leading we are doing. Ask yourself some of the following questions. Is the work area, circulation, or reference desk in good shape or does it appear to be in disarray? Are employees arriving at work on time or do they often call in late or even sick? Do staff members make an attempt to look professional or is attire generally sloppy? Is customer service a strong suit in the eyes of your patrons or are there often complaints from the public? These are just a few of the many questions to be 'mindful' of when trying to determine if your library has gone sour. More than likely, if the answers are not coming in the way you had hoped, there is a good chance that favorable morale could be

dwindling. And if so, this is generally a sign that we are not leading as best as we are capable of.

The second step in improving the work environment is to take notice in staff interactions. It is important not only to notice interactions between supervisors and supervisees, but supervisors communicating with other supervisors, and lower-tier employees interacting with other lower-tier employees. Those that have worked in toxic environments will confirm that when morale is low, one of the most prominent signs is a lack of communication. This lack of communication is usually a direct indication that the director, manager, supervisor, etc. has done a poor job of interacting with staff. This can be a result of any number of personal shortcomings or faux pas including having an abrasive personality, being a micromanager, possessing an inability to delegate, showing a lack of trust in employees, or simply giving preferential treatment to one employee over the others. Another bad habit supervisors get into is treating professionals different from paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals may lack some of the skills or knowledge that a professional may possess, or even vice versa in some cases. Nevertheless, treating employees as though they do not have the capability to learn new tasks, lack the general competency to do their job well, or play a less significant role is a sure-fire way to convert an otherwise pleasant employee into a malcontent. Poor communication is not strictly relegated to the supervisor-supervisee relationship however. Often in toxic environments, same-level employees can be found sniping at one another or even bickering with patrons. The latter of course is an immediate indication that trouble is in the air.

Additional passive interaction problems can stem from inappropriate example setting. A manager should never ask staff to do anything that he/she will not do. In my experiences, I have observed that staff members tend to follow examples that have been set by their superiors. For instance, when a supervisor arrives late to work and leaves the office early, you will often find subordinates following suit shortly thereafter. Another example is the manager who does not follow library policy, as if he/she were one of the many congressmen who are 'above the law' these days. Employees notice when the rules do not seem to apply to their supervisors, wondering why they should have to go through all of the proper channels and rigmarole when the boss does not. In abiding by all of the rules that are set which employees are expected to follow, managers are improving the chances that staff members see the importance in the creation of these rules. And in seeing the importance, employees generally work harder to help achieve the common goal of making a better library.

So what do we do if we've noticed the levels of morale taking a downturn? Well, the third step in improving your workplace is the hardest, which is to pool together your observations and make a concerted effort at gaining respect. When I say respect, I mean not only garnering personal respect from defecting staff members, but also instilling in them a respect for their own responsibilities and work areas. After all, it is often the manager that has lost all respect from his/her employees who becomes the overseer of a toxic environment. To avoid being that manager, start small by correcting some of the negative observations you have made including those resulting from your own lack of leadership. Work on presenting yourself more professionally if you have noticed the attire of your staff getting increasingly drab or sloppy. Make an effort to take a sincere interest in the personal lives of your employees if you notice them ignoring your presence

as you stroll through the work area. If employees present an idea for a project, request to create a new policy, or ask to implement a new technological tool, allow them some room for creativity and autonomy as well as a predetermined allotment of time to work on it. None of these solutions alone will fix a problem environment over night, but by working on small details little by little you will probably notice a spring developing in the steps of your staff members.

In summation, remember that no matter how busy we may be as supervisors of a library, department, or a few employees, we must always take the time to pay attention to the smaller details that can symbolize the morale status of our workplace. By surveying the work environment, taking notice in staff interactions, and implementing solutions based on keen observations, any morale problems that have been created as a result of poor leadership can be rectified. So if you have been noticing a toxic stench permeating around your work area lately, it may be time to consider a course of action towards sewage management. And if your department smells fresh as a daisy these days, it still would not hurt to brush up on some morale boosters to help fend off a future toxic spill.

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