
WORKING WITHIN THE LIBRARY: INTANGIBLES

Interpersonal Skills in the Reference Workplace

Lorraine J. Pellack

SUMMARY. Reference librarians are expected to interact effectively with a variety of clientele and are taught skills such as approachability, showing interest, and verbal and non-verbal cues. Librarians who have a knack for interpersonal skills do very well both at the reference desk and interacting with their co-workers. An area that is rarely addressed in the literature (or in library school) is that of *educating* librarians about *how* to establish professional, collegial relationships with one another. It is assumed that if a reference librarian can interact well with patrons, in a professional manner, he or she will be able to successfully “fit into” almost any reference department. This article discusses the importance of interpersonal skills within the Reference Department and ideas for improving these skills to enhance co-worker relations. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

A very eye-catching article in *American Libraries* entitled “Can’t We All Get Along?” asserted that “a growing body of evidence suggests that the root cause for the epidemic of bad bosses is the growing number of problematic employees” (Manley, 1998). It seems ironic in a public service profession which stresses customer service skills and interpersonal interactions with the general public, that there would ever be a need to address interpersonal skills with co-workers. Where’s the evidence that skills are poor or lacking? The fact that there are a number of library consultants specializing in organizational development such as Maureen Sullivan and George Soete implies a need for assistance in dealing with library workplaces gone awry, aka restructuring. Some of the restructuring is due to technological innovations causing workflow changes; other restructuring is an attempt to alter reporting lines due to personnel issues. Library managers are taking courses on team building, conflict resolution and facilitation skills. There are a few announcements of library staff members resigning due to workplace tensions, but even more who change jobs after only a year or two without any publicly stated reason. Interpersonal differences are often the cause, but confidentiality issues prevent these from being reported to anyone other than the supervisor and individuals involved. In 1985, *Library Literature* introduced a new subject heading for staff relations; to date, there are 110 articles with this subject heading. There are too many variations in words such as conflict, tension, getting along, collegiality, etc., to attempt to whittle the list further . . . but clearly this is the focus of the majority of these articles.

MANAGEMENT ROLE versus INDIVIDUAL ROLE

The introduction of Myers-Briggs into libraries, in the late 1980s, sensitized librarians to individual personality types and the concept that awareness of co-worker differences could help us understand and learn to work with different types of personalities. Since then, library manag-

ers have struggled to implement one management fad after another, in an attempt to improve the workplace. Rarely have workplace dynamics been addressed as the responsibility of individual employees. Managers can coach and recommend changes, but only the individual person can affect change in their behavior. It is somewhat analogous to those who promise to quit smoking or drinking—it can happen but only if they truly acknowledge the need for it and *want* to change.

In addition to having an ethical obligation to treat colleagues with courtesy and respect, reference librarians must be able to interact effectively with one another in order to provide an optimal level of service to their clients. A well-functioning reference unit builds on the individual strengths of each reference librarian and promotes an environment conducive to consultation and sharing . . . Collegiality generated in this work environment further boosts productivity and enhances working conditions. (Jones, 1997)

As with many similar authors on this topic, Dixie Jones mainly focuses on the role of the supervisor or manager in creating a “conductive” workplace environment. Managers typically have the opportunity to evaluate and encourage employees in specific areas of need but they rarely include things related to interpersonal skill development, unless there is a large problem area. What about those employees who don’t have major problems in specific areas, but might not realize they need to work on their active listening skills, or that with a little work on their persuasive skills (and some better preparation) they could dramatically improve their chances of success with a particular proposal to other librarians in Reference Department meetings? The workplace climate is not only the responsibility of the reference supervisor or manager; it is also the responsibility of each individual librarian in the unit.

REFERENCE BEHAVIOR COMPETENCIES

Much has been written about behavior of reference librarians at the Reference Desk, the reference interview, and customer service roles related to patrons. For example, *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Professionals* (1996) as recommended by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association includes typical things such as approachability, shows interest, uses both verbal and

nonverbal cues, etc. These are classic areas that all aspiring library school students learn, think about, and practice early in their careers. In recent years, the emphasis has been on the creation of competencies or best practices in patron interactions.

Johannah Sherrer (1996) noted, “. . . the personal attributes of librarians have a direct bearing on how effectively individual libraries move forward in providing improved, enhanced and user respected services. In any job or profession, success depends as much on attitude and approach to work as it does on training, knowledge, or appropriate degrees.” Sherrer does a very good job of discussing the importance of interpersonal skills, how they impact approachability, and their relevance to a successful reference desk interaction. The appendix to his article contains an excellent “Selected Bibliography on Reference Competencies.”

Mary Nofsinger (1999) wrote about core competencies, specifically related to reference librarians. Among the usual competencies related to reference skills and subject knowledge, Nofsinger also included “communication and interpersonal abilities.” While most of her examples pertain to interpersonal interactions with patrons, Nofsinger concludes by saying, “each reference librarian must assume responsibility for acquiring new knowledge and developing new skills.”

Unfortunately, none of these reference competencies touch on workplace skills or co-worker relations. What goes on *behind* the desk can impact approachability just as much as having a friendly demeanor when patrons first walk up to the desk. Terse comments, disagreements, and even lack of interaction between staff at the reference desk create negative tension that is noticeable by patrons and make the desk itself unapproachable. Developing/utilizing skills to assist in improving and maintaining interpersonal relations with co-workers as well as the general public is very important to creating a successful reference environment. I suggest we go one step further and expand these competencies to include behaviors related to staff interactions, both at the desk and in departmental office areas. In many cases, this may be similar to what some have labeled as personal competencies.

PERSONAL COMPETENCIES

The Special Library Association published competencies for special librarians in 1996. They divided the competencies into two sections: professional competencies and personal competencies. Personal com-

petencies are defined as “a set of skills, attitudes and values that enable librarians to work efficiently; be good communicators; focus on continuing learning throughout their careers; demonstrate the value-added nature of their contributions; and survive in the new world of work.” These skills are further defined as “creates an environment of mutual respect and trust,” “knows own strengths and the complementary strengths of others,” and “constantly looks for ways to enhance personal performance and that of others through formal and informal learning opportunities.”

In 1999, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln libraries staff developed twelve core competencies, including interpersonal/group skills and communication skills. Giesecke and McNeil (1999) described UNL efforts in defining and creating these competencies. They defined core competencies as “the skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that contribute to an individual’s success in a particular position.” Interpersonal/group skills competencies are defined as “Builds strong work relationships with a sensitivity to how individuals, organizational units, and cultures function and react. Establishes partnerships at all levels and across department and functional lines to achieve optimum results.” As part of this article, Giesecke and McNeil provided an appendix with interview questions aimed at identifying job candidate aptitudes in each of these areas.

These two sets of competencies are very definitely a step in the right direction. They serve as a guide for training and development of existing staff as well as areas to look at when hiring new staff. Reference librarians who have a knack for interpersonal skills do very well both at the reference desk and interacting with their co-workers. But what about those who do not have instinctively good interpersonal skills? Where do they acquire these aptitudes prior to going into the job market?

LIBRARY SCHOOL CURRICULA

An area that is rarely addressed in the literature is that of *educating* librarians about *how* to establish professional, collegial relationships with one another. Robert Stueart (1989) states his belief that teaching this concept must “permeate the whole curriculum.” He stresses that students should be required to work together in groups and asserts that schools should ensure graduates understand the importance of peer relations. Levy and Usherwood (1989) first began talking about the need

for library schools to develop interpersonal skills training starting in 1989. Levy was a Library Information Studies student at the time and Usherwood was a faculty member at Sheffield University. Levy later became a temporary lecturer at Sheffield and, in 1992, published a lengthy article discussing the development of interpersonal skills training integration into the LIS curriculum at Sheffield University in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, this innovation does not appear to have made the leap across the Atlantic to affect many changes in library school curricula in the United States.

ISIM University (an online-only International School of Information Management based out of Denver, Colorado) offers the *eCreation Self Assessment Survey* (<http://www.isimu.edu/foryou/begin/eprocess.htm>) to help individuals decide whether or not they are “suited” to a profession in Information Technology or Information Management. The survey asks about different types of work preferences and scores one’s aptitude in various areas. At the end it provides a list of tasks that would be required of a person in that career and recommends comparing your work preferences to the task list to see how well (or not) you might fit. It is not a requirement for entry/exit, but merely a tool for assisting individuals in making career decisions.

I recently polled subscribers to JESSE—a library and information science education listserv—asking what types of self-assessment or interpersonal skills training are students introduced to (or required to complete) in library schools. Only three professors responded saying that they have a unit/exercise/project involving self-assessment within various classes. Others replied that their reference courses only test individual knowledge of resources; they do not test reference interview skills or interpersonal skill competencies. There is an inherent expectation that graduates from library school automatically know how to interact in the workplace and act in a professional manner. Further, it is assumed that if a reference librarian can interact well with patrons, in a professional manner, he or she will be able to successfully “fit into” almost any reference department.

PROFESSIONALISM

What is “professionalism”? Ask ten different people and you will likely get just as many different responses. Most of the articles in *Library Literature* seem strictly to equate professionalism in academic librarianship with faculty status; and in public libraries, professionalism

seems to equate to staunch ethics and protection of privacy. Textbooks for library science and reference courses skirt the issue entirely or merely suggest that reference librarians should act in a professional manner; however, a definition of professionalism or professional behavior is not included. Sarah Archer (2001) tries to provide more explicit details in the scope of professionalism for reference librarians by asserting, "Professionalism can include developing basic employee skills, supporting library standards, participating in university and library functions, presenting papers, and publishing." She goes on to specify that "additional attributes include good self-esteem, a positive attitude, and a challenging plan for career development. . . . being a professional also means planning a career with continuous improvement as the goal." While Archer does not touch on what she means by "basic employee skills" and/or how they are developed, she does present a more precise picture of what it means to be a professional reference librarian. I submit that professionalism should also include standards for behavior among co-workers.

WORKPLACE MANNERS

Information on cubicle etiquette is very easy to find. One of the best write-ups I have seen is from the Monster.com Career Center (Bryant, n.d.). General workplace etiquette is much more difficult to locate and tends to vary in each workplace. Experts agree that most employees learn workplace manners "on the job" during their first few years of employment. Employees learn what is likely to please or annoy their co-workers/bosses through trial and error, and by having good or bad examples pointed out to them. This method is flawed, however, in that what may be fine in one workplace may be completely offensive in a different setting (Argyle, 1981).

Why bother with civility? Several recent articles have brought national attention to workplace etiquette, manners, courtesy, etc., and show it as a growing concern. *USA Today* reported on the results of a poll conducted in 2002 (done by Lilia M. Cortina, University of Michigan) which found that 71% of workers surveyed have been insulted, demeaned, ignored, or otherwise treated discourteously by their co-workers and superiors (Workplace Rudeness, 2002). In a study conducted by Christine Pearson, a management professor at the University of North Carolina, she asked 775 respondents to describe how they reacted to a recent unpleasant interaction with a co-worker.

Twenty-eight percent lost work time avoiding a co-worker; 22% decreased their effort at work; 10% decreased the amount of time they spent at work; and 12% changed jobs to avoid the instigator (Pearson, Andersson, and Porath, 2000). All of these are classic avoidance methods; none of these even attempts to solve the problem. Pearson recommends several prevention techniques for managers as well as tips for dealing with specific situations as they occur. Another well-written list of practical ideas for building a kinder workplace comes from Tom Terez (2002), founder of BetterWorkplaceNow.com.

Workplace incivility isn't violence or harassment or even open conflict—although it can build up to any of those things. For most of us, it's the thousand small slings and arrows that, day after day, eat away at what Peter Drucker once called the “lubricating oil of our organizations.” (Lee, 1999)

Bob Rosner (1998) agrees saying that truly off-the-wall behavior is not what is most likely to drive people to distraction. It's the small stuff—“the pebble-in-the-shoe stuff”—that relentlessly grinds down collegial working relationships. Rosner's formula for dealing with uncivil co-workers is “you can try to change them, try to change yourself, try to get help or get the hell out.” The vast majority of employees try to change others or go elsewhere. In a poll conducted by *U.S. News & World Report* (Marks, 1996), 89% of respondents report workplace incivility as a serious problem . . . when asked about their own behavior, however, they were only too eager to point a finger at the other guy. Too often, it's the other person's fault.

SELF-TESTING

Try taking a close look at your own interpersonal skills and reactions. People never like to admit they might be part of a problem—let alone discover they might be lacking skills in a given area—but no one is perfect. Testing your own skills can be a very private, personal exercise in identifying your strengths and weaknesses. Once you have identified the weakest areas, set up some interventions for working on improving them.

The first step in self-testing is to be prepared for distasteful results. Often the areas in need of work are not only nonvisible, but also shock-

ing to discover. The most common types of self-assessment tests are the following:

- Personality tests (e.g., Myers-Briggs, DiSC, Keirsey Temperament)
- Emotional Intelligence (or Emotional IQ—e.g., BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory)
- Communication skills
- Self Esteem
- Goal-Setting
- Coping Skills
- Team Player/Building Skills (e.g., Parker Team Player Survey).

There are a plethora of interactive Internet quizzes for all sorts of skills; see the list at the end of this article for a few of the author's personal favorites. Also, try looking in a favorite web search engine using "self-assessment" and one of the above types of tests (e.g., self-assessment and coping skills). As many of the pages are likely to state, these are not all scientifically sound "complete" tests. Each has strengths and weaknesses and some are more peculiar than others; however, the results (if taken collectively) can show trends in certain areas.

Locate specific types of tests using *Tests-in-Print* or find comparative information on various tests in books such as *Psychological Testing at Work* (Hoffman, 2002). These tests are rarely free, but many are fairly inexpensive. Search the Internet for the names of these tests to see if abbreviated versions are freely available. Many companies offer "teasers" and will provide an abbreviated version to get you interested in paying for a full test with analysis of results. The best tests will also provide tips for improvement in the areas that score the lowest.

ONGOING "GENERAL" SOCIAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Similar to keeping abreast of current developments in the profession, librarians should also continually keep watch on possible new areas for interpersonal skill development. There are many ways to do this in conjunction with professional development such as scanning the literature and attending conferences and workshops.

Scanning current issues of various library journals can supply some interesting possibilities for personal improvement. For example, an article on "reference etiquette" in *American Libraries* (Eckwright, Hoskisson, and Pollastro, 1998) not only supplies examples of good

behaviors for patron interactions, it also covers sharing questions and correcting colleagues. “Collegial relationships in a busy reference department are extremely important . . . considerate conduct between colleagues can be as important as the rules of conduct between librarian and patron.” While some of the recommended behaviors may be somewhat controversial, it’s a step in the right direction in that it provides suggestions for behavior in awkward situations. A keyword search of *Library Literature* on “reference librarians and evaluation” would pull up this article, but someone looking for tips on improving interpersonal skills would never locate the article without browsing the journal. *The Reference Librarian* also regularly supplies thematic issues related to competencies and reference interactions, e.g., Section 1 of no. 54 (1996) entitled “The Current State of Reference Librarianship and Competencies Required of Reference Librarians” and *Doing the Work of Reference: Practical Tips for Excelling as a Reference Librarian* (no. 72-73, 2001).

Conference presentations are, unfortunately, often overlooked by major indexing services. A very relevant presentation, “Thinking Style Preference Among Academic Librarians: Practical Tips for Effective Work Relationships” was given at the 1999 ACRL National Conference and published in the ACRL Conference Proceedings (Golian, 1999), but has not been indexed in *Library Literature*. *Library Literature* does index two reports from recent library conferences where emotional intelligence is finally being presented as an important issue for the library workplace (Flowers, 2000). The same workshop was also presented at ALA Midwinter 2000 (Rosenstein, 2000). The ALA presentation was standing-room-only and clearly shows that librarians were looking for tips on how to better manage their local work environments. These two presentations were aimed at managers to assist in improving the workplace, but since these are merely reports of presentations, they do not give the reader any detailed information from which to learn. The only way to get some of this information is by attending the original presentations. Many state and regional library conferences also provide similar types of presentations and are not indexed by *Library Literature*. It can be very expensive to attend conferences and many librarians do not get reimbursed for any of the expenses by their institutions. Those who do attend conferences should watch for these sorts of presentations and provide copies of the information to their co-workers.

LEARNING FROM MANAGEMENT FADS

Over the years, a number of fads in the business world have made their way into the library literature, particularly in library management. An excellent example of this is the emergence of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in library literature, starting in 1989 and continuing today (Agada, 1998). More recently, articles on the applications of emotional intelligence in libraries have begun appearing in the literature. Eidson (2000) discusses the elements of emotional intelligence and how they relate to the reference interview, but stops short of discussing their relevance to the workplace in general. Goleman (1998) defines using emotional intelligence in social skills as “handling emotions in relationships well and accurately reading social situations and networks; interacting smoothly; using these skills to persuade and lead, negotiate and settle disputes, for cooperation and teamwork.” Goleman outlines a list of “social competencies”; Chapters 7, 8, and 9 deal with this topic in depth. As with any fad, they may not be applicable to reference librarians but they can generate some excellent ideas.

OTHER TIPS

Become a people-watcher. Pay attention to co-worker reactions/questions—both in group meetings and one-on-one settings. Analyze extremely positive and negative situations looking for clues of things to emulate (positive) or avoid (negative) when interacting with specific co-workers. As reference librarians, we have learned to phrase things in ways to avoid patron angst. For example, “Is it possible you mis-typed the journal name in the search box?” instead of something like “Well of course we own that journal; you must not be searching the catalog correctly.” But how often do we carefully rephrase things to avoid co-workers’ “hot buttons”?

Ask co-workers to rate your skills in particular areas—pick someone you like/trust as well as one you might not get along well with. Ask for their honesty and be prepared for harsh realities in their responses. It is often difficult to accept the results graciously—but admitting the existence of faults to co-workers goes a long way toward helping and improving relations in and of itself.

Check with your institutions’ Human Resources department for workshops/classes—many tailor them to specific needs/requests (e.g., working with dominant personalities, communicating without offend-

ing, etc.) or provide individual assistance in developing skills when there isn't enough call for the topic to justify a full class.

CONCLUSION

To reiterate a comment made by Dixie Jones (1997), "Collegiality generated in this work environment further boosts productivity and enhances working conditions." Traditional reference interview skills focus on approachability, friendliness, smiling, etc., to encourage patrons to ask questions and feel welcome doing so. It is frequently inferred that being in a bad mood also affects patron interactions, since it is very difficult to put on a smile and appear friendly while seething internally, but rarely does anyone state this anywhere in the literature. Similarly, interpersonal relationships among reference staff will have a tremendous impact on the service given to patrons. Interactions between staff members at the reference desk are very visible to patrons. Congeniality between staff members breeds approachability. Terse comments, disagreements, and even lack of interaction between staff at the reference desk create negative tension that is noticeable by patrons and make the desk itself unapproachable. That limits our effectiveness, gives our patrons a bad experience, and reduces the likelihood they will come back for assistance in the future. Contrary to popular opinion, old dogs *can* be taught new tricks. Interpersonal skills *can* be developed at any point in life—not just in adolescence. I submit that it is the professional responsibility of each individual librarian to continually develop and improve *personal* as well as professional competencies. Time spent developing interpersonal relationships between co-workers is a necessity for good customer service and a healthy, inviting work environment.

SOME USEFUL WEBSITES

BetterWorkplaceNow.com—<http://www.BetterWorkplaceNow.com/>—check out the links under "Insight and Inspiration" as well as "Laugh and Learn."

Career Planning from About.com—<http://careerplanning.about.com/cs/selfassessment/index.htm>.

CareerResource.com—<http://www.careerresource.com/Careerplan.html>—scroll down the page to a section entitled "Understanding Yourself/Self Assessment"—it has links to several excellent company sites as well as some individual tests you can try.

- Emotional Intelligence quiz—<http://www.utne.com/azEQ.tmpl>—interactive quiz from the *Utne Reader*, Nov/Dec 1995 by Daniel Goleman.
- Keirseey Temperament and Character Web Site—<http://www.keirseey.com/>.
- Psycho-Geometrics—<http://www.drSusan.net>—a somewhat off-beat but interesting self-assessment tool. Scroll to the bottom of the page and click on the I.T. Serve button to start test.
- PsychTests.com—<http://www/psychtests.com/tests/index.html>—demo versions are available for most tests—some tests require you to sign up.
- SBA Women’s Business Center site has an excellent page of resources for managers—a few of them also apply to self-assessment for individuals <http://www.onlinewbc.gov/docs/manage/>; see also *Developing Your Team Building Skills*—<http://www.onlinewbc.gov/docs/manage/team.html>.

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