

ALA GUIDES FOR THE BUSY LIBRARIAN

PATRICIA TUNSTALL

HIRING, TRAINING, AND SUPERVISING LIBRARY SHELVERS

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CHAPTER FIVE

KEEPING YOUR SHELVERS IN GOOD ORDER

Sooner or later every supervisor has to confront an employee who is not doing her job as well as she should be, and tackling situations like this as early as possible is vital. If you let someone get away with performing poorly, you can be sure that the rest of the people you supervise will notice. Your best workers may start to wonder if there is any point to keeping up their own high standards. Others who might be inclined to slack off will see an opportunity to do just that.

If you are the only person in charge of the shelvers and the library is open seven days a week, it is obvious that you cannot be physically present for all that time. If you leave a group of younger pages to their own devices for the last shift of the day, you should not be too surprised if they spend more time talking than you would normally permit. It is a certainty that other library staff will notice these lapses and will not be slow to let you hear about them. The best way to keep situations like these down to a minimum is to get some help. I was able to count on the support of a member of our circulation department. I used to arrange most of my time away from the building to coincide with the times when she was scheduled to work. She was well placed to keep an eye on the shelvers and knew what they were supposed to be doing. We met weekly to review any problems, and she would leave me messages if anything needed more immediate attention. All of my shelvers were aware of this arrangement, and her deputy supervisor's duties were part of her job description.

When you have to speak to a shelver about behavior that is causing concern, be sure to do so in private. (No one likes to be reprimanded in public.) If you don't have an office of your own, borrow one or use a staff conference room for this meeting. In a calm and friendly tone of voice, ask the person in question to come with you. You can always suggest going over a training log or a daily log if you want to keep the reason for the meeting between yourselves. Once you are alone, begin by asking your page how he thinks he is doing. Ask him if he has any questions or concerns about the work he is being asked to do. Sometimes shelvers are aware they have a problem and are willing to talk about it, in which case it is not difficult to agree on a course of action.

When you are responsible for maintaining discipline among your staff, you must become familiar with the policies and procedures that your library has in place for dealing with these matters. Aim to deal as fairly and humanely as you can with your people within the library's guidelines.

Whenever you have a problem with a member of your staff and are not sure how to handle it, don't hesitate to seek advice. Talking to colleagues who also supervise others is useful. I have already mentioned how valuable it can be to have regular meetings with other shelving supervisors in your area. In the meetings of this sort that I went to, people often talked about difficult situations they had faced with their staff and how they had handled them. I didn't always agree with their way of doing things, but I welcomed the chance to hear their ideas

Here are some suggestions for dealing with specific problems.

NONAPPEARANCE FOR A SCHEDULED SHIFT

Failing to arrive for work without giving any advance warning is a serious matter, and you must never allow an instance of this behavior to pass without making inquiries. In some circumstances, this behavior can be excused:

- sudden illness
- a sudden family or personal crisis or bereavement
- involvement in an accident on the way to work
- being the victim of a crime
- any other event after which a person could not be reasonably expected to report for work or warn you about his or her absence

In a situation where no satisfactory explanation is given, you need to find out where the problem lies. Make contact with the person as soon as possible. If he does not provide a good enough reason for his absence, ask him to come in as soon as possible so you can have a talk with him. Let him know he will not be allowed to start another shift until this problem is resolved. When you are in a private setting, ask him if he is unhappy about any aspect of his job. Perhaps another staff member is making life difficult for him, and if this is the case, you need to know this. Help your employee understand that you are willing to work with him to resolve the problem, but make it clear that you have to know you can rely on him to show up when he is expected.

If you still don't get a satisfactory answer, I advise you to issue a written warning to your employee stating that another failure to turn up for a scheduled shift will result in dismissal. You have to be able to rely on your staff, and they must understand their obligations to you and to the library.

HABITUAL LATENESS OR POOR TIMEKEEPING

If you are going to tackle someone about this issue, you cannot simply come out with vague accusations. You must have the evidence at hand. A way to do this is to keep a record of this person's arrival and leaving times over at least a week. When you have evidence of a pattern, invite the person to meet with you. Begin the meeting by giving her a chance to open the discussion by asking her if she has any idea what you might want to talk about. When it seems appropriate, bring out your notes, and show her the list of the dates and times when she arrived late or was seen leaving early. If some of these lapses took place while you were not in the building, your employee may demand to know who told you about them. Never give out names. Simply say that your information comes from sources you trust; then move on. Remind her that by accepting a position as a shelver, she agreed to contract a set amount of her time to the library. Point out that her late arrival or early departure puts an unfair burden on her coworkers. Having reached agreement that there is a problem, you need to set out your requirements for solving it. If she cited traffic conditions as her reason for being late, suggest that she leave herself some extra time to make the commute to work. If it fits in with the needs of the library, you could offer her an alternative starting time while still requiring her to complete her allotted hours. Let her know that you will be monitoring her arrival and departure times closely for the next two weeks and that you expect to see an immediate and sustained improvement. Arrange to meet again at the end of that period to review the situation. It can be useful to make a record of these proceedings that you can both keep and refer to. A simple conduct agreement sheet is in the appendix.

This kind of intervention is usually enough, but if the problem persists, you need to make use of any further disciplinary procedures your library has in place, such as official warning letters. If that doesn't work, you may have to let this person go. You cannot afford to tolerate persistent lateness.

INAPPROPRIATE DRESS

Even if your library does not have a specific dress code, common sense dictates that safety and decency need to be taken into account when looking at clothing worn during working hours. Shelvers need to be comfortable and need to be able to stretch, bend, and crouch without restriction, but there is a balance to be kept between comfort and professionalism. You would be justified calling someone to account for a number of reasons, including these:

- showing cleavage of any sort when standing or bending
- revealing a bare midsection when standing, stretching, or bending
- displaying offensive wording on a garment

- wearing shorts if they are prohibited in your library
- wearing dirty or torn clothing
- having footwear that is too flimsy for safety

Since all your staff will be aware of any clothing policy in place at your library, you will be perfectly justified in asking anyone who is dressed inappropriately to go home and change before starting or continuing a shift. The time taken to go and fetch suitable clothing should not be paid for by the library. Since the experience is going to cost the offender money, it is unlikely to be repeated. I did make an exception once when a young shelver arrived in shorts for her first shift, and I realized I had forgotten to warn her beforehand that they were unacceptable. She was dismayed to find out that she was not properly dressed for work, but I explained that the fault was mine and allowed her to hurry back home and change on the library's time. It was a useful learning experience for both of us.

INAPPROPRIATE TALKING AND SOCIALIZING

Social exchanges at work are a good thing and should certainly be encouraged. If your coworkers greet you in a friendly fashion and ask how you are, you are likely to begin your day in an upbeat frame of mind and feel inclined to cooperate in whatever tasks you are given. As a supervisor, you will do well to try to sustain an atmosphere of goodwill, but if you notice that conversations about topics outside the library are taking up an excessive amount of time and hindering the flow of work, you need to take action at once.

Quite often all you need to do is politely break into the conversation and give all those involved some further instruction about what you would like them to be doing. There's no need to actually say that you want them to stop talking. Most people take the hint and get back to work. If someone is still inclined to keep chatting, you can set him a target that will leave no time for casual conversation—for example, "I'd really like to see you shelve three carts of adult fiction before we begin cleanup." You must be consistent. Once your shelvers know that any kind of chatfest is going to be noted and discouraged, they generally give up.

You will need to deal with those who persist in gabbing to excess on an individual basis. Speak to them in private and be calm and firm. Begin by explaining that their excessive talking is distracting to others and that you cannot ignore a behavior that is interfering with important tasks. Make sure they understand that behavior of this kind does not go over well with other library staff and that you are bound to hear about it even if you are not in the building at the time. You might also want to point out that it reflects poorly on them as individuals, the other shelvers, and you, their supervisor. Let them know that you expect to see an immediate improvement and that a failure to curb this behavior will lead to disciplinary action.

I often found it necessary to speak to individuals more than once about their excessive chatting but usually never had to take action beyond a second warning. Generally a person who is known to be a constantly long-winded talker will find coworkers gradually withdrawing from any but the shortest exchanges, mostly because they have better things to do with their time.

The most persistent group of talkers is likely to be younger school-age shelvers, especially if they work together in the evenings and on weekends. It's best to try and keep the problem from reaching the point where stern measures have to be taken. Some of your options might include

- Leaving them detailed instructions about the amount of work you expect to see completed. This might persuade them that they have no time to chat.
- Asking a staff member from another department to check in with your shelvers frequently to see how they are doing.
- Increasing your own evening and weekend hours so you can be on site to give more direct supervision.

Shelvers in this age group may also be inclined to take their enjoyment of socializing with each other so far as to begin taking their breaks all at the same time in the evenings. This is a bad idea on several levels:

- The larger the group, the longer the break is likely to be.
- Their joint absence will create a time period when no one is available to help other library staff with inquiries about returned and not-yet-shelved items.
- Such an obvious breach of good sense and discipline is bound to be noticed and cause annoyance on the part of other staff.

To combat this behavior, you need to have a rule in place that allows a maximum of two shelvers to go on break at the same time. All shelvers need to be aware of this regulation, and it does no harm to have it posted prominently in the work area. Alert other library staff and ask them to let you know if they see it being breached. Speak to any offenders as soon as possible after the event. Once people know they are being observed and that news of their transgressions will get straight back to you, generally their behavior improves.

I have known some supervisors who organize work so that the bulk of the shelving in their library is done during the day or even in the mornings before the library opens, and because of these arrangements, they employ only adults as shelvers. That is certainly one way of avoiding situations that can sometimes arise when teenagers are employed. But public libraries exist to serve their communities, and it can be argued that providing a number of young people with their first employment experiences is a worthwhile part of that service. This is something that has to be worked out by the board and staff of each library.

If you do employ high school students, you are bound to come across excess congregating and chatting sooner or later. When it happens, it will not necessarily be your young shelver's fault. It usually occurs soon after young people are hired. When you go into the stacks to see how they are getting along, you may find a trainee surrounded by half a dozen friends who have come into the library with the sole purpose of watching their buddy at work. It is important to act immediately. Be pleasant, but explain to them that their friend is operating on the library's dime and will not be free to meet with them until break time or the end of his shift. Then stand your ground. This is usually enough to persuade them to go and hang out elsewhere. They may come back another day, but if they get a similar reception, the novelty will wear off. The trainee is often embarrassed to have an audience anyway and will be relieved to see them go. If you encounter a group that will not give up, you can take them to one side and ask them if they want to be the reason that their friend loses a job. If that doesn't work, you may have to resort to excluding them from the building for a day or two until they get the point.

UNDERPERFORMANCE

If you have a shelver who has completed a few weeks of training and is not getting as much work done as you think she could, asking her to get a move on probably won't improve matters much. It's better to show her how the work is done. If you work alongside her for a whole shift and are able to demonstrate that you can easily shelve two carts to her one, you may make an impression that will yield results. This does not mean that you ask anyone to sacrifice accuracy for speed. What you will be doing is showing what can be achieved by concentrating on the task at hand.

It's also a good idea to pair one of your best workers with a shelver who needs to pick up the pace. You don't need to say why you are doing it. Often the slower worker will see how much more effort his colleague is putting in and will recognize ways to improve his own performance.

If it is the case that an established shelver, who usually gets a satisfactory amount of work done, is beginning to fall short, another type of approach may be called for. A private talk is always a good place to start. You can begin by complimenting her on her consistently good performance and let her know that you are glad to have her as a member of your team. Tell her you have noticed that her work rate has not been as high recently and that you are wondering if there is anything you can do to help. If she tells you she is having a difficulty at home for one reason or another and is feeling really down about it, I suggest that you respond with sympathy and understanding. We all go through periods of personal upheaval from time to time. A person who has been an outstanding

worker is likely to be so again once she gets back on an even keel. The fact that you have noticed her distress and are willing to be supportive may help that happen even faster. If your library offers access to any free counseling services, you can remind your employee that this type of help is available to her.

NO LONGER UP TO THE JOB?

Older adults who work as shelvers are generally excellent employees. They have spent years in the workplace and understand what is required of them regarding punctuality, cooperation, and performance. I have had people working for me well into their eighties and would not be surprised to learn that in some libraries, shelvers are still pushing book carts around well past their ninetieth birthday.

However, none of us can last forever. There may come a time when you notice that an employee who has been an active and conscientious worker for several years is slowing down and making mistakes. The last thing you want to do is upset someone by telling him bluntly that it's time to give up his job. It is likely to be a social lifeline for him and quite possibly a reason for getting out of bed in the morning. But if you see evidence of advancing frailty you must act. Begin by letting the person know that he is highly thought of throughout the library. Explain that you and other staff members are concerned about his welfare and ask if there is anything you can do for him.

It is possible that at this stage, your shelver may admit that he feels the job might be getting a little too much for him. He might not have said anything before because he felt you were relying on him. You can assure him that everyone will understand his need to take a well-earned rest. This will then leave the way clear for your senior shelver to resign with dignity. Hold a party, and give him a good send-off.

But what can you do if an employee in these circumstances does not want to admit he is struggling? One response is to move him to tasks that can be done sitting down if the needs of the library are still being met. If this is not an option, you can ask the person to consult with his doctor and bring in some signed proof of his fitness to work. Stress that you are doing this because you are concerned that he might injure himself. Consult your human resources staff and see if there are questions of liability that you can cite as reasons for asking someone to verify his fitness.

Your goal is for the person concerned to have the option of handing in his resignation rather than your requiring him to leave. If he is very reluctant to break off ties to the library, you can always point out that his knowledge of what goes on in the building would make him an ideal volunteer.

WHEN IT GETS PERSONAL

If you ask most supervisors what kind of problems are the most difficult to deal with, I am certain that having to speak to someone about his personal hygiene, or lack of it, would be at the top of everybody's list. You might think that at a time when you can find at least a dozen brands of deodorant in any supermarket or drugstore, you will never come across an instance where it is obvious that someone is not using any. My conversations with other supervisors and my own experience tell a different story. Shelves do strenuous work and are therefore physically active during their shifts, so sweating while shelving books is not unusual. Moreover, the air often does not seem to circulate as well in areas that are heavily built up with book stacks. So there is a good chance that you will have to speak to a shelvee about this at least once in your career. Although not using deodorant is not entirely a matter of discipline, it can disturb the harmony of the working environment in a very direct way, and you cannot allow one person to make everyone else physically uncomfortable.

There is no easy way to tackle this situation, but it is essential to treat the person concerned with as much dignity as possible. Here are some suggestions that may help:

- Talk to him in a private setting. A borrowed office or meeting room would be best.
- Explain that a number of staff members have asked you to mention that they have noticed this person giving off a noticeable odor of sweat. Don't use the word *complaints*, and don't identify these people.
- If you have also noticed the odor, say so.
- If it seems that further explanation is needed, you can point out that it's difficult for people to feel comfortable working alongside someone with a strong body odor and that patrons will be equally put off.
- Ask the person if he thinks he will have any difficulty in eliminating the problem.

It's important to listen with a sympathetic ear during this kind of conversation. Anyone who has this kind of problem brought to his attention is quite likely to get visibly upset. Let him know that you are sorry to have to bring the subject up and don't wish to offend him, but emphasize that you have no choice since it has been mentioned by a number of other staff members. It's possible that someone who has become careless about his personal hygiene is struggling with a severe problem. It's possible he may have been made homeless and be sleeping in a car. If your library has any free counseling services for staff, it may be appropriate to let the person know what is available to help. Or it may just be that the employee has

pulled on a used T-shirt a couple of times or is waiting to have his washing machine repaired. Whatever the reason for the difficulty, you still have to make it very plain that you expect him to arrive for all future shifts smelling of nothing stronger than soap.

Before you speak to anyone about this particular problem, I strongly suggest that you make absolutely sure that it has happened more than once. Putting yourself and your employee through this uncomfortable interview because of a single incident will cause unnecessary embarrassment and distress for everyone.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT PARENTS

If you have to speak to one of your teenage shelvers about a disciplinary problem, you cannot always assume that the matter is over and done with just because you have reached agreement with them about what is to happen next. If they go home and mention that you have written them up for a lapse in behavior, you may hear from the parents. It's important to be pleasant and calm if you get a phone call from an irate parent. Listen to everything that the parent wants to say first. In a case like this, it is not unusual to find that a young employee has not given her parents the whole story. Explain that in dealing with their son or daughter, you have followed procedures that apply equally to all library employees and have documentation to back up the action you have taken. Point out that you and their child have already dealt with the matter to your satisfaction and that you are happy to continue working with the teenager. This is usually enough to diffuse the situation.

If you have had no choice but to fire a teenager, the chances of parental feedback are even higher. If a phone call is not enough to satisfy parents' concerns, they may insist on coming in for a face-to-face discussion. At this point you must let your superiors know what is going on and get the human resources department involved. The priority must be to get the matter settled before it can escalate. A meeting of the parents, yourself, and one or more senior staff members should be enough to arrive at a satisfactory resolution.

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO FIRE THEM

Taking the final step and dismissing someone is never easy, but if you have given the person every chance to mend his or her ways, you are left with no choice. The rest of your staff will be resentful if appropriate action is not taken against someone who consistently breaches the rules, and rightly so.

Once again, it is vital to follow your library's disciplinary procedure regarding documentation, verbal warnings, and written warnings when you are dealing with any employee who is giving you problems. In this way, you will be able to act immediately when it becomes clear that the only option is dismissal.

Here are some guidelines that I found helpful:

- When you terminate someone's employment, always do it in a private setting, for example, a borrowed office or staff meeting room.
- Have another member of the staff with you, preferably someone from a senior level (in other words, never another page).
- Have all the documentation with you, including dates and times of any incidents, records of meetings, and copies of warning letters.
- State your case clearly and calmly, setting out the events that have led up to this meeting.
- Make it clear that as a result of all that has happened, you cannot continue to employ him.
- If the person is inclined to be argumentative, both you and your supporter can point out that the matter has already been dealt with appropriately on more than one occasion and is no longer open for discussion.
- If the employee is tearful, hand him a tissue and continue with the dismissal process.
- Once any paperwork has been dealt with, escort the person to collect his belongings and then usher him from the building.
- Explain that in the future, he can use all of the library's public facilities but may not enter any staff-only areas.
- Do not allow him to visit his former coworkers on the way out. He has no right to take up your staff's time complaining about his fate.
- Never discuss the specifics of the case with the rest of your staff.

Being on the receiving end of a dismissal is never a pleasant experience, and the employee may become visibly angry or even aggressive during the process. This is why you should never conduct this type of meeting alone. If you have reason to believe that the person being dismissed may become overly agitated, you may want to add an extra safeguard, such as posting a third staff member close by and asking this person to come into the room and ask if all is well if he or she hears shouting. If your library is large enough to employ security personnel, they are ideal for this purpose. The interruption may be enough to calm the situation. Speak to the person as calmly as you can and acknowledge his feelings by saying something like, "I can see that this has upset you." Let him know that you are willing to listen to what he has to say, but make it clear that he cannot continue to shout at you. Ask if he would like to take a few minutes to compose himself. If this does not work, you can try bringing in the most senior staff member available to back you up, at which point the matter will be out of your hands. I hope that you never have to resort to calling police, but if you or other staff members are being threatened, you will have no other choice.

When your other employees see you behaving in a fair, firm, and consistent manner when it comes to discipline, they will understand that you may occasionally have no choice but to show one of their colleagues the door.

It's difficult to regard firing an employee as a positive experience, but neither should you regard it as a personal failure. If you give an employee several chances to change his behavior and he chooses not to, the responsibility is not yours. Sometimes, in spite of all the care you put into your selection process, you will hire someone who turns out to be unsuitable for the job. If you are careful to act only in the best interests of the library and not from any personal motives, then you need not blame yourself when you let someone go.

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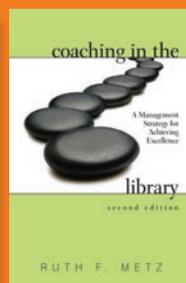
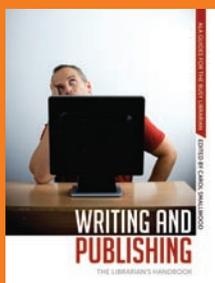
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