

# **CULTIVATING CIVILITY**

*Practical Ways to Improve  
a Dysfunctional Library*

Jo Henry, Joe Eshleman,  
and Richard Moniz

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## CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments ix*

*Introduction xi*

### **Part I The Functional Individual**

- 1** *Understand Yourself First 3*
- 2** *Skills Development 13*
- 3** *Productive Communication 25*
- 4** *Navigate Conflict 33*
- 5** *Wellness and Self-Care 45*

### **Part II The Functional Team**

- 6** *Team Formation 61*
- 7** *Promote Communication Flow 73*
- 8** *Utilize All Communication Methods 81*

### **Part III The Functional Leader**

- 9** *Self-Awareness: A Leader's Perspective 93*

- 10** *Skills Development* 101
- 11** *Communication and the Work Environment* 113
- 12** *Conflict Management* 123
- 13** *Facilitate Collaboration* 135
- 14** *Manage Resistance to Change* 143

#### **Part IV The Functional Organization**

- 15** *Assemble and Hire the Right Library Staff* 155
- 16** *Provide Organizational Structure* 167
- 17** *Develop a Trusting Work Environment* 179
- 18** *Organizational Training* 191

*About the Authors* 201

*Index* 203

## INTRODUCTION

When we wrote our original work, *The Dysfunctional Library: Challenges and Solutions to Workplace Relationships* (2018), we also completed a survey of over 4,100 library staff which indicated that incivility and dysfunction were prevalent in the field. Our hope was to shine some light on this topic and provide some ideas for solutions to those in need. After the book's release, we were contacted to do workshops on the topic both in-person and online. These additional interactions with library staff and administrators also confirmed the pervasiveness of these workplace issues. Inevitably, at the end of our workshops attendees would ask the same questions: "What do we do now? Can you provide more solutions? What's next?"

Writing a follow-up book was never in our plans, but we felt compelled to come together one more time in an attempt to answer these questions. While the first book provided some solutions, it was primarily focused on defining the different kinds and causes of library workplace dysfunction. This new book, *Cultivating Civility: Practical Ways to Improve a Dysfunctional Library* is just that—a book of solutions. We cannot possibly provide a solution to every problem that exists in the library workplace, but we can provide additional information and stimulate thought and discussion towards that goal. Additionally, we wanted the book to be for everyone. As a result, we divided this book into four parts—individual, team, leader, and organization—focusing solutions in each part on those respective viewpoints.

Chapters 1–5 deal with the functional self, and the discussion begins in chapter 1 with gaining an increased understanding and awareness of oneself. We have always felt that self-reflection and

self-awareness are key starting points when we explore issues affecting us in the workplace. Chapters 2 and 3 provide tips for interpersonal communication, conversations, and assertiveness and then offer a deeper view of communication. Communication issues seem to be a prominent concern in many organizations, and libraries are no different in this respect. Individuals who are focused on handling interpersonal conflict in challenging or even toxic workplace situations will benefit from chapter 4. Chapter 5 concludes the book's first part on individuals by focusing on wellness and self-care. Unless we make sure that we are as mentally and physically healthy as we can be, we will not be able to address the concerns and stressors in the workplace very effectively. This chapter provides some common approaches to improving one's lifestyle in this regard.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 all deal with teamwork and shed light on how to form and sustain good library teams. Organizing a functional team is the focus of chapter 6, which lays out how to best use teams within your library and provides solutions for misaligned teams and dissenters. Additionally, making a concerted effort to create diverse work groups and how to develop a good team mindset are also explored. Turning to chapter 7, how teams can communicate to prevent information silos and span boundaries is explored. In chapter 8, the overarching solution of using a number of different communication methods to improve teams is offered. An often overlooked aspect of communication—that is, the preferred methods that library staff have—is also deliberated upon in this chapter. As is the case throughout the book, the chapters in this part provide real-life examples from libraries that help to solve dysfunction hurdles.

Solutions for functional leaders are provided in chapters 9–14. While self-awareness is addressed earlier in the book from a general perspective, chapter 9 focuses exclusively on this topic as it applies to leaders. Often the self-awareness of the leaders can have a dramatic impact on the culture of the library as a whole. The value of authenticity, conveying vision, role-modeling, and empathy as displayed by leaders is explored in chapter 10. These qualities in leaders can have a very positive impact on the library workplace. In chapter 11, leader communication is the primary topic. Treating staff equally, developing a positive workplace, encouraging staff to thrive, and showing inclusivity are all goals of the highly communicative library leader. If the leader can work toward these goals when communicating, an environment of trust is established and dysfunction is greatly diminished. Chapter 12 focuses on conflict management as practiced by leaders, who are often tasked with this as a major function of their

role. Chapter 13 points out that allowing library staff to work on projects of interest, providing them with adequate time and balanced workloads, and taking time for team-bonding can work well in the library. The leader who facilitates collaboration in these ways and also takes time to create diversity among her staff will be greatly rewarded. In chapter 14, how to manage staff members' resistance to change is considered. A lament heard over and over again in dysfunctional libraries is that staff do not feel part of a unified team and they feel as though their work serves no purpose. In this chapter, library leadership is called to engage employees in a change process which may help to alleviate this morale-buster.

The final part of this book explores solutions for a functional organization. Chapter 15 explores the need to hire the right employees, which is a critical element in setting the library up for success. Chapter 16 examines how it is not just personalities, but also organizational structures that can either detract or contribute to a library's success. The importance of developing a trusting workplace environment is examined in chapter 17. Among the solutions in this regard are forming a balanced psychological contract with employees, as well as promoting opportunities for employee engagement and growth. The organization part of this book concludes with a look at various types of training that can be used to minimize dysfunction. These include training for bias, empathy, conflict management, and diversity.

While many readers will find every chapter of this book useful, the design allows for targeted reading as well. The solutions (in part I) for a more functional self may benefit all readers. Other parts provide solution perspectives depending on one's position and function in the library organization. We hope that there are benefits for everyone in this book. So let the page turn and the exploration of solutions for library dysfunction begin!

**PART I**

The  
Functional  
Individual



## *Understand Yourself First*

**W**ithout self-awareness one will be doomed to failure from the start when addressing workplace problems. Self-awareness, therefore, is the crucial starting point for all of the content in this book. Without understanding ourselves and how we are perceived by others, we will be trying to solve problems in the dark, especially those that involve interpersonal relationships. Self-awareness is not only critical for library managers but for anyone working in a library setting. In the words of one scholar speaking on civility, “I now see that bad behavior reflects a lack of self-awareness. We don’t want to hurt others but we do.”<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that, while difficult, self-awareness can be improved. Put simply, increasing our self-awareness has wide-ranging benefits.

### **General Self-Awareness**

The modern concept of self-awareness, especially as it applies to the library workplace, is the ability to know what one’s own goals, values, and behaviors are and then also be able to see oneself

from an outsider's or coworker's perspective. It is important to note that while self-awareness is of critical importance, possessing it alone does not mean that an individual is effective. By way of example, someone could see themselves as manipulative and controlling while others see them that way too. Thus, this individual could theoretically be self-aware and still not be a great person to work with. These people are labeled as "aware don't care," and it is often impossible to change their approach. Often, these individuals believe they are better than others, and they also genuinely believe that leading through intimidation is a logical way to lead and manage.<sup>2</sup> Without self-awareness a person will continually be thwarted in efforts to be the most successful version of themselves. It takes both a willingness and a desire to do good, as well as self-awareness, to be effective and functional. One's ability to accomplish tasks is itself inextricably connected to self-awareness.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, a belief in one's self leads to better achievement.<sup>4</sup>

Those who lack self-awareness, Tasha Eurich states, "won't listen to, or accept, critical feedback. They cannot empathize with, or take the perspective of, others. They have difficulty 'reading a room' and tailoring their message to their audience. They possess an inflated opinion of their contributions and performance. They are hurtful to others without realizing it. They take credit for successes and blame others for failures."<sup>5</sup> It is hard to imagine anyone wanting to work in a library where employees are described this way. And yet, there may be someone in the library workplace who fits this description in part or whole. Often, our behavior falls on a spectrum. On some days and in some situations, individuals may be more self-aware than in others. Also, while the very point of self-awareness on a deeper level is understanding one's underlying emotions and motivations, when one is upset, angry, or stressed it can be much more challenging to maintain a sense of self-awareness. There are ways, however, that individuals can improve their ability to handle difficult situations while maintaining self-awareness.

Self-awareness is most definitely not achieved by beating oneself up over everything said and done. According to Eurich, "frequent self-analyzers are more depressed and anxious and experience poorer well-being."<sup>6</sup> At some point, many of us experience stress and anxiety about how we could have done something better or differently. While we should certainly consider our past actions, it is essential that we do not go too far in dwelling on the past. This can lead to depression, anxiety, and, in the long run, an inability to change for the better. The goal is not just better performance, but a better work experience and life in general. This must

be kept in the forefront as individuals confront, through self-awareness, their strengths and weaknesses.

Being too self-critical also relates to the concept of “vocational awe.” Fobazi Ettarh, among others, notes that this is a significant problem in librarianship. According to Ettarh, “‘vocational awe’ refers to the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.”<sup>7</sup> Many a librarian considers librarianship *a calling*. The use of this word has some far-reaching consequences in how library workers see themselves. This, in turn, has significant implications for any discussion of self-awareness in the library workplace. To begin with, there is much evidence to suggest that this way of thinking is similar to or connected to religion and the history of religion, or to religious faith and ideas. Librarians often think of their work as enabling a higher good. What does vocational awe mean to the individual library employee? Ettarh notes that “awe is used as a method of eliciting obedience from people in the presence of something bigger than themselves.”<sup>8</sup> The key word here is obedience. He goes on to state: “Awe is easily weaponized against the worker, allowing anyone to deploy a vocational purity test in which the worker can be accused of not being devout or passionate enough to serve without complaint.”<sup>9</sup> This “weaponization” can be used to justify librarians, say, not getting a lunch break or not taking a needed mental health day. How can someone think of their own interests when the work being done is so sacred? Vocational awe ties to pay and benefits as well. “Through its enforcement of awe through the promotion of dramatic and heroic narratives, the institution gains free, or reduced price, labor.”<sup>10</sup> This is a real problem for library staff. It serves as a justification for job creep and for trying to live up to some sort of martyred status. It is good when library staff are passionate about what they do, but when work and roles are viewed through the lens of self-awareness, staff must recognize and resist the tendency to become, in essence, a doormat.

## Self-Awareness Solutions

So what are some ways to improve our self-awareness? A good beginning is where the text left off above when considering the issue of being critical of oneself or suffering from “vocational awe.” Jean Pincott notes the dangers of having an “inner critic.” Individuals must become aware that they are in essence sometimes putting themselves down with self-reflection.

One suggestion for combating this is to, as odd as it sounds, refer to oneself in the third person. By distancing ourselves from the issue at hand we can gain a more objective perspective. Another approach Pincott shares is the practice that some therapists use in getting adults to consider when their inner critic first materialized. They are then encouraged to essentially befriend a younger version of themselves. Presumably, one would not treat another person, especially one cared about, with the same harshness as oneself, but this is also true when “talking” to one’s younger self. Another pitfall noted by Pincott is that individuals can fall into a pattern of dichotomous thinking whereby past actions are either “good” or “bad” when often they are not that absolute.<sup>11</sup> The key idea is to find a way, without berating oneself, to learn from one’s mistakes. So, one thing to understand about working to improve self-awareness is that it is *not* an excuse to attack oneself. Pincott’s solution to this problem is important to have at hand when an individual feels they are doing so. If a friend made a mistake or provided a less than ideal answer in a job interview, would one say to her, “That was a stupid thing to say. You really don’t interview well and don’t deserve that job.” No, of course not. Yet, perhaps some version of this is what many of us would potentially do . . . to ourselves. But what if this situation was thought of in the third person? How might that look? How about something like this: “You didn’t answer that one question well, but now you know you need to do better next time. How could you have better responded in case you have another opportunity to do so in the future?” It is readily apparent here that when the framing changes, there is a greater opening for future success. One additional suggestion from McQueen and Klein, in their extensive analysis of research on self-affirmation, is worth considering as well. Recognizing our best qualities, especially when we are about to face criticism, can prevent us from falling down a rabbit hole of doubt and despair and instead use the opportunity for purposeful reflection.<sup>12</sup>

## **Another Key to Self-Awareness**

Self-awareness includes both how we see ourselves and how others see us. Often individuals get “stuck” on one side of that equation. There needs to be a balance between a deep understanding of ourselves and a commitment to our core personal values, on the one hand, with an awareness of how others perceive us. Focusing on just one side misses the point entirely. Another key way that individuals can improve their self-awareness,

therefore, is to assess where they are right now. Eurich describes the balance between how one sees oneself and how others see one as the key to being a self-aware person. Other tools will be discussed in this chapter, but a free online “Insight Quiz” associated with Tasha Eurich’s book *Insight: Why We’re Not as Self-Aware as We Think, and How Seeing Ourselves Clearly Helps Us Succeed at Work and in Life* (2017) is available at [www.insight-book.com](http://www.insight-book.com). Eurich is one of the leading scholars in this area. The information in her book is based on her own studies, in addition to an analysis of more than 800 other studies on the topic of self-awareness.<sup>13</sup> Her quiz asks the quiz-taker questions about how they see themselves, and then asks the quiz-taker to e-mail a trusted friend or colleague to fill the quiz out for them as well. The idea behind this tool is that, when looking at self-ratings and the ratings of a colleague, one should see a commonality between them. If not, it indicates that one’s self-awareness may be skewed.<sup>14</sup> This allows the individual to better understand what her personal values are and how those are translating or not translating into action.

## **SOLUTIONS STORY**

### **How Changing My Desk Location Improved My Quality of Life**

CARALYN ANNE CHAMPA

When I first started as the public services librarian at the US Army Garrison Italy in 2015, I set up a desk on the main floor of the library in a central area. My goal was to be at the heart of the library in order to help *everyone*. However, in the brief moments I would get to sit down at that desk, I would respond to mainly directional or computer questions. It wasn’t the patrons’ fault—I had chosen to put the desk there. But I found that I was getting zero program-related work done, and I wasn’t even able to respond to an e-mail without interruption. A month ago, I moved my primary workspace upstairs to a slightly more private setting—still no walls, but at least I’m not by the self-reservation computer anymore. This practical change has made a huge difference for me. I find that I am more productive and less stressed. In addition, I have challenged myself to set time aside for reflection about recent programs. This helps me capture important details and powerful moments. For example, during a recent Makerspace Petting Zoo, I observed a whole family building magnetic tile structures together. At one point, the little girl

said, “I’ve never built anything like this before!” If I hadn’t made time to sit down and reflect after the program, I could have easily overlooked this young patron’s moment of joy and discovery. I also created a tracking sheet so I can better capture the reference and readers’ advisory questions I field on a daily basis. Since readers’ advisory is one of my favorite aspects of my work, this time spent remembering my interactions with customers is quite pleasant. It will help me with future readers’ advisory questions, since I will have a record of past connections and recommendations. In addition, it is an artifact that my colleagues can search and refer to when I am not available for “live” assistance. I am actively seeking other practical changes to try out in hopes of improving my general well-being while at work, so that I can contribute to the library and our community from a more centered and joyful place.

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As previously noted, Eurich points out other problems with those who lack self-awareness, such as not being able to accept feedback, not being able to see others’ perspectives, and not knowing how to tailor a message. Hurting others inadvertently, as well as claiming credit for work done by others or by the team as a whole, can also stem from a lack of self-awareness. These shortcomings, however, imply some immediate ways in which we can improve our awareness. For one thing, we can *listen*. This will be reiterated many times in this book. The minute we begin to listen we are opening the door to understanding. And then there is *humility*. Individuals may be great at their job or other things in life, but it is still critically important to recognize the efforts of others. One of the most tone-deaf things we could do would be to claim sole credit for something that someone else or the team has accomplished. We should *recognize our impact on others*. We should consider how other people have different experiences and backgrounds, and thereby recognize that something we may have said or done which we thought was innocuous could actually be hurtful to someone else. Referring to an earlier point, the idea is not to berate oneself, but rather to try to understand the other person’s perception of one’s actions or words, apologize as appropriate, and then move on with a deeper understanding. Martel and Perkins note that a key part of successful self-awareness is owning up to one’s mistakes.<sup>15</sup>

Yet another way to approach self-awareness is to think of oneself as having a reputation or, in marketing terms, a brand. Hubert Rampersad says that “your personal brand is the synthesis of all expectations, images,

and perceptions it creates in the minds of others, when they see or hear your name.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Busch and Davis discuss personal branding as it connects to self-awareness. “We assert that true self-awareness is the foundation for creating a personal brand.”<sup>17</sup> How does one go about understanding a personal brand? One way is through various tools intended to give individuals a more complete picture of themselves. We have already mentioned a simple quiz about self-awareness. It is important to recognize, however, that there are many tools that have added depth if you want to take this further. For example, Busch and David suggest using StrengthsFinder and 360Reach. In conjunction with publishing their book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (2001), Buckingham and Clifton created StrengthsFinder, which, according to its website, has been used by more than 20,000,000 people.<sup>18</sup> The test costs \$50, but it helps to determine one’s natural strengths. The test has limitations, and there have been various criticisms of this tool, but it would be hard to deny that reaching an enhanced understanding of one’s strengths can be useful in the quest for greater self-awareness. For the same price of \$50 individuals can also gain access to 360Reach. This tool is based on the concept of 360-degree feedback. “According to Edwards and Ewen, the first published professional literature on this approach dates from 1993. The idea behind 360-degree feedback is to have not just a supervisor but others such as peers, direct subordinates and, in some cases, customers or vendors rate an employee’s performance.”<sup>19</sup> As discussed above, self-awareness consists of matching up our own perceptions of ourselves and our values with others’ perceptions of us. 360-degree feedback, while not without its critics, entails having a variety of individuals answer a series of questions that relate to how one is perceived. Thus, individuals can triangulate not just a single external perception against their own, but do so from multiple points of view. How those views differ or reveal the same information can be telling. Does everyone have the same views of oneself across the groups? The next step is up to the individual, but at least they would have the information to consider.

Finally, one last word needs to be said about the concept of a “beginner’s mind.” Frequently used in conjunction with mindfulness, this term implies that sometimes our past experiences and existing biases impede our ability to be self-aware. But if individuals approach things with a beginner’s mind and try to shed some of their predetermined ways of viewing the world or a situation, they may gain a deeper understanding. Critically, they may find a new way to view themselves and their actions.

## INDEX

### A

- ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries), 192
- affective empathy, 108, 193
- affinity bias, 192
- AFL-CIO's Department for Professional Employees, 64
- Afton, Melissa, 94
- Ahmed, Sara, 66, 87
- Alabi, Jaena, 195
- Albert R. Mann Library at Cornell University, 170
- Alberti, Robert E., 19
- Albrecht, Karl, 14
- Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (Noble), 116
- aligned group behaviors, 69–70
- American Library Association (ALA)
  - diversity training, 197
  - Office for Human Resource Development and Recruitment, 186
  - Office for Intellectual Freedom, 104
- AMHL (Association of Mental Health Librarians), 49
- Andrews, Camille, 168, 171, 174
- Angell, Katelyn, 193
- Appleton, Brian, 30
- Appleton, Leo, 186
- “Applications of Edith Stein’s Empathy Theory to Library Science” (Angell), 193
- Arakelyan, Sophia, 117
- “Artificial Intelligence May Reflect the Unfair World We Live In” (Arakelyan), 117
- artificial intelligence systems and bias, 117
- ASERTIV (Seven steps for assertive communication), 21–22
- assertiveness
  - conflict and toxic workplace situations, assertive confrontation of, 36–37
  - DESC technique for, 21
  - empathy and, 21
  - list of assertive behaviors, 21
  - overview, 18–22
  - practice scenario for, 22
- “The Assertiveness Inventory” (Alberti and Emmons), 19
- Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), 192
- Association of Mental Health Librarians (AMHL), 49
- Association of Research Libraries (ARL), 65
- associations, joining local library, 19–20
- Atkins Library, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 162–163, 170
- attention, communication and, 31
- attitude
  - hiring staff and determining attitude of employee, 156
  - team formation and, 66–67
- Atwater, Thomas, 87



authenticity, leaders and, 102–103  
 avoiding the instigator as response to toxic  
 workplace situation, 36, 37–38  
 “aware don’t care” approach to  
 leadership, 4

**B**

balance between how one sees oneself and  
 how others see one, finding a, 6–7  
 balanced workloads, 140–141  
 Barnhart, Anne, 155, 156, 159, 160  
 Barrett, Deborah, 25  
 Barrick, Murray R., 10  
 Bart, Chris, 174  
 Bashir, Sajid, 164  
 Baughman, M. S., 67  
 beginner’s mind, approaching things  
 with a, 9  
 behavior, differences between espoused  
 values and actual, 98  
 behavioral empathy, 193  
 behavioral modeling training (BMT),  
 interpersonal communication skills  
 improvement with, 15–16  
 Bejan, Teresa, 86  
 Bell, Peter, 127  
 Bell, Steven, 108, 149  
 bias  
 affinity bias, 192  
 artificial intelligence systems and, 117  
 cognitive bias, 191–192  
 confirmation bias, 192  
 groupthink, 192  
 halo effect, 192  
 hiring staff and, 161  
 implicit bias, 192–193  
 overview, 191–192  
 perception bias, 192  
 training to reduce, 191–193  
 body language, 27, 31  
 body scan meditations, 52  
 Bolino, Mark C., 173, 174, 175  
 Bolognese, A., 145  
 Borges, Elizabeth, 109  
 boundary spanners, utilizing, 77–79  
 Bourg, Chris, 64  
 Boyatzis, Richard, 108

branch library reimagining of university  
 library system strategic plan, 68–69  
 Brannon, Sian, 159  
 Braun, Stephan, 26, 27  
 breathing meditation, 51–52  
 Brock University Library, 74  
 Buckingham, Marcus, 9  
 budget cuts, organizational structure and,  
 169  
 bullying in the workplace, 35–37, 39  
 burnout, 46  
 Busch, Paul S., 9

**C**

Calm (App), 51  
 Camp, Richard, 158, 159  
 Caneda, Suzette, 145  
 caring, promoting a culture of, 175  
 Carnegie Mellon University, 62  
 Carter, Jacqueline, 94  
 Center for Building a Culture of Empathy  
 and Compassion, 194  
 Chamorro-Premuzic, Tomas, 93  
 Champa, Caralyn Anne, 7  
 “Change Management in Libraries:  
 An Essential Competency for  
 Leadership” (Soehner), 148  
 change resistance, managing. *See*  
 managing resistance to change  
 channel of communication, 25  
 Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, 105  
 Charney, Madeleine, 49  
 Chesley, Julie, 96  
 Christian, Julie, 126  
 civility (generally)  
 communication and, 86–87  
 organizational structure and, 173–176  
 tips on, 174  
 clarity, communication and, 31, 114  
 classroom-style training, interpersonal  
 communication skills improvement  
 with, 16  
 Clemson University, 95  
 Clifton, Donald O., 9  
 ClimateQUAL: Organizational Climate  
 and Diversity Assessment, 65  
 coaching style of conflict resolution, 131

- Coastal Carolina University, 16, 76, 78, 136
- cognitive bias, 191–192
- cognitive dissonance, 66
- cognitive empathy, 108, 193
- cognitive flexibility, 125
- collaboration, facilitating. *See* facilitating collaboration
- Communicating Professionally, A How-to-Do-It Manual for Librarians* (Ross and Nilsen), 21
- Communicating with Staff (Library vignette), 28–29
- communication. *See also* communication by leaders and the work environment
- attention and, 31
  - behavioral modeling training (BMT), interpersonal communication skills improvement with, 15–16
  - body language, 27, 31
  - channel of, 25
  - clarification and, 31, 114
  - classroom-style training, interpersonal communication skills improvement with, 16
  - components of, 25–26
  - consistency and, 30
  - conversations and, 17–19
  - decoding, 26
  - by e-mail (*See* e-mail communication)
  - encoding, 25
  - face-to-face communication (*See* face-to-face (F2F) communication)
  - feedback, 26
  - flow, 74–79
  - honesty and, 30
  - judgment suspension and, 31
  - in meetings, 27–28, 82
  - methods (*See* communication methods)
  - noise, 26
  - office layout and, 27
  - overview, 25–26, 73
  - peer-to-peer feedback, interpersonal communication skills improvement with, 14–15
  - receiver of, 26
  - reflection and, 31
  - sender, 25
  - 360-degree feedback, interpersonal communication skills improvement with, 14
  - tone and, 27
  - by videoconferencing, 29–30
  - weeding collections, managing resistance to change and, 147–148
- communication apprehension, 18–19
- communication by leaders and the work environment
- behavior of leadership, 30
  - clarity, need for, 114
- Communicating with Staff (Library vignette), 28–29
- consistency, need for, 114–115
- diversity, lack of, 116
- equality, lack of, 116–118
- interviewers, lack of empathy and understanding by, 114
- overview, 113–115
- policy enforcement, equality in, 115–117
- search engines, racism reinforced by, 116–117
- staff, encouragement of, 118–119
- staff treatment, equal, 115–117
- transparency in decision making, 175–176
- trust, establishing an environment of, 119
- communication flow
- boundary spanners, utilizing, 77–79
- e-mail communication, excess of, 74–75
- Effective Departmental Communication in a Full-Service 24/7 Library (Library vignette), 78–79
- overview, 74–75
- silos, prevention of, 75–77
- communication methods
- civility and, 86–87
  - complaints and, 87
  - courtesy and, 85–87
  - empathy and, 86–87

- communication methods (cont.)  
 give-and-take and, 87  
 in-person, 83–84  
 intranets as, 85  
 meetings, 82  
 overview, 81–83  
 responsibility for keeping up with  
 information about the library,  
 staff members and, 85  
 shared communication spaces, 85  
 whiteboards, 29, 85
- community, when library is siloed off  
 from, 76–77
- complaints, communication and, 87
- confirmation bias, 192
- conflict and toxic workplace situations  
 (for individuals)  
 avoiding the instigator, 36, 37–38  
 confronting the instigator, 35–37  
 one-to-one resolution of, 33–35  
 repetitive episodes in work  
 conversations, preventing  
 unwanted, 37  
 reporting incidents, 36, 38–40  
 self-care and, 40–41  
 training for organization to  
 reduce conflict, 195–197
- conflict management (for leaders and  
 managers)  
 coaching resolution style, 131  
 cognitive flexibility, 125  
 conflict orientation, 125  
 cultural awareness and, 126–127  
 dignity cultures and, 126  
 emotion regulation, 125–126  
 emotional intelligence (EI), 126  
 face cultures and, 126, 127  
 force resolution style, 130–131  
 honor cultures and, 126–127  
 logrolling resolution style, 130  
 overview, 123–124  
 relationship conflicts (generally),  
 124  
 resolution styles, 130–131  
 self-awareness and, 124–126  
 staff behavior, addressing, 128–130  
 steps for, 127–128
- From Stress to Success (Library  
 vignette), 129–130  
 styles of conflict management, 127–128  
 task conflicts, 123–124  
 training for organization to  
 reduce conflict, 195–197
- conflict orientation, 125
- confronting the instigator, 35–37
- connectors in workplace, importance of,  
 77–78
- consistency  
 communication and, 30  
 by leaders, need for, 114–115
- conversations  
 keywords in, 18  
 open-ended questions in, 17–18  
 overview, 17–18  
 places to practice, 19
- Cook, Matt, 49
- Cooke, Nicole, 195
- Cornell University, 170
- courtesy, communication and, 85–87
- Covey, Stephen, 96
- Cowell, Eva, 26
- critical librarianship, 74
- cronyism, hiring staff and, 164
- Cross, Brady, 16
- Crossan, Mary, 98
- Croxton, Becky, 170
- Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When  
 Stakes Are High* (Patterson, Grenny,  
 McMillan, Switzler and Covey), 30
- cultural awareness and conflict  
 management, 126–127
- cultural diversity. *See* diversity
- D**
- Daresh, John C., 159
- Darling, Ann, 128, 129
- Das, Bhibha, 46
- Davis, Jade E., 82
- Davis, Scott W., 9
- De Jong, Mark E., 170
- De Wit, Frank R. C., 124
- Death by Meeting: A Leadership Fable . . .  
 about Solving the Most Painful Problem  
 in Business* (Lencioni), 27

- decoding communication, 26
- Dees, Ashley, 146
- Department for Professional Employees, AFL–CIO (DPE), 64
- DESC technique for assertiveness, 21
- The Desegregation of Public Libraries in the Jim Crow South: Civil Rights and Local Activism* (Wiegand and Wiegand), 143
- desk location change and improvement in quality of work life, 7–8
- DiAngelo, Robin, 161
- dignity cultures and conflict management, 126
- discovery systems, bias in library, 117
- discrimination. *See* bias
- “Disrupting Whiteness in Libraries and Librarianship: A Reading List” (Strand), 116
- dissenters, utilizing, 65–66
- diversity
  - at Atkins Library, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 162–163
  - hiring staff and, 160–163
  - inclusion and, 138–139
  - lack of diversity in libraries, 63–65
  - training to reduce prejudice and discrimination and improve interactions with diverse others, 197
  - treatment of staff and lack of, 116
- diversity audits, 76
- Diversity Efforts at the Atkins Library, UNC Charlotte (Library vignette), 162–163
- diversity librarians, 65
- Diving in Head First to a New Career: Expanding Horizons (Library vignette), 19–20
- documentation of conflict and toxic environments to be reported to human resources, 39
- Douglas, Veronica Arellano, 140
- drive as important trait when hiring staff, 156
- Drucker, Peter, 168
- Dweck, Carol, 66
- The Dysfunctional Library: Challenges and Solutions to Workplace Relationships* (Henry, Eshleman and Moniz), 18, 65, 70, 85, 114, 139, 143
- ## E
- e-mail communication
  - entire department, e-mail alias used to relay information to, 78–79
  - excess of, 74–75
  - overview, 29
- Eads, Denelle, 162
- Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation at Carnegie Mellon University, 62
- Edmundson, Amy, 183
- Edwards, Catherine, 195
- Effective Departmental Communication in a Full-Service 24/7 Library (Library vignette), 78–79
- Effective Difficult Conversations: A Step-by-Step Guide* (Soehner and Darling), 128
- The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution: Preserving Relationships at Work, at Home, and in the Community* (Weeks), 34
- Emmons, Michael L., 19
- emotional intelligence (EI) and conflict management, 126
- emotional response, conflict resolution and limiting, 34–35, 125–126
- empathy
  - assertiveness and, 21
  - change prevention and, 82
  - communication and, 86–87
  - as leadership skill, 108–109
  - training to increase, 193–194
- Empathy Training Manual (Center for Building a Culture of Empathy and Compassion), 194
- Employee Assistance Plans, 55
- employee-organization relationship (EOR), 180–181
- “Employee Resistance to Change” (Caneda and Green), 145
- employees. *See* staff

- encoding communication, 25  
*Encyclopedia of Emotion*, 52
- engagement  
 change process, engaging  
 employees in the, 150–151  
 job crafting and, 53–54
- Englander, Magnus, 194
- Ensari, Nurcan, 126
- equality  
 communication by leaders  
 and, 116–118  
 workloads, equally balancing  
 staff, 140–141
- ethical leadership, 107
- ethics, organizational structure and, 173–176
- Ettarh, Fobazi, 5, 85, 119
- Eurich, Tasha, 4, 7, 8, 93, 98
- evaporating cloud technique for resolving  
 workplace conflict, 35
- exercise and job performance, 46–48  
*Expect More: Demanding Better Libraries for  
 Today's Complex World* (Lankes), 77
- F**
- face cultures and conflict management,  
 126, 127
- face-to-face (F2F) communication  
 meetings, 27–28  
 one-to-one dispute resolution, 33–35  
 overview, 26–27  
 as preferred method of  
 communication, 83–84
- facilitating collaboration  
 Full Service 24 Hours per Day:  
 Solutions for Effectively  
 Balancing Workloads (Library  
 vignette), 136–138  
 materials, providing adequate, 139–140  
 overview, 135–136  
 projects of interest, allowing  
 work on, 138–139  
 space, providing adequate, 139  
 time, providing adequate, 140  
 workloads, equally balancing  
 staff, 140–141
- Farkas, Meredith, 138
- Farrell, Maggie, 128
- feedback, communication and, 26
- finances, reasons to abolish library, 144
- first-time chair and examples of  
 self-awareness for leaders, 95–96
- Fisher, Roger, 34
- Fister, Barbara, 116
- fit, moving away from hiring practice of  
 finding the correct, 138–139
- “Fit From Your Desk” program, 47
- Fitsimmons, Gary, 155, 156, 157, 158
- flattened hierarchies, 172
- force style of conflict resolution, 130–131
- Ford, Anne, 169
- FOREWORD initiative and improving  
 the organizational culture, 105–106
- Fort Worth (TX) Public Library, 76
- “A Framework to Foster Diversity at Penn  
 State University Libraries’ Diversity  
 Strategic Plan 2010–2015,” 65
- Fredrickson, Barbara, 179
- Freeman, Rebecca, 28, 147
- Freeman, Valerie, 19, 182
- “From Saboteurs to Change Management:  
 Investigating the Correlation  
 between Workplace Behavior and  
 Change Resistance” (Young and  
 Dees), 146
- From Stress to Success (Library vignette),  
 129–130
- Full Service 24 Hours per Day: Solutions  
 for Effectively Balancing Workloads  
 (Library vignette), 136–138
- G**
- Galvan, Angela, 161
- Gero, Jeff, 97
- give-and-take, communication and, 87
- Gold, Nick, 128
- Goldberg, Beverly, 169
- Goldman, B. M., 102
- Goldratt, Eli, 35
- Goldstein, Arnold, 15
- Goleman, Dan, 108
- Goman, Carol, 27
- good citizenship, organizational structure  
 and, 173–175
- Google (Company), 183–184

Google Drive, 81  
 Gordon, Judith, 26  
 Gore, Jennifer, 54  
 gossip, 85  
 Govindarajan, Vijay, 75  
 Graziano, Magi, 94  
 Green, Ravonne, 145  
 Greer, Linred L., 124  
 Grinnell College Libraries, 172  
 group projects, benefits of, 62–63  
 groupthink, 192  
 “Guided Breathing Meditation with Kim Eng” (Video), 51

## H

halo effect, 192  
 hard model of operation for human resources, 38–39  
*Harvard Business Review*, 75  
 Harvard Business School, 183  
 Harvard University Libraries, 169  
 Harwell, Kevin, 45  
 Hathcock, April, 116  
 Headlee, Celeste, 17  
 Headspace (App), 51  
 hidden workloads, 141  
 hiring staff  
   attitude of employee, determining, 156  
   bias, suggestions to combat, 161  
   cronyism and, 164  
   diversity and, 160–163  
   Diversity Efforts at the Atkins Library, UNC Charlotte (Library vignette), 162–163  
   drive as important trait when, 156  
   fit, moving away from hiring practice of finding the correct, 138–139  
   interview process, 158–160  
   job descriptions and, 157  
   negotiable factors in, 157–158  
   nepotism and, 164  
   networking and, 157  
   overview, 155–156  
   phone, preliminary interview by, 158  
   preliminary interviews, 158  
   qualities to look for when, list of, 156  
   soft skills, importance of, 155–156

honesty, communication and, 30  
 honor cultures and conflict management, 126–127  
 Hoppe, Michael, 30  
 Horry-Georgetown Technical College, 47  
 Hougaard, Rasmus, 94, 97  
 House, Martin, 54  
 How Changing My Desk Location Improved My Quality of Life (Library vignette), 7–8  
 Hughes, Jennifer, 78, 136  
 Human Library, 84  
 Human Resource Development and Recruitment Office, ALA, 186  
 human resources  
   hard model of operation, 38–39  
   reporting complaints of toxic workplace situations to, 38–40  
   soft model of operation, 38–39  
 humility, leading with, 184

## I

implicit bias, 192–193  
 in-person communication. *See* face-to-face (F2F) communication  
 “Incivility and Dysfunction in the Library Workplace: Perceptions and Feedback from the Field” (Henry, Eshleman, Croxton & Moniz), 88  
 information-gathering steps in conflict resolution, 196  
 inner critic, methods for quieting an, 5–6  
*Insight: Why We’re Not as Self-Aware as We Think, and How Seeing Ourselves Clearly Helps Us Succeed at Work and in Life* (Eurich), 7  
 Intellectual Freedom Office, ALA, 104  
 interview process for hiring staff, 158–160  
 interviewers, lack of empathy and understanding by, 114  
 intranets as method of communication, 85

## J

J. Murrey Atkins Library, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 162–163, 170  
 Jackson, Millie, 52

Jantz, Ronald C., 167–168, 173  
 Jarvis, Will, 114  
 Jehn, Karen A., 124  
 Jensen, Karen, 45, 76  
 Jerry Crail Johnson Earth Sciences & Map  
 Library, University of Colorado at  
 Boulder, 68  
 JetBlue (Company), 175  
 Jetter, Rick, 159  
 job crafting, stress reduction and, 53–54  
 job descriptions, hiring staff and, 157  
 Johnson & Wales University, 172–173  
 Johnson & Wales University Library at  
 Charlotte, 19, 51, 182  
 judgment suspension, communication  
 and, 31  
 Juntunen, Arja, 171, 173

## K

Kabat-Zinn, Jon, 48, 52  
 Kahn, William, 186  
 Katopol, Patricia, 174  
 Keisling, Bruce L., 170  
 Keltner, Dacher, 97  
 Kendrick, Kaetrena Davis, 40, 116, 124, 150  
 Kernis, M. H., 102  
 keywords in conversations, 18  
 Khan, Abdul Karim, 164  
 Kim, Joshua, 75  
 Kimbel Library, Coastal Carolina  
 University, 16, 76, 78, 136  
 Klein, William M. P., 6  
 Knight, Cecilia, 172  
 Kolb, David, 193  
 Kouns, H. B., 141  
 Kouzes, James, 105, 107  
 Kupritz, Virginia W., 26

## L

labyrinths and stress reduction, 49–51  
 “Lack of diversity by the numbers in  
 librarianship and in book stuff”  
 (Bourg), 64  
 Langton, Peter, 94  
 Lankes, R. David, 77–78  
 Larsen, Sarah, 160–161  
 Lazarus, Arnold, 20

leadership skills  
 authenticity, 102–103  
 empathy, 108–109  
 ethical leadership, 107  
 Moving FOREWORD for a  
 Trusting Workplace (Library  
 vignette), 105–106  
 overview, 101  
 patience and successful  
 leadership, 16–17  
 role-modeling, 107–108  
 stress of employees, strategy for  
 dealing with, 129–130  
 vision and goal alignment, 103–106  
*The Leadership Challenge* (Kouzes and  
 Posner), 105  
 Lencioni, Patrick, 27  
 Lenstra, Noah, 47  
 “Let’s Move in Libraries” program, 47  
 Leuzinger, Julie, 159  
 Lewis, Abbey B., 68  
 Lewis, Michelle, 78, 136  
 “A Librarian’s Case against Overdue Book  
 Fines” (Wacek), 144  
 Library and Archives at University of  
 York, 171  
 library discovery systems, bias in, 117  
 library fines, reasons to abolish, 144  
*Library Journal*, 76, 88  
 Library Leadership & Management  
 Association (LLAMA), 101  
 library liaison role, 70  
*Library Professionals: Facts and Figures Fact  
 Sheet 2019* (AFL-CIO’s Department  
 for Professional Employees), 64  
*Library Worklife*, 193  
 LIS Mental Health Week, 40  
 LIS Microaggressions, 194–195  
 listening to others, self-awareness for  
 leaders and, 97  
*Living a Feminist Life* (Ahmed), 66, 87  
 Lloyd, Annemarie, 77  
 local library association, joining, 19–20  
 logrolling style of conflict resolution, 130  
 Long, Shawn, 25, 26  
 Lothian, Andy, 94  
 loving-kindness meditation, 52

“The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study” (Kendrick), 116, 150  
Lutgen-Sandvik, Pamela, 38

## M

Maddon, Joe, 69  
Malmö University, 194  
managing resistance to change  
  engaging employees in the  
  change process, 150–151  
  implementing change, 146–149  
Managing Change Resistance in a Small Rural Academic Library (Library vignette), 147–148  
overview, 143–145  
resistance, understanding effects and roots of, 145–146  
training of employees and, 149–150  
weeding collections and, 147–148  
“Managing the Team” (Ryan), 69  
Martel, Pat, 8  
*Masked by Trust: Bias in Library Discovery* (Reidsma), 117  
Massari, Michael, 84  
Massis, Bruce, 156  
materials for collaboration, providing adequate, 139–140  
McCroskey, James, 18  
McQuade Library, Merrimack College, 51  
McQueen, Amy, 6  
Medford Library, University of South Carolina Lancaster, 28  
meditation, 51–52, 97  
meetings  
  communication in, 27–28, 82  
  one-on-one meetings, 83–84  
Meier, John J., 172, 173  
mental health assistance for employees, 40  
*Mere Civility* (Bejan), 86  
Merrill-Cazier Library at Utah State University, 186  
Merrimack College, 51  
microaggressions  
  awareness training, 194–195  
  defined, 194

microassaults defined, 194  
microinsults defined, 194  
microinvalidations defined, 194  
Miller, Rebecca K., 172, 173  
mindful practices  
  meditation, 51–52, 97  
  overview, 48–51  
  self-awareness for leaders and, 96–97  
  self-care, as option for, 40–41  
  yoga, 52–53  
Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), 48  
*The Mindful Librarian: Connecting the Practice of Mindfulness to Librarianship* (Moniz, Eshleman, Henry, Slutzky and Moniz), 40  
Minneapolis College, 51  
minor disagreements, one-to-one resolution of, 33–35  
mistakes  
  learning from, 6  
  recognizing and admitting, 98, 176  
mobbing in the workplace, 35–36  
Model of Principled Negotiation, 34  
Moniz, Lisa, 168  
Mortensen, Annabelle, 76  
Mosley, Pixey, 169, 175, 176  
Mount, Michael K., 10  
Moving FOREWORD for a Trusting Workplace (Library vignette), 105–106  
moving on, need for, 55  
multicultural diversity. *See* diversity  
multitasking, lack of effectiveness while, 97

## N

National Association of Colleges and Employers 2017 survey, 13  
nature, spending time in, 53  
Neeleman, David, 175  
Neff, Kristin, 52  
nepotism, hiring staff and, 164  
networking, hiring staff and, 157  
New England Library Association (NELA), 49  
Nilsen, Kirsti, 21  
Noble, Safiya Umoja, 116–117



noise and communication, 26  
 nonverbal conversation tips, 18  
 Norton, Robert, 19  
*Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham  
 and Clifton), 9

**O**

Oade, Aryanne, 37  
 ODLIS Webinar Archives, 197  
 office layout, communication and, 27  
 Oklahoma City Human Resources  
 Society, 192–193  
 onboarding, 149  
 one-on-one meetings, 83–84  
 one-to-one resolution of conflict, 33–35  
 open-ended questions in conversations,  
 17–18  
 Orey, Maureen, 104  
 organizational structure  
   budget cuts and, 169  
   caring, promoting a culture of, 175  
   civility and, 173–176  
   ethics and, 173–176  
   flattened hierarchies, 172  
   good citizenship and, 173–175  
   mistakes, recognizing and  
     admitting, 176  
   overview, 167–168  
   rapid prototyping, use of, 173  
   restructuring in library  
     organizations, 170–173  
   transparency in decision  
     making, 175–176  
   user perspective and, 170–171  
 Using Data at UNCC to  
   Make Decisions (Library  
   vignette), 170–171  
 workload issues and, 169  
 organizational training  
   bias training, 191–193  
   conflict management training, 195–197  
   diversity training, 197  
   empathy training, 193–194  
   microaggression awareness  
     training, 194–195  
   overview, 191  
 outreach, boundary spanners and, 77–78

**P**

Patel, Piyush, 31  
 Patience Leads to Successful Leadership  
 (Library vignette), 16–17  
 patron experience and organizational  
 structure, 170–171  
 Pauleen, David, 98  
 peer-to-peer feedback, interpersonal  
   communication skills improvement  
   with, 14–15  
 Penn State University Libraries, 172  
 perception bias, 192  
 Perkins, Jan, 8  
 personal brands, 8–9  
 phone, preliminary hiring interview by, 158  
 physical exercise and job performance,  
 46–48  
 Pincott, Jean, 5–6  
 policy enforcement, leaders and equal,  
 115–117  
 Posner, Barry, 105, 107  
 posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD),  
   mindfulness and, 48  
 “The Power of Mindfulness: What  
 You Practice Grows Stronger”  
 (Shapiro), 194  
*Practical Empathy for Collaboration and  
 Creativity in Your Work* (Young), 109  
 preliminary interviews for hiring staff,  
 158  
 “Preparing Early Career Librarians for  
 Leadership and Management:  
 A Feminist Critique” (Thomas,  
 Trucks and Kouns), 141  
 Pringle, LaJuan S., 105  
 professional development  
   local library association, joining,  
   19–20  
   opportunities for, providing, 185–186  
   wellness and self-care and, 54  
 Project Implicit, 192  
 projects of interest, allowing work on,  
 138–139  
 psychological contracts between  
   employees and employers, 180–181  
 psychological safety in work  
   environments, 183–184

**R**

Raju, Reggie, 167, 169, 172

Rampersad, Hubert, 8

rapid prototyping, use of, 173

receiver of communication, 26

*Recipes for Mindfulness in Your Library:*

*Supporting Resilience and Community Engagement* (Charney, Colvin and Moniz), 48

reflection, communication and, 31

Reflective Learning Cycle method, 193

Reidsma, Matthew, 117

Reimagining the Strategic Plan for a Branch Library (Library vignette), 68–69

relationship conflicts, management of. *See* conflict management (for leaders and managers)

repetitive episodes in work conversations, preventing unwanted, 37

reporting incidents of conflict and toxic workplace situations, 36, 38–40

resilience and methods of coping. *See* wellness and self-care

resistance defined, 145

resistance to change, managing. *See* managing resistance to change

resolution styles for conflict management, 130–131

responsibility for keeping up with information about the library for staff members, 85

Restorative Yoga, 52–53

restructuring in library organizations, 170–173

Robert Muldrow Cooper Library, Clemson University, 95

role-modeling, 107–108

Ross, Catherine Sheldrick, 21

Ryan, Marianne, 69

**S**

Santagata, Paul, 183–184

Santoro, Michael D., 27

Schlaerth, Andrea, 126

Schlesselman-Tarango, Gina, 116

search engines, racism reinforced by, 116–117

self-affirmation, 6

self-awareness for individuals

balance between how one sees

oneself and how others

see one, finding a, 6–7

dysfunction in the library

and need for, 65–66

How Changing My Desk Location

Improved My Quality of Life

(Library vignette), 7–8

immediate ways to improve, 8

improving self-awareness,

methods for, 5–9

lack of self-awareness, traits

of someone with a, 4

overview, 3–5

work personality and, 10

self-awareness for leaders

behavior, differences between

espoused values and actual, 98

conflict management and,

124–126, 128

listening to others and, 97

mindful practice and, 96–97

mistakes, recognizing and

admitting, 98

overview, 93–95

questions for, 98

Self-Awareness in Leadership:

Examples from a First-Time

Chair (Library vignette), 95–96

self-care and, 97

self-reflection and, 94–95, 97

self-care and wellness. *See* wellness and self-care

self-coaching, 16

*Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind* (Neff), 52

sender of communication, 25

Sensoy, Özlem, 161

Shaheen, Sadia, 164

Shapiro, Shauna, 194

shared communication spaces, 85

shared mindset or goal for teams, 66–67

- sharing concerns about the work
    - environment as form of self-care, 41
  - Sharma, Gauri, 157, 160
  - silos, prevention of, 75–77
  - Simon, Brenda, 54
  - Sims, Ronald, 180
  - Sippel, Jennifer, 51
  - skills development
    - assertiveness, 18–22
    - conversation, 17–18
    - Diving in Head First to a New Career: Expanding Horizons (Library vignette), 19–20
    - employers, skills desired by, 13
    - interpersonal communication, 14–16
    - Patience Leads to Successful Leadership (Library vignette), 16–17
  - Slack (Instant messaging), 75, 81
  - Smith, Loretta Biscaro, 98
  - Smith, Maggie Mason, 95
  - Snyder, David, 156
  - Social Intelligence* (Albrecht), 14
  - Soehner, Catherine, 128, 129, 148
  - soft model of operation for human resources, 38–39
  - soft skills
    - assertiveness, 18–22
    - conversation, 17–18
    - hiring staff and importance of, 155–156
    - interpersonal communication, 14–16
  - SOFTEN (Nonverbal conversation tips), 18
  - Sorcher, Melvin, 15
  - space for collaboration, providing adequate, 139
  - staff
    - behavior, addressing, 128–130
    - communication with, 28–29
    - encouragement of, 118–119
    - growth and development, providing opportunities for, 185–186
    - hiring (*See* hiring staff)
    - leader interactions with
      - employees, trust in a work environment and, 182–184
      - low morale, 150–151
      - onboarding practices, 149
      - psychological contracts between employees and employers, 180–181
      - resistance to change by, 168
      - responsibility for keeping up with information about the library for staff members, 85
      - restructuring of organization, staff involvement in, 172
      - treatment, need for equal, 115–117
      - trust and (*See* trust in a work environment)
      - voice and engagement, support of, 184–185
      - work-study students, training and supervising, 182–183
      - workloads, among staff equally balancing, 140–141
  - “Staff Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan” (American Library Association), 197
  - Stephenson, Kyle, 48
  - storytelling as element in the interview process, 159–160
  - Strand, Karla J., 116
  - StrengthsFinder, 9
  - stressors, list of, 45–46
  - structure of organization. *See* organizational structure
  - Stryker, James B., 27
- T**
- task conflicts, 123–124
  - team chemistry, 69
  - teams
    - aligned group behaviors, 69–70
    - attitude and, 66–67
    - dissenters, utilizing, 65–66
    - diversity and, 63–65
    - group projects, benefits of, 62–63
    - library team*, replacement of the word *library* by the words, 62
    - overview, 61–63
    - Reimagining the Strategic Plan for a Branch Library (Library vignette), 68–69

- shared mindset or goal
    - for teams, 66–67
  - teamwork, 62–63
  - “10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation” (Headlee), 18
  - Tewell, Eamon, 139
  - Thomas, Camille, 141
  - 360-degree feedback
    - interpersonal communication
    - skills improvement with, 14
    - sample 360-degree open-ended questions, 15
    - self-awareness improvement with, 9
  - 360Reach, 9
  - time for collaboration, providing
    - adequate, 140
  - tips
    - authenticity in leadership, tips for achieving, 103
    - on civility, 174
    - on conflict management (for leaders and managers), 131
    - on delivering feedback to staff, 129
    - on leadership creating a positive workplace, 118
    - on role-modeling promotion by leaders, 107
  - tone, communication and, 27
  - Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science* (Schlesselman-Tarango), 116
  - Town, J. Stephen, 168, 172, 173
  - training
    - behavioral modeling training (BMT), interpersonal communication skills improvement with, 15–16
    - bias training, 191–193
    - classroom-style training, interpersonal communication skills improvement with, 16
    - conflict management training, 195–197
    - diversity training, 197
    - empathy training, 193–194
    - managing resistance to change and, 149–150
    - microaggression awareness training, 194–195
    - work-study students, training and supervising, 182–183
  - transparency in decision making, 175–176
  - Trucks, Elia, 141
  - trust in a work environment
    - establishing, 119
    - growth and development, providing opportunities for employee, 185–186
    - leader interactions with employees and, 182–184
    - overview, 179–180
    - psychological contracts between employees and employers, 180–181
    - psychological safety in work environments, 183–184
    - Using Student Workers to Help Create a Kind and Safe Workplace (Library vignette), 182–183
    - voice and engagement, support of employee, 184–185
  - Turnley, William H., 173, 174, 175
- U**
- University of Alabama Library, 52
  - University of Birmingham, 87
  - University of California at Berkeley, 169
  - University of California at San Diego, 34
  - University of Cape Town Libraries, 169, 172
  - University of Colorado at Boulder, 68
  - University of Maryland, 65
  - University of Massachusetts, 48
  - University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 49
  - University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 162, 170
  - University of Oklahoma, 49
  - University of South Carolina at Lancaster, 147
  - University of Southern Maine, 169
  - University of York, 171
  - upward feedback, 16
  - Ury, William, 34
  - user perspective, organizational structure and, 170–171

Using Data at UNCC to Make Decisions  
(Library vignette), 170–171

Using Student Workers to Help Create a  
Kind and Safe Workplace (Library  
vignette), 182–183

Utah State University, 186

## V

Vancouver Island University, 35

Vaughan, Laura, 25, 26

Velasquez, Diane, 168

videoconferencing, communication by,  
29–30

Virginia Tech Library, 150

vision and goal alignment, 103–106

vocational awe, 5, 46, 85–86, 119

## W

Wacek, Dawn, 144

walking meditation, 52

Walters, Tyler, 150

Walton, Graham, 195

Warnick, Barbara, 19

Wassmer, Arthur C., 18

“We Are All for Diversity, but . . .”:

How Faculty Hiring Committees  
Reproduce Whiteness, and  
Practical Suggestions for How  
They Can Change” (Sensoy and  
DiAngelo), 161

Weak, Emily, 157

W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of  
Massachusetts at Amherst, 49

website, redesign of library, 171

weeding collections, managing resistance  
to change and, 147–148

Weeks, Dudley, 34

wellness and self-care

conflict and toxic workplace  
situations and, 40–41

exercise and job performance, 46–48

job crafting, stress reduction  
and, 53–54

Labyrinths and Libraries: Take  
a Walk on the Winding Side  
(Library vignette), 49–51

mindfulness, 48–53

moving on, need for, 55

nature, spending time in, 53

overview, 45–46

professional development and, 54

stressors, list of, 45–46

workplace wellness programs, 47–48

“White Librarianship in Blackface:  
Diversity Initiatives in LIS”  
(Hathcock), 116

whiteboards, 29, 85

“Why Do We Have So Many Freaking  
Acronyms?!” Some Colleges Target  
Jargon in the Name of Student  
Success” (Jarvis), 114

Wiegand, Shirley A., 143

Wiegand, Wayne A., 143

Williams, Claudia, 93

Wolpe, Joseph, 19

work-study students, training and  
supervising, 182–183

workloads

equally balancing, 140–141

example of solution for  
balancing, 136–138

organizational structure and, 169

Workplace Bullying Institute, 38, 39

workplace personality, 10

workplace wellness programs, 47–48

workspaces

desk location change and improvement  
in quality of work life, 7–8

office layout, communication and, 27  
overview, 139

World Wide Labyrinth Locator, 49

## Y

yoga, 52–53

Yoose, Becky, 172

Young, Brian, 146

Young, Indi, 109

## Z

Zare, Nazarzadeh, 167

Zes, David, 93

Zucker, Donna, 49