CULTIVATING CIVILITY

Practical Ways to Improve a Dysfunctional Library

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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

Without 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."[1] 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.[2] 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.[3] Essentially, a belief in one's self leads to better achievement.[4]

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."[5] 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."[6] 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."[7] 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."[8] 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."[9] 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."[10] 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 one-self 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.[11] 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.[12]

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. 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.[13] 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.[14] 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.

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.[15]

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."[16] 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."[17] 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.[18] 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."[19] 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.

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