The Mission-Informed Library

Internal Marketing to Improve the Organizational Climate in the Public Library

By Amy An

“We treat coworkers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institution.” —American Library Association (ALA) Code of Ethics

Library mission statements almost universally include some variation of “meet the information needs of the community” to demonstrate that serving patrons is one of the most highly held values of the library. Libraries have faced many challenges in meeting that mission since the World Wide Web went live in 1993; technology has transformed what those information needs are and how we deliver them. The pace of the change may have blindsided us to the experience of our internal patrons—library staff. It is difficult to imagine that the staff experience of libraries is anything but welcoming and open to a diversity of discourse and ideas. “There is a presumption that libraries are places of refuge, bastions of freedom, and evidence of civilization at its best.” Yet this is far truer for patrons than it is for employees. The presumption that

libraries are universally welcoming all too often glosses over the lived experiences of library employees.

Public library staff and the organizational climate in which they work are far less healthy, collegial, or civil than we imagine. This has a deep impact on the ability of a library to serve its patrons. Dysfunction and incivility in the workplace lead to poorer patron outcomes. A potential solution is “internal marketing,” a concept borrowed from management research, and used effectively to improve staff engagement in the workplace and commitment to patron outcomes. Library employees are, arguably, the library’s first and most important “customer.” The library mission statement is an unanswerable and critical tool for addressing internal marketing in the library, for improving staff engagement in the workplace, and for increasing overall commitment to and improvement of patron outcomes.

The Disrupted Library

The working environment of the library has changed dramatically. We are all aware of the changes and growing pains for libraries over the past thirty years as a result of automation and the increasingly fast pace of technological growth. Patrons, boards, administrations, and other stakeholders expect libraries to keep up with changes (with shrinking budgets) and offer modern ILS systems, discovery layers, apps, e-materials, and more. And patrons expect libraries to help them learn to keep up with the changes by offering more tech instruction and increasing levels of help desk support. The job has changed.

These new technologies, changing job requirements, and economic pressures have combined to “disrupt” the traditional library operating environment. This disruption is due to the erosion of the central purpose of the library. Until very recently, the library had what Henry, Eshleman, and Moniz call a “functional monopoly over providing information services.” Organizing and providing access to print information was the bread and butter of the library and few, if any, other organizations provided the services offered by librarians and library staff. Today, anyone with a modern smartphone can appear to provide the same service. While service remains the core value of libraries, we are operating in a fluid and constantly restructuring environment that can lack clarity of purpose. Without clarity of purpose, the environment is correspondingly confused and prone to dysfunction. There is evidence for this; when the work role is clear, when employees know what is expected of them, they exhibit more organizational commitment and more job satisfaction.1

The Dysfunctional Library

Libraries have changed. We all know this. What is less clear is the impact this is having on staff. If we think about incivility and dysfunction in the library at all, we are most often thinking about the public-facing side; about the emotional labor of working with patrons. We pay less attention to the private side. There is evidence that libraries have become increasingly dysfunctional places to work; that bullying, incivility, and dysfunction are a regularly occurring problem on the workroom side of the library.

Bullying, Incivility, and Dysfunction are Widespread

In 2005, Susan Mosin issued a call to address mobbing and bullying in US libraries. At the ACRL 12th National Conference, she presented a paper titled “Bullying in Public Libraries: Is It Happening in Your Academic Library?” In it, she credited Thomas Hecker with opening the discussion about bullying and mobbing in US libraries but noted there was little a target could do to stop or prevent bullying. In 2007, Thomas Hecker introduced the term “mobbing” to the American library audience in “Workplace Mobbing: A Discussion for Librarians,” published in the Journal of Academic Librarianship. In it, he defined mobbing as “in a group. Hecker used the terms “insidious” and “prolonged” to distinguish mobbing from more traditional workplace conflicts that are most often resolved fairly quickly, and from bullying, which is generated by one individual against one person. He reported that lifetime risk of mobbing in Sweden was 25 percent (and he estimated the risk was similar in the US). Men, women, and all age groups were equally targeted, he found no defined “target person,” but workers with disabilities were five times more likely to be mobbed and it happened more in schools, universities, and libraries than other workplaces. Although Moehl and Hecker raised the issue and pointed to clear problems in academic libraries, it was not until 2016 that evidence about the extent of the problem became available and not until 2020 that public libraries were included in studies.

In 2016 and 2018, three research studies ended the relative silence surrounding workplace incivility and bullying in libraries. In 2016, Freedman and Vreven studied 354 academic library employees. They found that 53 percent of employees witnessed bullying, 40 percent experienced bullying, and 24 percent witnessed experienced the bullying weekly or daily. Freedman and Vreven also found that administrators experienced and witnessed less bullying. Asian and Black librarians experienced more bullying, there was more bullying at the time of tenure and promotion, and academic librarians at two-year institutions experienced more bullying than those at four-year institutions.

In 2018, Kim, Geary, and Bielefeld studied 573 library employees in New England. “They found that almost half of respondents (43.7 percent) experienced bullying; academic libraries exhibited significantly more bullying than public libraries; supervisors were most often the bullies, and male supervisors bullied their staff significantly more than they bullied fellow supervisors; and those over age thirty-five reported more bullying. They found bullying across gender lines, workplace positions, education levels, and years at the library.”

Early in 2018, in Henry et al. reported the results of the largest study to date on this topic, conducting a survey of 4,168 library employees with the help of ALA. In their 2018 book, The Dysfunctional Library, the authors detail an astonishing and disappointing breadth of poor behavior: incivility, bullying, mobbing, cyberloafing, and workplace conflict. More than 50 percent of respondents said their library workplaces were dysfunctional, 5 percent reported incivility daily or weekly; 40 percent experienced bullying personally, and almost half of those were bullied by higher-ranking coworkers or supervisors; 53 percent witnessed bullying daily or weekly, and 35 percent of the survey participants experienced conflict daily or weekly. They also found that public library staff experience significantly more workplace incivility than staff in other library types. Although Kim, Geary, and Bielefeld found more bullying in the academic library and Henry et al. found more in public libraries, all found evidence that bullying, incivility, and dysfunction are serious problems in our library workplaces.

Costs of Incivility and Dysfunction in the Library

There is reason to be concerned about the high rates of incivility, dysfunction, bullying, and conflict on the staff side of the library. These high rates cause health problems for employees, have direct and indirect financial costs for employers, and result in poorer service for patrons.

The inability to resolve conflict on the staff side results in less stress for Kim, Geary, and Bielefeld found increased health problems in 28.7 percent of those who experienced bullying. The list of mental and physical health-related problems as a result of workplace bullying is extensive: anxiety, sleep disruption, depression, stress, headaches, suicide, PTSD, psychosomatic illness, complications, cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, ulcers, and obesity. Employees may lose promotions, jobs, and leave the profession; one study found 32.5 percent of librarians left a position due to bullying. The costs to replace an employee are well understood. Estimates of the costs to all American workplaces from bullying related absenteeism alone are as high as $4 billion a year.2

Employees do not perform as well when they experience or witness bullying and incivility. Work quality, work effort, and creativity are reduced. A significant percentage of US workers exposed to...
incivility intentionally reduced their work effort (all 42 percent) and they lost work time just worrying about an incident (80 percent). This is true for library employees as well. Kendrick found increased stress in the library workplace in response to workplace bullying; library employees reported "work subculture behaviors or misconduct, including time-stealing, or procrastination." Henry et al describe what they call "organizational deviance," employee actions intended to harm the organization or its customers (e.g., cyberbullying, fraud, theft, and sabotage).

Porter and Pearson found that worker creativity suffered as a result of workplace incivility; study participants were "39 percent less creative, they produced 35 percent fewer ideas, and their ideas were less diverse." Quality of work is an issue not just for the targets but to witnesses. Incivility acts like a "contagion" and has a "spillover effect" on all bystanders; it impairs working memory which allows it to "hijack" work performance and work dysfunctional thoughts for everyone in the workplace, not just the target. But even worse than the reduction in quality or creativity is the impact on organizational commitment; in one study, more than 60 percent of employees had a low commitment to the organization declined.

Commitment to the organization is central to libraries because it is tied to the quality of customer service. In their analysis of six London Library authorities, Broady-Preston and Steel showed that staff attitudes have an impact on patron perception of customer service. Li and Bryan were able to demonstrate this connection at Cornell University Library (CU). They compared their measures of service quality (Li et al and CU surveys of customer satisfaction) to their results of their ClimateQUAL organizational health study. They demonstrated an empirical connection between organizational health and customer satisfaction. Kyyröldion and Roebuck offer the strongest connection between organizational health and customer satisfaction. They identified libraries that had administered both the LibQUAL measure of customer service and the ClimateQUAL measure of organizational health and analyzed the relationships between the two. They were able to show that the quality of the library climate for staff had an impact on users' outcomes. That is, a healthy organizational climate for staff results in a better service outcome for patrons.

The Mission-Informed Library

The mission-informed library is a library that makes the library mission and values a core part of the day-to-day operations of the library. A 2014 survey showed that library directors identified library staff as the main audience for their mission statements, but they rated their mission statements as "only somewhat important" in informing daily operations in the library. This is a missed opportunity. The library mission statement can play a crucial role in reducing dysfunction and improving patron outcomes.

Leadership and the Mission Library

Over and over again, the literature points to weak leadership as the cause of workplace dysfunction. Surprise; unexpectedly, employees report that the problem is not overly strong or micromanaging leadership but a lack of awareness or understanding of the conflict avoidance leadership. For example, most libraries do not have policies in place to address bullying, one study found that fewer than 10 percent of libraries had anti-bullying policies. It is worth pointing out that in Kendrick's study, every respondent said weak leadership ignored both the bullying and requests for help and was the cause of their low morale.

The library mission can support library leaders in taking a more active role in preventing dysfunction. For Lowry, Harper, and Aiken, library leaders should "motivate employees toward shared goals that promote the success of the entire library," and it is more than a staff email or press release about a new feature. They are all important elements, but we do not type the words "new feature." LibQUAL+ led library leaders to plan designed to change the organizational culture of the library. Training about homelessness in the library or about new accessibility features or emotional intelligence will "stick better" if they are part of an IM plan aimed at aligning staff attitudes and creating an organizational culture focused on the library mission and the way those new features programs support the mission. For example, after a training on difficult patrons, a young staff person needed follow up on their coaching with unwanted sexual advances from patrons. She was lucky enough to have a more senior staff member to ask and direct her. This is an example of follow ing an IM plan. In an IM plan strategy, two things would be in place: the training would have been tied to the overall mission and customer service strategy of that library and the training would have been followed up with meetings, newsletters, etc. In other words, the answer would have already been addressed in the training and planned follow up.

Lessons Learned

Libraries often have the basic building blocks in place but need to coordinate them into an IM plan to be able to align the organizational culture and their mission. Any IM plan has to be rooted in the culture of the organization not in the techniques of marketing. It must begin with the existing goals of the campus, and how they fit together. And a successful IM program must focus on internal communication.

Key Tactics and Strategies

Survey existing internal marketing— you might not think you do any, but you do—look at everything you do, it might turn out to be more than you realized. Maybe current internal marketing only creates a non-competing picture to staff. Establish what you already do before you plan an internal marketing campaign whether the campaign is focused on a new accessibility feature or broadly focused on refreshing the staff awareness of the library mission.

Internal market research—are your stakeholders, what do they know, what do they feel about the job, do they feel they can speak up? Survey your stakeholders (staff, boards, city officials) formally or informally to identify training and marketing needs.

Benchmark best practices—identify best practices and policies that you want to implement (customer service, library, tech policies, a customer service principle). Look to see what other libraries are doing with unwanted sexual advances from patrons.

Training—Provide comprehensive training, where needed, to all staff with focus and support. Use your internal marketing research to guide your needs, use your survey of existing internal marketing to create a plan. If possible, establish incentives like certification for training received.

Communicate clearly and often—Choose the right channel for the right staff at the right time: face-to-face communications, newsletters, videos, digital screens. Create specific internal marketing messages that are relevant to the areas, departments of your institution (account services, youth services, technical services, instructional services).

Align internal and external marketing—time the internal messages to coordinate with external marketing as well as the library calendar.

Chart your progress by a person with knowledge of interest and in the training topic (and give them continued training to develop their expertise) to take a lead role in ensuring that all staff are up to date on current trends, tools, and to take the pulse of the library on the topics.

Would an internal marketing campaign look like for an anti-bullying policy? Survey your existing internal marketing to look for any parts of the mission, values, or policies that already exist and look for any internal messaging surronding bullying.

Research your market, in this case staff. Do they know about these policies, do they notice a problem? This does not need to be a formal survey but can be informal conversations and questions at meetings, at the desk, etc.

Make a plan for training—identify best
Call to Action
I have attempted to trace a path from disruption to dysfunction to solution. If you do nothing else with this information, pay attention to staff and their experience. Is there bullying at your library, do you have plans and policies in place to address dysfunction, what will you do if you notice or are told about an issue? Second, market your make the library a part of its day-to-day operations. Use it to help align everyone to the goals and mission of the library. Bring to the fore the mission and the values of your library and the ways that library programs align with and support the mission. And make clear the critical staff role in playing in the goal of the mission. Evidence suggests this can reduce the impact from disruption to dysfunction.

References