

The Successful Workplace: Our Shared Responsibility

WHEN A WORKPLACE “WORKS” IT IS NO ACCIDENT. DELIBERATE AND CONSTANT CARE IS REQUIRED TO CREATE AND SUSTAIN THE KIND OF ENVIRONMENT THAT HAS EMPLOYEES LOOKING FORWARD TO GETTING TO WORK

BY ULLA DE STRICKER

Through more than three decades in the profession, I have naturally come across many a challenge and opportunity and learned valuable lessons from each. Those standing out most in my mind are associated not with any technical aspect of our domain, but with people. To this day, I am thankful to long-ago colleagues for the learning and growth opportunities they afforded me, and I continue to learn from colleagues and clients. I am grateful for the opportunities I now have for speaking about the skills that make for a successful career and the characteristics that make for a successful workplace.

When a workplace “works” it is no accident. Deliberate and constant care is required to create and sustain the kind of environment that has employees looking forward to getting to work. Fortunately, the characteristics and behaviors that make for a positive workplace are not esoteric—the golden

rule and common sense are the major ingredients (to no one’s surprise, I hope). Any casual visit to Amazon.com will reveal a cornucopia of resources dealing with the overall topic of getting along with others and being a productive team member at work.

Ah, I hear you think: But isn’t the special library a unique environment calling for specialized approaches to a good atmosphere? It’s a good question. My answer is that special libraries—and other libraries in their own way—in several ways exhibit characteristics that set them apart from other “intellectual” workplaces:

- Many special libraries occupy an exposed position so that attention needs to be focused outward as well as inward. It is one thing to nurture a positive mood in a department that enjoys the enthusiastic support of the organization’s senior management and a rock-solid budget with regular increases ... it is quite another to pull the feat off in one that is at constant

risk of downsizing or outright closure.

- Even in relatively secure settings, it is not sufficient to focus on the technical specifics of the job. Every activity and interaction with clients and stakeholders needs to be infused with an element communicating the value message and engaging the recipient in further dialogue so as to sustain the ongoing process of learning about stakeholder priorities. Such an extra angle to every function adds complexity.
- The special library may be perceived as separate from the “real business” of the organization, hence there is potential for a sense of isolation on the part of library staff.
- The nature of the work done in a special library is often intense (tight deadlines come to mind as one reason), and the subject matter in question may be quite complex, rendering research work demanding. The sense of pressure and stress may be pronounced.



- Given that the subspecialty of managing special libraries may have been covered in one course taken long ago, it is not uncommon for those in special libraries to find themselves in leadership roles they don't feel fully prepared for. Wondering whether one is "doing it right" adds significantly to the stress level.

However, those special characteristics do not prevent us from learning the lessons in the management books. The trick is to adapt what we read to the unique mix of roles and personalities in *our* special library setting.

The Foundation

In the segment on personal competencies within the Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century (Revised edition, June 2003), the special librarian is pictured as doing two important things:

1. Builds an environment of mutual respect and trust; respects and values diversity. This means a workplace where everyone:

- Treats others with respect and values diversity.
- Knows the strengths of each person and the complementary strengths of others.

- Delivers on time and on target and expects others to do the same.
- Creates a problem-solving environment in which everyone's contribution is valued and acknowledged, and helps others optimize their contribution.
- Advocates for a work environment that encourages and supports ongoing knowledge development and that values the contribution of people.

2. Employs a team approach; recognizes the balance of collaborating, leading and following. This means a workplace where everyone:

- Works as part of the team regardless of his/her position or level.
- Develops and uses leadership and collaboration skills.
- Keeps abreast of trends in leadership skills and styles, using this knowledge to help self and others develop the most effective and appropriate approaches in different contexts.
- Mentors other team members and asks for mentoring from others when it is needed.

Building on those points, I would like to add: The magic of a supportive workplace that staff members love to work in consists of nothing more unusual than what I call "bringing our human-

ity to work." If *every team member, regardless of role*, keeps the wellbeing of colleagues front and center every day ... the rest is straightforward. We are unlikely to find job descriptions featuring mentions of compassion, but it is worth considering. To me, it is reasonable to ask that everyone show compassion in the course of day-to-day work.

I hasten to say that I am not advocating any kind of inappropriate venture into group therapy or meddling in colleagues' personal affairs. I *am* advocating interest in and caring for colleagues so that their experience of coming to work can be as positive as possible—and that is entirely doable well within the boundaries of decorum and professional demeanor.

Fostering a Positive Atmosphere

It is true that a leader's actions, explicit communication, and implicit messages have tremendous impact on the mood of the workplace, but *everyone* must contribute. It is a mistake for any team member to believe he or she is exempt from the responsibility for creating and maintaining a good environment.

I am convinced that no action, no exchange, and no gesture is too small to

Any casual visit to Amazon.com will reveal a cornucopia of resources dealing with the overall topic of getting along with others and being a productive team member at work

play a role in how the mood of the workplace is experienced. The sum total of all the seemingly small individual moments is what makes up the “feel” of an environment. Thoughtfulness, willingness to think about how something might appear to others, and plain old courtesy, consideration and friendliness are a good beginning.

Three fundamental principles are key to understanding the dynamics of a workplace:

1. CULTURE MATTERS

The answer to the question “What’s it like to work here?” will reveal a great deal about a workplace’s culture. Workplace culture is an outcome of

many elements: The type and frequency of feedback and recognition staff members receive; the scope of permitted experimentation and innovation; tolerance for learning curves; the quality of communication among team members; the level of trust among individuals; and so on. A positive culture plays a significant role in fostering the creativity and innovation so critical in these days of rapid change (for example, adjusting to new tools).

Leaders and team members who actively reward healthy behaviors are in a position to influence culture in more powerful ways than they might believe. Of course, when interaction is virtual there is a special challenge: How

does one “look” friendly and interested within the barren confines of an email or wiki post?

2. ATTITUDE AND BELIEFS ARE PARAMOUNT

We may not be able to control events, but we are in a position to choose how we react. Before saying or doing anything, it’s wise to consider how we will look back on it later—with pride or with a cringe? Similarly, an individual’s disposition and overall personality may be relatively unalterable, but he or she can choose how to behave and how to treat colleagues.

An individual’s “work attitude” is the standard operating approach he or she brings to bear on the situations arising in the workplace: “Hm, let’s see, how can we best use this unexpected opportunity to reach out to more stakeholders?” or “Ouch, that was an unfortunate setback, but how can we learn and apply the lesson for the future?” are positive workplace attitudes.

nature.com
is life science



nature.com
is physical science



It’s all in your nature.com

Provide your library users with a NPG site license and select from the highest quality research and reviews journals across science and medicine. NPG’s acclaimed portfolio of academic and society-owned journals welcomes several pioneering journals in 2009:

New *Nature Chemistry*
Nature Climate Change

New to NPG *The American Journal of Gastroenterology*
Acta Pharmacologica Sinica
The Asian Journal of Andrology
Hypertension Research
The Journal of Antibiotics
Journal of Human Genetics

T: +1 800 221 2123 | E: institutions@natureny.com | W: www.nature.com/libraries



nature.com
The world's best science and medicine in your delivery

nature publishing group **npg**

In an analogous way, an individual's belief system about work colors all behavior—and the experience of his or her colleagues. There can be significant impact from the positive energy of someone who consciously thinks, "I am here to make a meaningful contribution and I give it everything I have; I look for ways to help the department over and above the job description; I am delighted and grateful to have the opportunity to learn and grow as I tackle the job each day; I look for ways to be a good influence on the way everyone experiences working here."

3. ATTITUDE AND BELIEFS DRIVE TEAM DYNAMICS

Even in special libraries with highly specialized unique roles, the staff members are a team, working together to deliver the mission. Regardless whether we are members of project focused or permanent teams, we benefit from asking, on a regular basis, questions about our own roles: "Am I doing my share? Could I volunteer something that would help the team's work along? How can I work actively to help other team members deliver their best work?"

Similarly, it is helpful to be tolerant and to recognize that people are human and cannot help bringing to the workplace some personal baggage. (However, tolerance of untoward behavior is of course not recommended!) It takes little effort to bring "flowers" to work and openly appreciate what someone has done, by saying things like: "I really admired the way you stepped up to bat during the meeting." "Where did you learn that ... I'm impressed!"

"Please be aware it is not lost on us how much extra work you are doing to help the project succeed; it is greatly appreciated."

When flowers aren't appropriate, there's always the option of bringing "Dr. Phil" to work, instead of ruminating privately. I call that "hmming instead of fuming." If things aren't ideal, it could be a good idea to ask, for example, "Hm, could it be that the curt response I received has something to do with how much pain she's in?" "Hm, had you considered that the new system is truly daunting and that everyone needs more time to learn it?" "You seem pre-occupied lately; is there anything we should know so we can take it into consideration during the project?" "Were you aware that your extreme energy and direct, enthusiastic manner could come across to quieter types as ... um, a tad intimidating?" (Yes, I have had this last comment made to me!)

A positive attitude is free for the taking—and it costs nothing to share it with others. Isn't that a great bargain?

What if You Were the Boss?

From my own experience, and from what I hear whenever the conversation turns to the art of management, it's a common experience for "the boss" to lose sleep over the responsibility. Through the years, I gathered up examples of behaviors I observed when watching good leaders at work. These characteristic behaviors are easy to forget in the rush of daily pressure, but when acted out, they have a lot of impact. In my view, we can tell a good leader by how he or she:

- Gives clear charges, and then lets the team work its magic.
- Is available for consultation at any time but avoids micromanaging.
- Appears "on the floor" to ensure awareness of day-to-day reality and to offer opportunities for staff members to mention things they believe don't warrant an appointment.
- Carefully observes each staff member to look for signs of the need for "a chat" or any practical intervention.
- Welcomes strange new ideas, and makes it a desirable and a pleasant experience for staff members to offer suggestions, regardless of whether any given idea succeeds or falls flat.
- Offers detailed feedback, especially if, for example, a proposal wasn't accepted higher up in the chain, to reinforce that input is taken seriously even if it did not have the desired outcome. (We value being heard more than getting our way!)
- Keeps the troops in the loop as to the directions of the organization and the potential impact.
- Is not afraid to say "I don't have the answer."
- Stands up for what is right, and for the staff, and does not shy away from dealing with sticky situations or less-than-positive behaviors.
- Takes a genuine interest in each staff member's experience of the workplace and asks, "What else could be changed to make you feel happy about working here?"

There are many more items in this list, but I'll encapsulate: An accomplished leader is someone who has earned the trust and respect of the individuals for whom he or she is responsible.

In conclusion, is there a "code word" we could pack in our briefcases or backpacks as we head to work? There is: Be yourself, and make sure that "self" is someone whose actions make you proud! **SLA**



ULLA DE STRICKER, immediate Past Chair of SLA's Leadership and Management Division, is a Toronto-based consultant specializing in strategies for information and knowledge management. She speaks regularly about career skills and workplace related matters and contributes responses to the "Dear Ulla" blog entries on LMD's Web site (http://sla-divisions.typepad.com/sla_lmd/). Her book, *Business Cases for Info Pros: Here's Why, Here's How*, was published by Information Today in June 2008.