CASE STUDY

The Lane Mutiny

ELIZABETH BROOKS and Jenny Bowen sat in a booth at a diner a mile away from Lane University Library where they worked. “I can’t believe the old monster is finally retiring,” Brooks said. “I thought she’d never go.”

“Me, too. I thought they’d have to blast her out of that office with dynamite,” Bowen said as a waitress placed two cups of coffee on the table. “Can you imagine being in the same job for 35 years?” she countered, regarding longtime director Johnson.

“Here’s to getting rid of her,” Brooks said, and the women touched mugs and sipped. “Who do you think will get the job?” Bowen asked.

“Sharon should get it, but that doesn’t mean she will. You know the administration isn’t big on promoting from within. They’ll either pull someone in from another campus or do a search.”

“I suppose they’ll have to have an interim until they hire someone permanent.”

“I hope Sharon will get that at least. It’ll give her a chance to show them that she can do the job,” said Brooks, sipping her coffee. “She was basically running the place anyway: Johnson wasn’t doing anything her last few years. At least now that she’s leaving, we won’t have to follow that ridiculous plan of rotating the collection.”

“You don’t think we’ll have to do that now?” asked Bowen.

“I doubt it. Everyone hated the idea, and now that she’s retiring, who’s going to listen to a thing she says? You know what it’s like—once you announce you’re leaving, you basically forfeit your authority.”

“You think so?”

“When Corinne told us she was leaving, did anyone care at all what she thought about anything? She wanted us to change the whole reference department, but we all knew that the next person who got that job would just make us change it all back, so no one ever did it.”

“Johnson just got us doing all this extra paperwork with every interlibrary loan that is a real waste of time. It always worked fine the way we did it before, so I guess we can cut that out now, too,” Bowen said.

“Sure. You know, if Sharon gets the job, the first thing she’s going to do is cancel all of Johnson’s initiatives. She’ll work to try to streamline procedures and make them more efficient instead of just creating busy work for everyone that doesn’t really serve any purpose.”

“Johnson’s done a lot of innovative things in her time, too.”

“Yeah, she was great for years, but lately she seems like she doesn’t know what’s going on anymore. It’s definitely time for her to vacate.”

“More coffee?” asked the waitress. Both women pushed their cups forward for a refill from a steaming pot. “If you want anything else, let me know,” the waitress said and turned to warm other customers’ cups.

“So,” asked Bowen, “are you going to talk to Sharon about this or just ignore the plan?”

“She already told me that she thinks the plan is ridiculous, so I’m sure she’ll be happy if we just pretend it never happened.”

“What if Johnson asks for progress reports?”

“Why would she? Now that she’s leaving, she probably doesn’t care what goes on anyway. How about you. Are you going to start implementing the plan?”

“I don’t know. Do we still have to listen to her or not?”

ANALYSIS

Change Is Stressful

By Alice Knapp.
Collection Development/Outreach Manager, Director, Bethel Public Library, CT

THIS SIMPLE “lame duck” issue is compounded by an old-fashioned communication problem. Johnson’s authority is threatened not only by her retirement but also by failing to communicate her goals to the staff.

Brooks’s and Bowen’s feelings are quite normal. Their conversation displays resentment over past practice as well as concern over their future work environment. It is further peppered with disregard for the administration and its authority. Within this framework, it is no wonder that they do not want to follow a plan developed by the current director.

Johnson has lost the respect of her staff. Even though Brooks and Bowen acknowledge that Johnson was innovative, they now consider her initiatives mere busy work. Johnson either did not include the staff in decisions or did not explain their importance. In any case, Johnson was not able to sell the latest project. Instead, she has isolated at least two of her staff—if not more.

Despite the staff’s feelings, Johnson is the director until the day she steps down. Brooks and Bowen have no choice but to follow the plan. If they ignore it, the administration could easily misinterpret their actions.
HOW DO YOU MANAGE?

as incompetence or laziness. Johnson has made another error. By not communicating the steps for the transition (the search process as well as interim measures), she has set up a scenario ripe for speculation and rumor. Staff changes are very stressful for those who remain. It is even more stressful when it is the director who is leaving. Staff should know what their role is in this process, how their work will be affected, and what changes are interim or permanent. By not acknowledging the magnitude of the change, Johnson has let her staff down.

Brooks and Bowen are, however, obviously concerned—indeed, they spent their whole lunch hour discussing work! They both realize that they could probably ignore the plan and no one would be the wiser. But wouldn’t that just perpetuate the current situation?

Instead, Brooks and Bowen should use this situation as an opportunity to change this environment. They should speak to Johnson and explain their concerns about the project.

Specifically, they should ask that it be delayed until the new director arrives. At the same time, they could ask about the transition process. If they are uncomfortable about approaching Johnson, they could approach the assistant director.

By asking for direction from the administration, Brooks and Bowen become involved in the process. Even if Johnson or the assistant director brushes their concerns aside, they know that they have done their best to improve communication.

ANALYSIS II

Managing Piranha

By Adrian Mixson

Associate Director, Hall County Library System, Gainesville, GA

THIS IS NOT a mutiny. It is more a big grumble in a little diner. Bold talk by employees takes place at campus whistle stops daily. Supervisors just need to remember that talk is not action.

There are problems at Lane University. Whoever is hired to replace Johnson will need to come in with a firm hand. It is not a genteel staff that will be encountered. It is obvious that the employees in this department are strong-willed, opinionated, and need a manager who will closely monitor their work. Promoting from within would only exacerbate whatever problems exist in the department.

If Johnson has been a successful supervisor, she knows Brooks and Bowen, and she will deal with them if they fail to carry out their work assignments. Managing does not cease the day retirement is announced. Verbal and written reprimands, or leave without pay, are still options, but simply a good talk with staff when trouble rears should head off most problems.

Change in an organization is sold. Those at the top understand and support it. Those at the bottom also understand and are ready to implement it. Change does not just happen. Not all players need to embrace change, but they do need to carry out the new routine. When staff is properly primed, new routine folds into the old and gets implemented despite the grumbling of some staff. It can be assumed Johnson has already prepared everyone for the changes that seem to be minor. She needs to institute what the organization already has approved and deal with staff problems if and when they appear, since she will be working at Lane University for several more months.

Managing piranha is not much different from managing sheep. The school needs to be pointed in the direction it swims, and the ones who swim out of line just need a little nudge to get them to return to the fold. The challenges for a supervisor come when working with employees who see themselves as part of a team and are willing to work within the organization to bring change. It is this spirit you do not want to stifle.

Poor Johnson will probably be working up until her last hour on the job with this crew. It is a shame that after 35 years she has not assembled a sensible team that can be counted on to do their jobs.

How Would You Manage?

Have you ever thought you had a better solution to one of our scenarios and wished you had the opportunity to state your opinion for the profession? Here's your chance. Library Journal is seeking veteran librarians to respond to How Do You Manage? case studies. Public, academic, and special librarians are all eligible to try their hand. Respondents selected for each analysis receive a byline plus $100 for their participation. If you are interested in telling other librarians how you would manage, please forward your name, address, phone and FAX number, plus area of interest (internal management problems, difficult patrons, technology, etc.) to How Do You Manage?, LJ, 245 West 17th St., New York, NY 10011; E-mail <ejones@ljcahners.com>.

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