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Working With, Not For: Confronting the Us vs Them mindset between Information Services and Access Services in a Major Urban Library System

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There is a well-known awkward weight, hardly ever mentioned aloud, that library staff hold close to their chests as they walk the narrow bridge over the imagined gulf that separates the Information and Access staff. The words stamped on the weight are "Who does the REALLY IMPORTANT work around here anyway?" This weight is a distraction that keeps us from filling in that gap and creating more stable ground on which we might keep our organizations relevant. It's time to start talking about it, so that we can demystify and dismantle it, and maybe even toss it off the bridge.

At my own public library in the heart of downtown Portland, Oregon, the edges of the gulf lie between the Information Services (IS) staff (professional librarians and library assistants) and the Access Services (AS) staff (pages and clerks).

People talk about the "luxuries" of working in the central branch of a large, urban library system, and indeed there are some—many staff, many materials, lots of space. But there are also challenges. The sheer number of people and large scale of everything means a hierarchical or striated structure is necessary just to get through the day, let alone provide the framework to make strategic decisions, implement innovations or take risks. This makes cross-departmental collaboration something you have to actively pursue and makes information sharing an every-day-no-exceptions necessity.

Of course, structures are only as good as the cultures that utilize them. Inside of this one, with all its rules and necessary pecking order and chains of command, the natural division of work duties, job classification, and salary range can divide library staff by creating myopic cells for highly specialized work instead of providing a general area of focus that keep us from being overwhelmed. People who have worked here for 30 years or more (and there are more than a few) remember when pages were given permission to answer only one question posed

by the public: "Where's the bathroom?" and librarians were surrounded by the sudden silencing of all conversation when they dared to travel into the basement stacks. No wonder the pages were indignant and the librarians dismissive. Unfortunately, memories like these about our traditional roles are still deeply ingrained in library culture.

I'm currently the Access Services Administrator in my building, with two major departments in my area of responsibility. I have 17 years of library experience working as-and-with hundreds of pages, clerks, shelvers and volunteers. But I have no MLS and limited reference work experience compared to my professionally educated Administrator peers. Admittedly, I have a better close up view of the support staff side of the equation and can bring plenty of my own baggage to this examination of the tension that exists.

When I started in public libraries as a paraprofessional, I was provided with the following guidance: "Don't ask the librarians questions. They don't know the particulars of your job, which is to put materials on the shelf and stay out of their way. Let them handle the patrons. If you need help, don't ask them. Ask one of us." This was not said with any animosity toward the Information staff. It was just the Way It Was. It was easier to stay isolated, on separate planets with different orbits around the sun, than to figure out how to pool our resources and work together. Being new and eager to fit into the well-established, much-romanticized-by-me library culture, I took the guidance to heart. This system of deliberate separation created a reality in my mind where the "real library work" was kept, ostensibly aloft, certainly secret, in the realm of capital "R" reference, and those of us who performed the "not as important and rightfully hidden" labor of handling patron accounts and keeping the collection in order were literally and figuratively housed in the basement.

Of course patron service and user experience suffered for our lack of integration. Hand offs were clumsy if they happened at all, patrons' service expectations went unmet due to the public not knowing or caring who the "real" librarians were (it was hard to figure out how to say to the public "I'm really not supposed to talk to you"), and half the public services staff never really knew what the other half was doing. Work was duplicated, done incompletely, incorrectly, or not at all. We had no service agreements or way to know what we (as staff) or patrons could expect from other departments. In the broadest terms, within our dysfunctional understanding of daily operations, AS staff only knew that patrons' reference inquiries were mysterious, untouchable, and answered out of earshot; IS staff knew that items got checked out, fines were collected, and materials got moved around without their having to get involved. We were all part of the same system, but you wouldn't have guessed it.

While that was almost 15 years ago, and we've made such great strides away from that reality, we still struggle with the divide. At our best: we feel and act like a great team of people seamlessly and passionately exercising our dedication to public service, and patrons can tell. At our worst, we feel and act righteously indignant in our separated silos, not communicating or extending each other the most basic courtesy, and the patrons can tell.

One of my clerks recently spoke up during a meeting about the work we currently do to support the IS staff. She said "We'd love to work more collaboratively with the IS staff. We just want to feel like we're working with them, not for them." This so succinctly and accurately encapsulated the myriad ways I'd felt about our work environment in the past. The question remains: How do we work more collaboratively across classification lines and instill a broad sense of importance for all library staff contributions when, for decades, the culture and politics of the work place dictated that the staff took on roles that felt like those

of nobility and servants? Especially when there are many of us still around who weathered the weirdness and still struggle with the old mindsets? We have done quite a bit of really good work around this since the turn of the last century, but it's taken time and deliberate planning to figure out our best route. Here are some of our successes.

It starts at the top.

Our Library Director Vailey Oehlke recently said in an all manager meeting, related to an IS initiative we're implementing to help shape and direct the work of IS staff for the future, that "There's no work (at the library) that's more or less important. And I include my own job in that. We all have a role in the success of this organization." She went on to say that just because we are focusing on the role of IS and what that work will look like as we carve out our new relevancy, doesn't mean that materials don't have to be moved around every day. It is incredibly important that your organization's leadership embraces the idea that all library work is equally important, and that it is unacceptable to reinforce the idea that certain work has higher value for the organization and that it resides with one classification or another. This helps break down the Us vs. Them structure and provides an alternative where it is about being one team, all working toward the same goals.

But at the very least,
do what you can to put your own house in order.

Let us say your organization is not quite ready to embrace this philosophy yet. You can still influence the culture of your own, smaller work group. One of the things my departments have focused on for the last many years is to deal with our own internal issues before tackling anything outside the sphere of our influence. Process inefficiencies, personality conflicts, unnecessary competition, performance issues, unclear expectations—anything that would keep us from being viewed as anything other than role models—these things needed to be addressed before we could worry about anything else, including how we built and maintained our relationships with other work groups.

Model the behavior you expect from others.

A physical manifestation of this shift in culture currently includes a project an IS colleague and I are working on called "MOLE (More Opportunities for Leadership Experiment)." Our lead workers were finding their mixed class meetings challenging, and it occurred to us that, with few exceptions, we weren't doing in our meetings what we had asked them to do. The idea is that if leadership (administrators like myself, supervisors, and lead workers) from IS and AS carve out the time to be present at a small percentage of the daily huddles, operational and planning meetings for each other, we will be more informed, we will have a chance to build better relationships, offer insight and ideas, and we will know when things will impact the work of the departments we're responsible for. Like diplomatic attachés— very exciting!

Leading by example is a great way to make something new less scary, and to communicate that we're all doing it together. If others see that it is not painful and nothing bad happens, the hope is it will make it easier for them to take their own leaps and suggest interdepartmental projects or discussions, build relationships, or even just know what's happening around them. At the very least, this cross-pollination should help deconstruct various rumor mills and assumptions that crop up from time to time.

Make it okay to talk about the tension, because it affects people and their work.

Talking about the differences between IS and AS work can feel like opening a can of worms. It's uncomfortable. But it's real. Just putting the divide on the table can be a relief. Even if you're not in a position of formal leadership, there is always a way to talk about issues that creates opportunity instead of closing doors. It helps if this is done in a structured way at first, through focused conversations with a facilitator, or in small groups where mis-steps can be worked through on a small scale. As many life-changing support groups would say, we first have to admit we have a problem.

Implement "service agreements" between departments or work groups.

Discussing with mixed groups of staff how they want to conduct their day to day business and what behaviors they expect to see out of their colleagues can have a big impact. Getting things written down in the form of a service agreement can help guide groups through sticky situations. For instance, just writing down what a successful inperson patron referral looks like can make a huge difference in how any staff make those referrals in the future, and there's documentation to look back to when things go awry. Spelling out the common goals (e.g. "Our goal is excellent and seamless patron service at that patron's point of need,") can help act as a filter through which all behavior expectations can be run to see if they make sense and are doable.

Create collaborative opportunities in decision making.

Asking small groups of interdepartmental staff to work on discrete problems within parameters agreed upon at the leadership level can be so beneficial on many levels. It creates buy in for multiple work groups, includes staff who are actually doing the work and experiencing the pain points, and helps contribute to a culture of transparency. Over the last few years we have successfully revamped the supply ordering process, reorganized almost half our overcrowded reading room collections and changed patron traffic patterns, and examined all our materials handling processes from check in to check out to eliminate "extra touches"—all by utilizing staff guided groups from mixed classifications. These projects were successful in part because every work group contributed to the problem solving and implementation.

Take the high road.

Everyone can relate to feeling that their buttons are being pushed, due to the ignorance of others, being subjected to cultural norms that feel wrong, or in the worst cases, by deliberate antagonizing during conflict. Friction points along the IS/AS divide are well known and earnestly experienced. The longer people work in libraries, the more baggage they may have around it. I certainly struggle with it. I have made goals around taking the high road when a class-based conflict arises. This is not as easy as it sounds. It takes self-awareness and some strategizing around what coping skills would best be suited for the particular situation. Removing myself from the conversation, practicing responses to trigger issues, and communicating directly about how I feel helps. (Taking the high road is not to be confused with tolerating unprofessional workplace behavior.)

We have also done other, larger scale things that have improved our environment. We implemented a major customer service initiative in 2009 called *Think Yes!* that not only asked all library staff to focus on improving welcoming interactions with patrons and colleagues, but also created some practical guidelines for how we engage with others (empowering any library staff to talk about general options with patrons, creating concrete behavior expectations around being a team player). Our hiring practices have shifted to include an interpersonal skills focus—so important to relationship building and collaboration.

Public library work has changed so much in the past 20 years. Stable funding is no longer assumed. The pressure is always on to do more with less. The pervasiveness of the Internet and Google have changed the way patrons think of and use us. The work of IS has moved from that of gatekeeping experts to that of trusted guides and facilitators. The work of AS has become more inclusive of many direct customer interactions. Both work groups have moved to more lateral positions on the patron usage map. All of these things and more have helped us become more cooperative, more collaborative, more collegial, and even just more aware of each other.

Working better together in these ways will ensure that the only people we feel like we are working for are our patrons.