

Managing Through the Void: Overseeing a Library Department Amid Personnel Vacancies

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Abstract

There are a variety of reasons a library department may experience a temporary position vacancy. Whatever the cause, this presents managers with the often overwhelming task of filling in the gaps, or even predicting and coping with stress inadvertently placed on the remainder of the department. Managers may be planning further into the future than we may be accustomed to in ordinary times. This brief, practice-based piece calls out the best ways to tame this frustration through maintaining three key focuses.

Introduction

Support staff retention is an inconvenient but true part of the library field. Employees are promoted, relocate, or choose to further their education on a regular basis. This leaves managers struggling to fill in the gaps while between staff. As a department manager in an academic library, I ultimately oversee multiple support staff employees, along with a small tribe of student workers. I have overseen several periods with vacancies now, and I have taken note of what works and what merely makes things more difficult. Effective strategies can ultimately be grouped into three categories: transparency, simplicity, and consistency.

Transparency

The very nature of a librarian being to provide resources and services, we ourselves do not like to see or feel disruptions. When between personnel, I attempted more than once to maintain a seamless operation with business as usual. Of course, I learned this is not only unfeasible, but frankly unnecessary.

This is not solely a struggle of academia, however. Other fields, such as public affairs along with the corporate sphere, experience it too. Noted in an *International Journal of Business Communication* piece from Mishra, Boynton and Mishra, transmission of challenges and endeavors, both internally and externally, has actually existed as a known strength in academia for some time.¹ Users of academic services are frequently aware of large-scale organizational changes, and this effort should naturally trickle down to the level of an individual library department. In times of departmental vacancies, candidness is key. While it may seem easier on everyone to carry onward with business as usual, in the long run, staff and students will respond much more obligingly to extra needs if management is upfront and honest about needing some assistance. By simply coming out and stating that things may be in flux for a bit, managers may find a more receptive and eager department willing to be flexible and pitch in on whatever is called upon them. Provide a challenge, and people will rise.

Full-time support staff often have a pretty clear idea of what a librarian's job description entails. However, student employees may be less aware. This presents an opportunity for the

librarian to shed some light on what it is they do, as well as the more holistic role of the academic library. Student employees typically work in one small area of the library performing a set of specific tasks. In turn, they may be missing the larger picture. Thus, periods of time between one direct supervisor and another can be an excellent time for these student employees to gain such knowledge, increasing their engagement, which ultimately enhances performance. Furthermore, student employees gain skills of flexibility and initiative which will be desirable to potential employers as they move onward. Library work translates well into many fields.

Simplicity

On the other hand, full-time support staff may feel the most pressure in such interim periods between colleagues. In my experience, the most effective way of easing this is actually to lean into more liberal asks from the beginning. It is not only difficult, but also unfair to add on extra desk shifts by the week, last minute reference assistance, or altering calendars left and right. Much more effective and smoother on everyone is placing these expectations, when appropriate, on the workload of employees at the time the other position first becomes vacant. State a concrete period of time that this workload will fall to them, and perhaps most importantly of all, make sure the extra effort is acknowledged with appreciation.

As Farrell explains in a 2016 edition of *Journal of Library Administration*, staff respond to change best when they are a part of the conversation.² Allowing as many employees as possible to engage in changes will improve not only communication, but also performance across the board. If someone needs to take on extra hours at the reference desk, perhaps they can select a portion of these hours. When promotional efforts need to be made, maybe various staff can choose which events and resources they individually work on. I have learned that by simply asking for volunteers, the extra work often gets accomplished enthusiastically as well as timely.

To circle transparency back in, awareness of interruptions in typical department flow is also crucial when onboarding the incoming employee. It is imperative that they know of any procedures which were tweaked in the interim period as well as workflows which have taken a slower pace than expectations allow for in ordinary times. Additionally, colleagues from other departments should be made aware that certain workflows may look differently during this time period. Often, we find ourselves striving hard to keep things afloat which are in the end impossible; whereas if we merely state that operations may temporarily look differently, things are smoother in the long run. The real key here is for managers to avoid making promises that cannot be kept.

Consistency

Indeed, there is no need to fix something that is not broken. I have admittedly found myself going overboard attempting to make up for the absence of staff. After assessing efforts, however, I have seen that these extra efforts were not necessary. Managers should strive to change as little as possible.

It may be difficult to rely on student employees when oneself has not previously been their immediate supervisor. It is important to keep in mind the bridges that are built from these positions. As Kohler identifies in a *College and Undergraduate Libraries* feature, these employees are invaluable in a multifold of ways.³ Student workers connect us not only to the work performed by their supervisor, but also to the population we serve.

Temporary coverage and additional responsibilities are best dealt out evenly. It is easy to rely on that one employee who happily goes the extra mile and takes on extra work with ease. Nevertheless, this should not be a relied upon method for filling in the gaps. This increases a risk for burnout, low morale, as well as some staff being cross-trained while others are not – a recipe for later issues. Rather, as Vela urges librarians in a 2018 *Journal of Library Administration* article, tasks should be distributed evenly, and communication should be spread widely.⁴ Everyone internally being on the same page at the same time will result in a unified message sent out to external users.

It is also worth exploring cross-training employees from related departments. Staff of all levels respond well to understanding the larger picture of their work and how it ties in with research as well as outreach more largely. A period of vacancy might present an opportunity to create a more collaborative library across the board. This not only solves an issue at hand, but also enhances services moving forward.

Conclusion

It is natural to feel overwhelmed while juggling multiple position descriptions, attempting to delegate extra work in a fair and effective manner, and ultimately making ends meet. Admitting to ourselves and others that workflow will fluctuate for a period of time is a first key step. Remaining mindful not to create a fix more frustrating than an actual problem, followed by keeping everything as steady and stable as possible completes the giant task at hand. With transparency, simplicity and consistency, managers can make it through this void and a strong department will in turn emerge.

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References

¹ Mishra, K., Boynton, L., & Mishra, A. 2014. "Driving Employee Engagement: The Expanded Role of Internal Communications." *International Journal of Business Communication* 51 (2), 183–202.

² Farrell, Maggie. 2016. "Transparency." *Journal of Library Administration* 56 (4): 444–52.

³ Kohler, Jamie P. 2016. "Training Engaged Student Employees: A Small College Library Experience." *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 23 (4): 363–80.

⁴ Vela, S. 2018. "Knowledge Management, Diversity, and Professional Hierarchies in Libraries." *Journal of Library Administration* 58 (8), 835–860.