

Two Mothers

Julie Todaro

The summer of '05 has been a difficult one. Many staff illnesses and issues, collegewide reorganizations, a library reorganization, difficult college media situations, global tragedies, state politics, federal politics, weather conditions, and an impact of weather conditions too enormous to articulate. We know that all of these issues and situations have an effect on individuals as well as staff members as a group. In this column, I've discussed these issues and situations and the impact of tragedy on staff as well as how to manage both direct and collateral issues related to tragedy, *and* I've observed how instincts play an important role in managing . . . but reflecting back on this summer specifically, I realize I needed just one special something to keep me—just me—going . . . so I went on a quest to find out “What gets me through the rough times at work and at home?” and now that I have realized I've found *that* answer, the second question is “How does it relate to management?”

SO . . . what was so bad about this summer? First we have to look at where I've been this summer. I spent half of my “free” time watching CNN's Nancy Grace in Aruba. While I don't usually watch CNN nonstop, I became captivated by the story, the search, the great loss, the characters, the family dynamics, and—most importantly—the mother. This mother didn't agonize over the decisions that led her daughter or her to the situation; rather she focused—through a relentless pursuit of truth—on the process and the end result. To observe her actions and the surrounding activities over weeks and then—sadly—months, I moved among the peaks and valleys of near misses, selfless rescue crews, an unfamiliar judicial system, a slow admission of realization of outcome, for and then against legal decisions, and finally—at summer's end—resignation, reality, and return home but with a sense of renewed commitment to continue but in different venues.

What did I learn from this distressing scenario for the topic of management? Persistence in the face of adversity; a reasoned, calm approach to the most difficult of situations; how to carry yourself with dignity when it seems impossible to do so; a critical need to delegate and enlist the help of others; the importance of staying true to the mission; and a fearless path to the truth.

Persistence in the Face of Adversity

Libraries and library managers always face adversity. Adversity and conflict are what burns us out, makes us want to change management positions, step down from management responsibilities, and—obviously—retire. Constantly dealing with adversity and conflict is repetitive, enervating, and not rewarding. Very few people thrive on relentless adversity and conflict; however, the best advice for dealing with adversity is to face each adversarial issue consistently while working through to solution with persistent communication and attention to detail. Planned persistence gives managers focus, purpose, and a plan of action to approach issues with a documented path. Attention to detail creates a less stressful situation as accurate details reduce the stress surrounding the situation and give managers an element of power over what might be a situation very difficult to control.

A Reasoned, Calm Approach to the Most Difficult of Situations and How to Carry Yourself with Dignity When It Seems Impossible to Do So

Whether difficult situations are one-time or ongoing, the approach that allows managers to make it through one situation and prepare to deal with another is demeanor and the image of control. The calmer the individual and the atmosphere, the easier it is for managers to make themselves understood and ensure that they are neither misquoted or ignored because their manner was too emotional or—by some definitions—unprofessional. Anger—considered unprofessional in the workplace—is not an appropriate emotion for the workplace, and managers who display or attempt to use anger with either staff or patrons find any successes (getting the job done quickly or an immediate behavior change) short-lived, as staff become fearful, secretive and nonresponsive.



Julie Todaro (jtodaro@austincc.edu) is Dean of Library Services, Austin Community College, Texas, and a frequent presenter of LAMA regional institutes.

Although one would think that the calm and reasoned approach insures dignity, it doesn't always. Demeanor as well as *what* is said—no matter how calm—is important, as is follow-up. In addition, choosing the *few* right words rather than too many words is important. Many managers begin with the best of intentions, but well-intended dignity may be harder to maintain as situations escalate or as frustrations increase. In addition, those who are themselves calm and dignified can more easily request those around them to remain calm and dignified in their approach to the situation.

A Critical Need to Delegate and Enlist the Help of Others

A key aspect of management is assessing work responsibilities and training and delegating appropriate responsibilities to others. While this is a recommended behavior in the best of times, it is most critical in bad times, when managers may easily find themselves overwhelmed with the aspects of the project. Delegating is best realized when the very act itself is planned out with a variety of aspects. These aspects could include:

- The areas of a manager's job that can be delegated with consideration for totality; in other words, can the entire area be handled by someone else, or just sections of an area?
- What are the timeline issues of the delegated activity; in other words, does the completed activity need to come back through the manager, or can it be completed without management attention? Other timeline issues include duration; that is, is the activity permanently delegated or only for a short period of time?
- What are the documentation issues of the delegated activity; in other words, what area elements need to be documented and for whom? The employee who completed the work? The manager? The manager's manager?
- What are the training issues regarding the delegation? Should the employee be trained generally beforehand, or specifically for the one area of delegation?

At the very least, managers need to train someone to be able to step in quickly, at the last minute, in order to provide the critical backup needed for the manager. To begin this process, managers should answer the questions:

- Function by function or area by area? Who do they turn to?
- Person by person . . . What do you turn to them for? HR? Tech? Budget?
- Can each person take over without instruction or training, or do they need training?
- How do you designate these people to your staff?

Revised job descriptions (to expand the typical "other duties as assigned")? Titles? Go-to charts?

The Importance of Staying True to the Mission

As much as we want to be all things to all people, we can't be, and our institution can't be. It is easy for others in the organization to have diverse approaches to the institution's mission OR to have things thrust upon them that aren't central to the mission. Managers must strive to build on existing goals and strategies and to seek outcomes that are specifically related to the mission. To ensure that you are prepared for nonmission or difficult mission situations, managers should answer these questions:

- Do you have a vision and a mission?
- How does your mission relate to your goals or strategies?
- Does each service or resource you offer relate to your mission?
- What are some areas you might be asked to address that aren't mission-oriented? How do you respond to mission area you can't handle? Can't afford?
- How do you respond for requests that are nonmission requests?

A Fearless Path to the Truth

Although concern for the path to the truth sounds noble and out of reach, librarians and library managers have a number of areas they now face every day that are truth issues and areas. Besides the areas we are now agonizing over daily, such as access and ownership issues, HR issues are a vital area where the truth is sometimes hard to ferret out and—when ferreted out—hard to adhere to. Staff performance, health issues, conflict areas among staff, conflict areas between staff and patrons, affect of internal issues on other staff, affect of external issues on staff . . . these are all areas where identifying sides, remaining objective, documenting reality, doing what's best for the individual, doing what's best for the whole, determining facts, and deciding on solutions demands an unflinching attention and commitment to the truth.

SO . . . what was *good* this summer and "What got me through the rough times at work and at home?" and "How does it relate to management?"

I spent the other half of my free time this last summer at the National Zoo in Washington. Well, that's not completely true. I spent the other half of my virtual and digital free time at the zoo. Staring—through the zoo's panda cam I and panda cam II—at another mother so perfect she looked like a stuffed animal . . . and her child.

In contrast, it was heartbreaking, with one mother agonizing over a lost child and doing her best to ensure that her child got the best care and treatment and another mother doing her best to ensure that her new child got the best care and all the attention children need.

In all honesty and with all due respect to the first mother, I observed similar characteristics in these two excellent mothers. The Washington mother exhibited persistence in the face of adversity; a reasoned, calm approach to the most difficult of situations; dignity when it seems impossible to do so; a critical need to delegate and enlist the help of others; the importance of staying true to the mission; and a fearless path to the truth. Both mothers operated on natural instincts, both were on 24/7 watch by a unrelenting press, and both wanted the best for their children.

And I think the balance is what calmed me the most. These two situations juxtaposed in harsh media spotlights . . . a dramatic, tragic situation paralleled with a life-affirming new start and, hopefully, a happy ending. While there is no way to respectfully compare the two situations or mothers in terms of magnitude and loss, there are lessons learned in both and—obviously great human courage compared to centuries of natural instinct.

The management lessons learned really deal with the following issues:

- **Managers must seek ways to balance the work environment** for ongoing healthy and productive work life

for employees. Negative long- and short-term issues must be specifically countered with positive processes and actions in order to provide employees with stability. This can be true with short- and long-term illnesses, employee conflicts, financial downturns and cutbacks, and loss of employees (including changes in management) due to employees going to other jobs, retirements, dismissal, and death.

- **Employees need to find a focus that reaffirms positive thoughts.** While this might sound like a Hallmark card, the reality is that while it is everyone's expectation that adults come prepared to present a balanced approach in the workplace, it doesn't always happen. Managers need to set expectations, discuss and define parameters, assist in training or development, and often identify what times might be good times or what times might work for employees to take breaks or downtime to focus on the one thing that illustrates more positive elements of life. In order to keep going during these rough times, some employees meditate, some read passages, some play games at break and at lunch, some do crossword puzzles, some read, and others look at baby pandas on animal cams. Within reason, whatever works.

Just when we all thought world events couldn't get worse, Katrina wreaked her havoc on the Gulf Coast. I'm just getting over this summer, some won't get over it for some time, and some won't ever get over it. Stay balanced.

Public Librarians—What's Next? Certification!

If you have:

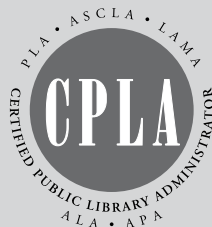
- an MSLS degree (ALA-accredited, NCATE-accredited, or accredited by the national body of another country)
- at least 3 years supervisory experience

Then, you've probably attended conferences, meetings, and workshops, and you want to do more to move your career to the next level. You may have even been considering getting another degree to prepare you for the responsibilities that come with being a library administrator.

Enrolling in the **Certified Public Library Administrator Program** will help you acquire the knowledge and skills you are looking for in:

- Budget and Finance
- Management of Technology
- Organization and Personnel Administration
- Planning and Management of Buildings
- Current Issues
- Fundraising
- Marketing
- Politics and Networking
- Service to Diverse Populations

Applications will be accepted by the American Library Association-Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA) in January 2006. For more information, visit www.ala-apa.org/certification/cpla.html or call 1-800-545-2433, ext. 2424.



Attention: American Library Association Divisions, ALA Chapters, ALA Division Affiliates, library associations, LIS programs, library consortia, university programs, state libraries, independent trainers, vendors, independent consultants, and for-profit providers ...

... want to be the first to offer courses to these motivated librarians? Complete the Request for Proposal on the American Library Association-Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA) Web site at www.ala-apa.org/certification/cplarfp.html by December 9, 2005.

