The Digital Photographer's Guide to Management

Denise M. Shorey

I've recently rediscovered an old passion: photography. I migrated from film to digital photography several years ago but used my camera primarily for taking snapshots. But with the recent purchase of a "prosumer" camera, I decided that it was time to stop taking snapshots and instead focus on *photography*.

I stocked up on books, read articles, bookmarked several webpages, joined a photography group, and am now happily shooting landscapes, closeups, people, pets, and much more. As with so many of my ventures, lessons that I learned over the last several months have turned out to have numerous applications in my professional life, with direct relevance to me as a library manager. Some of my discoveries come from the art of photography in general, while others relate specifically to the digital method. I'm happy to share them here with you.

Move In Closer and Focus

A beautiful fall scene crying out to be captured; dew on a leaf; a gorgeous sunset; the texture of a brick wall; patterns in nature; a sweet baby's face: these are subjects that we see and appreciate time and again in photo magazines and online. Yet often, when we try to capture what appeals to us in these, our work seems flat and boring, leaving our friends unimpressed and ourselves disappointed. Don't despair—it's surprising how a few simple but effective changes to your technique will produce much more satisfying results.

Many novice photographers assume that they need to get everything in their viewfinder. But getting closer to the subject helps isolate it, knocking out extraneous matter. So:

- Just because you're a manager, you shouldn't assume that you need to deal with everything equally and at once. If you have a pressing issue, a deadline to meet, or a personnel matter, decide what you want to work on, and make that your central item for an hour or two.
- When you zoom in and concentrate on one task, you'll get better results and you'll have more energy for the rest of the items on your list.

Check Before You Click

Take a quick look at the area around your subject before you snap the photo. You're less likely to see disembodied hands and poles growing out of people's heads in your photographs as a result. So:

- Interpersonal relations are fraught with possibilities for misunderstanding and conflict. Don't assume that each situation fits neatly into your mental model or past experience; institutional culture might also be a factor.
- Employees can't read your mind. Have you made assumptions about performance outcomes that are unrealistic because of time or resource constraints? Staff feedback can provide a good reality check.

Frame Your Subject

Overhanging branches, a doorway, a person's arms, a natural hole in a rock: use these to help focus on the subject at hand.

- Decide what the issue is and where the best solutions can be found. Are you dealing with a personnel matter? Talk with your human resources department to see if they can offer advice—you don't have to go it alone.
- Sometimes confusion arises over conflicting priorities or expectations. It's up to you to communicate your priorities for the department clearly and effectively.

Denise M. Shorey (d-shorey@northwestern.edu) is Head of Reference at Northwestern University Library, in Evanston, Illinois.

Look for Alternative Viewpoints

You'll be amazed at how quickly this simple technique can improve your photos. Before you take your next shot, ask yourself if you could make it better by changing your angle. Tilt your camera up, look down, or move around to better capture the essence of a scene–your first viewpoint may not convey what you want. As an added benefit, sometimes you'll see other scenes that you would otherwise have missed.

- Do you routinely call on the same people for projects because you know they'll come through? Give someone else an opportunity to succeed, even if it means more of your time coaching that person–that's what you're there for.
- If a new project is underway, why not invite other teams or departments to be involved? Get fresh ideas and share the work. There are untold benefits to collaboration.

Keep It Balanced

Avoid tilted horizons and water that appears to be pouring out of your photo by keeping your camera level.

- Sometimes little things annoy you to the point where you snap at others; conversely, you brush off incidents that to you seem trivial but loom large for your staff. Always remember that you're dealing with *people,* and their trust in you comes from your fair treatment of them and your ability to put aside your own feelings. Be fair to others, slow to criticize, and quick to praise.

Break the Rules

"Don't center your subject." "Don't shoot against the light." "Don't cut people off at the knees." You can't go wrong in photography if you follow these guidelines . . . but you may also miss some creative opportunities.

- You need to know the rules and regulations of your organization and of human resources management in general; but beyond that, it's okay to be flexible with your staff. As the manager, *you're* expected to set expectations and determine what's best for your team. Pick an area where you've been somewhat hard-nosed, relax a little, and watch morale and productivity improve.

Visualize What You Want to Accomplish

Expert photographers see the world differently from the rest of us. The particular way that evening light hits a

branch or a certain reflection in a pond might be pretty to us, but to them is a photo opportunity. When they look at a scene, they already have some idea of how the finished photo will look, and they don't have to depend on cropping or later changes to get there.

- Know what you want to accomplish when you meet with an employee at evaluation time or if you have regularly scheduled meetings. Make the most of this one-on-one time for following up on assignments and getting feedback.
- With group meetings, set an agenda and stick to it. You can't plan every single result, but you can–and should–establish a general direction for discussion.
- Ensure that staff members know whether decisions will be reached by consensus or by other means; empower them to discover solutions that work.

Try, and Try Again

The cost of film and film processing in the old days encouraged a very stingy approach to picture taking. One shot, perhaps two, would be all we felt we could afford, and heaven forbid "wasting" a complete roll on experimentation! But the digital era has freed us from the mindset of waste, allowing us to focus on technique, on evaluating what worked and what didn't, and providing instant feedback that we can learn from.

- Try something new in your unit. This can be taking statistics differently (try sampling instead of each hour every day), incorporating a new technique into a class session, team teaching, or having different people lead a team meeting. If the new practice doesn't work, you haven't failed; instead, chances are you've learned about your colleagues, the institutional culture, or gained new insight into good pedagogical practices.

Practice Makes Perfect

My camera allows me to shoot on automatic or completely manual mode, but also allows me to establish shutter-priority and aperture-priority modes, depending on whether I want to capture fast action or adjust my depth of field. It takes practice and experience before these options become second nature, but it will be worthwhile once you've mastered them!

- There's no "perfect" management technique, but neither are there necessarily an infinite number of management situations. As you grow as a manager, you'll learn to identify patterns and will know which array of techniques is most likely to be useful in a particular situation.

- The more you practice good management skills, the better you'll be. Read good books and articles on management, find strategies that suit your style, and use them. Listen to your employees and let them know that you care about them.
- If it's time to have a difficult conversation with an employee, practice talking to yourself in the mirror or find a trusted colleague to work with.
- Know when to delegate. This demonstrates trust in another's ability and helps develop that person's decision-making skills.

Save Your Money and Buy a Postcard

This is a clever travel technique that I've come across several times. Do you really think that your photo of the Eiffel Tower is going to match any postcard that you could buy? So, if it's just a *picture* of the monument that you want, pay for it. On the other hand, if you feel that you've found a particularly unusual angle that speaks to you, or if you spot a unique photo opportunity, *go for it!*

- Did a normally reliable staff member drop the ball on a project? Find out what the circumstances were behind it and then move on (buy the postcard). On the other hand, you may need to spend a lot of time coaching an employee who isn't always able to follow through on a project. In this case, be prepared to examine different ways to motivate and encourage the employee.

Have Fun!

If photography is your hobby, you should enjoy it. Focus on flowers, or set up that still life that you've been visualizing for a while. Capture some exciting cityscapes. Genuine interest will keep you going and encourage you to continue learning. Similarly, discover the joys of management. Watching people grow and develop, providing opportunities for others, or managing projects all contribute to your growth, both personal and professional.

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changes. Although this article focuses solely on the role, scope, and purpose of library HR officers in academic institutions, public library directors in larger systems face many similar situations and may likewise benefit from using specialized HR administrative models. In many cases and for many reasons, the prudent decision is often to have an in-house HR expert familiar with the library's issues.

References and Notes

1. For example, see Simmons Welburn, Janice McNeil, and Beth McNeil, eds., *Human Resource Management in Today's Academic Library: Meeting Challenges and Creating Opportunities* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2004).
2. CUPA–HR Homepage, "We Are Higher Education," www.cupahr.org (accessed Mar. 13, 2008)
3. Library administrators need to be judicious in applying their "uniqueness" argument to the campus HR department. While there are indeed several unique elements in the administration of the academic library, there are many more administrative similarities to the campus as a whole. For an example of a library inappropriately applying this "uniqueness" argument, please see Dennis R. Defa, "Position Analysis of Library Assistants," *Library Administration & Management* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 88–93.

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ing ploy, a pretense that the customer is important. That lack of conviction comes through in the corporate voice, and it is most obvious when staff are not given freedom to resolve customer problems. When staff have to literally *stick to the script,* there is no passion for customer service.

There's a quote in a customer service book that Ms. Barrett gave me: "When the heart is in the right place, the ego gets out of the way."[3] Simple and complex, it explains to me why some new ways of work catch on and why some do not.

References and Notes

1. Allen B. Veaner thusly sums up "business management derivates." He elaborates on the topic in his "Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained? A Persistent Personnel Issue in Academic Librarianship, II," *College & Research Libraries* 55 (Sept. 1994): 389–404. While admittedly critical of business fads, he does not "suggest that we cannot learn from business and industry or should not apply appropriate business techniques to managing academic libraries. The key is in the words *appropriate* and *proper*" (398).
2. Donald Trump and Bill Zanker, *Think Big and Kick Ass in Business and Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
3. Ken Blanchard and Barbara Glanz, *The Simple Truths of Service—Inspired by Johnny the Bagge*r (Napier, Ill.: McMillan Media & Simple Truths, 2005), 72.