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Turn that Frown Upside Down: Management Strategies for Improving Library Employee Morale in Uncertain Times

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Abstract:

In the face of difficult organizational change, library managers must help employees cope in order to prevent emotional toxicity. Bringing the arts into the workplace can boost morale, enhance creativity, relieve stress, and improve communication. Some organizational managers have sought the guidance of art therapists, who are trained in the psychotherapeutic use of art making. Art therapists lead groups of employees in a variety of creative arts activities designed to improve empathy, communication, and team-building. One of the authors, who has training in art therapy, led an art making session with a group of her colleagues in an academic library. The group was supervised by the associate dean of the library. The artwork created in the group revealed how some library employees coped with emotional stress. In a follow-up survey, most of the attendees reported enjoying the session, although some reacted very negatively. Some ideas for how the art session could have been improved are noted.

Libraries Face Organizational Challenges

Libraries face a unique set of external and internal managerial challenges. Recent economic and societal shifts, including rapid globalization and technological innovation, have created new expectations for library services (American Library Association, 2000). Libraries are highly diverse in terms of size, patron types, resources, and relation to government entities. Library employees are grouped into subcultures which may have very different rules, routines, and attitudes. Examples include technical services and public services, contract employees and hourly employees, faculty and non-faculty (VanDuinkerken & Mosley, 2011).

To adapt to change, private corporations, commercial retailers, and non-profit organizations develop “groupthink” programs. However, libraries don’t quite fit into any of these categories. There is no equivalent of Total Quality Management for libraries. Also, many library managers lack the leadership training and skills to deal with organizational change (VanDuinkerken & Mosley, 2011).

Organizational changes may trigger distressing emotions in library employees. This, combined with incompetent leadership, can lead to an emotionally toxic work environment. Employees, including managers, may develop a pattern of hostile, unreasonable, or emotionally distressing behavior. A survey of nearly 3,000 librarians revealed that emotional toxicity is a serious concern in libraries. About 88% of respondents reported experiencing signifi-

cant problems due to emotionally distressing behavior by colleagues. Nearly half of the respondents considered leaving their library jobs because of it. Identified causes included personality conflicts, poor or rude communication, ill-defined job duties, and poor behaviors by managers (including micro-managing and emotional instability). Passive-aggressive behaviors and conflicts among women were also noted as causes (Bennett, Freier, & Riley, 2007).

How can library managers deal with organizational change and motivate employees? Managers first must be aware of how change affects employees on an emotional level. Then, by facilitating positive communication, managers can defuse difficult emotions and encourage rational deliberation among employees (VanDuinkerken & Mosley, 2011).

To stay relevant, libraries will continue to rely on innovation and new ideas. Library managers can foster a climate of creativity in the workplace. But what exactly is creativity? Contrary to popular belief, creativity is not confined to artists. It is not some magical ability bestowed on a select few. Creativity is an energy or force that permeates our everyday lives. We are creative whenever we generate new ideas to communicate or solve problems. Creativity is a process of give-and-take with ideas or people. This process can enhance the work of any group with a shared sense of purpose, such as a classroom, a therapeutic group, or a workplace (McNiff, 2003).

Library employees may feel their creativity hindered, even stifled, by rigid routine and hierarchy. However, library managers can encourage employees to take risks and try new ideas (McNiff, 2003). They can loosen restrictions, such as giving employees time to daydream or dabble. Daydreaming stimulates the most complex regions of the brain and allows us to free associate and think uncensored thoughts. Google and 3M, two of the most innovative companies in the world, give their employees between six to eight hours a week of "dabble time." This may be too radical or unrealistic for many libraries. However, organizations benefit from as little as thirty minutes of daydream time per week. Also, it allows employees to feel that their creativity is valued in the organization (Fries, 2010).

The Arts Can Help

« Nous connaîtrions-nous seulement un peu nous-mêmes, sans les arts? » ("Could we ever know each other in the slightest without the arts?") (Roy, 1994, p. 114).

Bringing the arts into the workplace can boost morale, enhance creativity, relieve stress, and improve communication. Just having beautiful artwork on the walls is enough to improve productivity. As another benefit, beautifully displayed art improves an organization's public image (Art in the workplace, 2005). General Motors established an office art gallery so designers could display artwork they make in their spare time (Kelly, 2007). The Kohler Company allowed sculptors to create artwork alongside the factory workers, using factory tools and materials (Laabs, 1994). These programs have allowed employees to share creative ideas in unexpected ways.

Some organizational managers have sought the guidance of art therapists, who are trained in the psychotherapeutic use of art making. According to the International Art Therapy Organization (2009), art therapists work in a variety of settings, including mental health institutions, nursing homes, and schools. In organizational settings, they lead groups of employees in a variety of creative arts activities designed to improve empathy, communication, and team-building. They may draw from any of the creative arts including visual art, dance, music, drama, and poetry. The focus of these art activities is not on the end product, but on the process of creativity. At

the start of a group session, the art therapist establishes the basic ground rules: no one's artistic skills will be judged and confidentiality will be maintained.

One art exercise, called "carousel," helps loosen up a group at the beginning of a session. The group sits silently in a circle. Each person makes a scribble on a piece of paper and then passes the drawing to the person to the left. Each person then has ten seconds to add something to the new drawing in front of them before passing it along. The carousel stops when the drawings complete the circuit. Afterwards, with the assistance of the art therapist, each member reflects on how his or her piece was changed by the group (Harris, 2001).

Art therapist Shaun McNiff (2004) has each group member write a story about something that happened in the workplace, such as the most humorous or embarrassing experience. The twist is that it has to be from the point of view of a co-worker. The stories can even be about inanimate objects, such as a day in the life of the copy machine. He encourages group members to present these stories by adding dramatic body movements and vocal expressions. These techniques create a safe emotional distance and allow more truthful details to emerge. They also help group members practice empathy.

Art therapist Cathy Malchiodi (2010) uses collage making with her clients because it is easily adaptable, uses recycled materials, and is less intimidating for clients who feel shy about a lack of art skills. She gathers a variety of images from old magazines, junk mail, or even Google image search. Group members choose images and paste them onto a sheet of paper to create a new whole. The finished piece tells a story about the person who created it.

Some art activities can reveal the specific challenges that women face at work. In one art therapy group, an administrative assistant drew a picture of a flower. Upon exploration, she revealed that the flower was her boss and she was the dirt supporting and nourishing him (Harris, 2001). In another art therapy group exclusively for professional women, each group member drew a picture of how she saw herself. One chemical engineer who drew herself wearing sneakers revealed a desire to run from her mistakes. Another woman drew a feminine face peeking

over a fan. During discussion, she realized that she communicates with her male boss in a seductive “little girl” manner (Turner & Clark-Schock, 1990).

Case Study: Cindy’s Art Group with Academic Library Employees

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to lead an art group with my colleagues at an academic library. At the time, the libraries were going through a series of changes, including staff turnover and budget issues. The faculty and staff were being asked to do more with fewer resources. In a conversation with the associate dean of the library, she noted the atmosphere of anxiety in the libraries. She considered gathering the staff to discuss how they felt about these recent organizational changes. I proposed using a simple art activity, such as a collage, to get the conversation going. She liked the idea and agreed to fund any arts and crafts supplies I required.

I purchased a variety of basic crafts supplies including poster paint, disposable brushes, tissue paper, decorative scrapbook paper, glue sticks, glitter, pipe cleaners, feathers, sequins, scissors, magic markers, paper plates, construction paper, stickers, and the like. I also scoured the library’s closets and storage areas for reusable items such as old catalog cards, withdrawn paperback books, notebooks, folders, foam board, journal boxes, paper clips, adhesive labels, bolts, and screws. I also gathered some bulkier items such as shelving end panels. The idea was to present some items that symbolized long-standing functions of a library (storing books and creating print records of them) that were currently in flux.

Finally, I gathered and cut out images from magazines and book covers discarded from the libraries’ collections. I also found images from postcards, greeting cards, and calendars. I searched the Web for sayings, mottos, and other interesting words and phrases (such as “where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” and “break a leg”) and pasted them into a Word document in various fonts and sizes. I printed the document and cut out each phrase.

The day of the meeting, I prepared the conference room by arranging the tables in one long row. I covered the tables with craft paper and scattered the art and craft supplies along the length of the table. About twenty staff members arrived and sat

around the table. The meeting began with a provided lunch.

After lunch, I invited the attendees to use any of the materials on the table to create a piece of art that showed how they felt about the recent changes in the libraries. Each person could create anything they wanted, no matter how large or small. I emphasized that this was not meant to be a therapy session, but simply a way to explore workplace issues. Everyone in the room was encouraged to create art, including the associate dean and myself.

Over the next 45 minutes, attendees created their art—some tentatively, some with gusto. Most of the participants gravitated toward the familiar crafts supplies (sequins, feathers, etc.). The slips of paper with the sayings were also popular. No one used the large, heavy shelving pieces.

When everyone was finished, I encouraged group members to talk about what they had made. The associate dean made notes on a large flip chart at the front of the room. The resulting pieces were delightful in their variety and creative spirit. The circulation department manager filled a large sheet of foam board with images placed along a continuum going steadily upward. Each image represented how recent changes had impacted her department. One staff member created a humorous piece out of foam board and paint showing a tempest in a teacup.

Life stress seemed to be common theme in the artwork. One employee made a worry doll with a sad face on the front and a happy face on the back. A faculty member made an “Anxiety Box” in which she kept her life stresses so she could function at work. Another faculty member made a fish out of a paper plate. Inside of the fish’s mouth dangled a tiny ballerina.

A few days after the session, I created and distributed a brief follow-up survey to the participants. Most of the attendees responded that they enjoyed the art-making session. A few respondents felt the art-making was an inappropriate use of staff time and resented having to participate.

If I were to do this type of session again, there are some things I would change. Perhaps attendance at

the session should have been optional instead of required. Also, as a colleague of the faculty and staff in attendance, I probably should not have been the one to lead the session. Ideally, the facilitator should be a neutral party, such as an outside consultant. As a junior faculty member on the tenure track, I inadvertently put myself in a politically difficult position. By planning this session with the associate dean, I may have exacerbated tensions between senior faculty and the administration. Overall, the art session was a positive experience. It gave library staff the opportunity to express their creativity in a work context, relieve some stress, and learn a little about each other.

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