Case Studies in Collection and Technical Services - Case Study Two: The Case of the Temperamental Bibliographer.

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Case Study Two: The Case of the Temperamental Bibliographer

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Brad was a little peeved. Right before the holiday break he had his performance review meeting with his supervisor, Jorge, who was the head of the monographic searching unit. The problem was not that he had gotten a bad review. In fact, Brad had gotten glowing remarks from not only Jorge, but also one of his fellow searchers, Therese, who had seen fit to write a letter to Jorge describing what a terrific teacher Brad had been when she had been hired on six months ago. No, Brad was mad because Jorge had assigned him to be the main searcher for Boris, known in the monographic searching unit as “the problem.” Problem Boris was the bibliographer for many subjects in the social sciences, and had worked at the library for years, and he had tenure so it was well known he would not be leaving anytime soon. He also taught classes on selection and collection development at the library school, and was well respected by those who never had to work with, or under him. He was known in the searching unit to be temperamental, sensitive, and perpetually late; but the worst part was that Boris had proven to be uncommunicative and even downright slippery, especially when it came to interacting with all of his many previous searchers. Jorge had assigned Boris to Brad, explaining that he thought Brad had excellent communication skills, and had built up strong rapport with the other bibliographers for whom he worked.

Brad knew that his success in the coming year would ride primarily on how he handled his new problem. What to do? How could he possibly communicate with Boris? Especially, Brad wanted to avoid having Boris march into the unit and yell at Brad in front of all the other searchers, as he had been known to do over the years.

The experts speak:

From a birds-eye view, Boris is not really Brad’s problem. Whomever Boris reports to ought to have a long time ago worked with Boris to help him improve his communication skills, learn about working in a diverse work environment and how to respect the work of others/underlings. His behavior ought not to have been tolerated all these long years. It is clear that among his many problems, Boris probably has self-image issues, particularly doesn’t seem to think of Boris as on the same level as a mere monographic searcher. Boris doesn’t recognize searching as an important part of the selection and acquisition process. However, knowing the big picture, or having a little insight into Boris’s personality, doesn’t sort out Brad’s predicament. What concrete things can Brad do to build a strong working relationship with Boris? Because building a strong working relationship is the goal. And the key in that statement is the word working. Brad does not need to be Boris’s new best friend; he just needs to be able to work with Boris. So, what is the plan?

First, Brad needs to do some background checking on Boris. The goal here is to find out more about Boris from a non-work related point of view. He needs to find out why Boris is the bibliographer for those specific areas, where did Boris get his degree? Does Boris socialize with anyone that works in the library? What does Boris do with his spare time? Once Brad has a fuller understanding of Boris the person, he can then begin to figure out how to work with Boris better on his own.

Second, Brad needs to call (not email — if you are trying to build a relationship, not just share information) Boris and introduce himself on the phone as Boris’s new searcher. The goal of this phone call is to set-up a meeting with Boris, in Boris’s office. Why not meet in a neutral space, you may ask? Brad needs to show Boris that he respects the work that Boris does, and to Boris he can explain that he, Brad, would like to have a better understanding of how Boris works, so that he can support Boris’s work in the best way possible. It is very important for Brad to focus on what Boris does, not on what he does. He needs to show Boris that he respects and is interested in the work that Boris does.

Third, when they meet Brad’s goal is to get Boris to talk. Talk about his job, his goals for selecting, who his favorite professors are, and basically pay lots of attention to Boris. Brad needs to keep in mind that Boris likes attention, and probably doesn’t get enough of it, so keep the focus on Boris. Brad also needs to ask Boris how he would like Brad to communicate with him on his orders. Brad needs to continually ask Boris what would work best for Boris. Brad needs to show that he can be accommodating to Boris’s needs and that he is enthusiastic about being Boris’s searcher.

Fourth, Brad needs to be attentive and responsive to Boris’s needs, especially during their first few interactions. He needs to show Boris that without a doubt he will be a supportive and responsive searcher. He needs to be unflinchingly positive and helpful, even if Boris, under the onslaught of all Brad’s professional customer service, is still snippy and spiteful. Unfailing patience, and a positive attitude are what Brad must focus on right now. If Boris doesn’t respond to Brad’s communications, even though Brad is using the ways that Boris specifically told Brad that he prefers, then Brad needs to call Boris and if there are other ways he would like to have Brad communicate with him.

And finally, Brad needs to keep Jorge apprised of his plan and long-term goals for working with Boris. Perhaps Jorge will have some insights, or even could look into getting some funding for Brad to take some customer service courses, or even something about dealing with difficult people. Brad could make his personal goal that of establishing such a good working relationship with Boris, that Boris would never have another searcher as long as Brad worked there. And perhaps, if Brad decided later on to get his library degree, he would work so well with Boris, that he could ask him for a recommendation.

If you have any ideas for future case studies, or a topic you would like explored in this column, please contact me, Anne Langley (Duke University) <anne.langley@duke.edu>.

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The Charleston Conference and all of us have recently lost two of our most valuable and long-time friends and colleagues — Deana Astle and Lyman Newlin. A Memorial Service will be held in their memory at the San Fernando Cathedral, 115 Main Plaza, San Antonio, Texas on Friday, January 20, from 3-4 PM. Please contact Katina Strauch at <kstrauch@comcast.net> by Monday, January 16, if you would like to say something about one or both of our dear colleagues.