Denise Brush

Trust in Academic Libraries

How to Build Connections between New Co-workers

I am a tenured faculty librarian who has worked at the same academic library for 18 years. But prior to that I was a library assistant in a public library, an adjunct lecturer at two colleges, and an engineer for public and private employers. Because I have worked in these very different settings, I believe that I have a unique perspective on academic libraries.

In all my previous full-time positions, I worked with the same co-workers every day. We understood each other's roles in the organization and knew a few things about each other's personal lives. We trusted each other without giving it much thought. But when you don't know your co-workers and you don't understand why a co-worker did something, you begin to not trust them. Over time the lack of trust between individuals can become the norm in an organization. Frequent turnover of staff at all levels often leads to a work culture that lacks trust among employees. This situation can easily occur at libraries supporting rapidly growing colleges and universities unless action is taken to counteract it.

How Loss of Trust Occurs

A library where a large percentage of the employees are new must build trust. Employees who have worked together for a long time have shared understandings, but when new employees join the organization, they must develop relationships with their co-workers before there can be mutual trust. The best approach is talking to each other one-on-one to develop an understanding of each of their roles and how they contribute to the library, but this may be impractical due to different work schedules, different work locations, and lack of time.

Staff doing entry-level work in an academic library often have no idea what librarians do. They don't understand why public services librarians are often unavailable to help walk-in patrons, because the classroom library instruction and work with faculty these librarians do is not visible to them. Similarly, librarians and staff who don't work in technical services may not understand the complexity of managing 21st century library collections, electronic resources, and discovery systems. The divide between employees and management that exists in every organization becomes another source of distrust when large unions take over the task of negotiating with management, and direct dialogue is no longer allowed.

In small libraries, trust between co-workers develops quickly because you work regularly together. As a library grows, people begin to be siloed into different departments, and they don't interact as much. When new employees join the library, they may not have much opportunity to interact with people in other departments and get to know them. When you

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are part of a large university, interacting with people directly is replaced by online forms, software platforms, and ticketing systems.

There are additional challenges in academic libraries where librarians have faculty status. Besides their primary roles, faculty librarians have research, scholarly, and service requirements to meet. It can be difficult for them to find the time to build relationships with staff members who don't have similar obligations. When national searches are required for librarian positions, librarians may have confidential information about how their co-workers got their jobs that they can never reveal, which may make them hesitant to get to know co-workers. In this setting, career growth (whether lateral or upward) for librarians within the organization becomes nearly impossible.

Some Possible Solutions

Lack of trust can easily occur between library employees who don't know each other. Opportunities to socialize across and within departments, such as potluck lunches or social events outside work, are important to developing trusting relationships and should be facilitated by library administration. Introverts may prefer to get to know their fellow employees through online collaboration platforms like Slack, but some form of personal connection between employees is critical. In organizations (like the places I worked previously) where co-workers know each other and are aware of the circumstances that their co-workers are experiencing outside of work, they can offer sympathy and a listening ear. These are workplaces where co-workers send flowers or a card when someone in their work family experiences a loss. As workplaces grow, that caring atmosphere can disappear unless proactive steps are taken.

New employee orientations are another important way to establish trust. They are crucial for making all new employees feel welcome. Employee orientation programs do take work and time to set up that an understaffed library may not have. But it is essential to the health of your library to find the time. New employee orientations provide several critical benefits to the new employee and to the existing staff. They help new employees understand the "big picture" of the library and where they fit in. They are an opportunity to set expectations and get an overview of administrative procedures. But orientations are also a key opportunity to explain to new non-librarian staff what librarians and library staff do. They may not realize yet that libraries are much more than places to check out books. Staff members who understand the work that is being done outside their immediate role will be more likely to trust that their co-workers are doing important, valued work.

Visibility is a touchy but important subject in academic libraries. Instruction and subject librarians whose work is outward facing need to make a special effort to make their schedules and their work visible to co-workers. Librarians who take the time to block off instruction sessions, consultations, meetings, and time off on their Outlook calendars make themselves more accessible to co-workers who want to connect with them. Those who are on the tenure/promotion track can also block out time on their calendars to work on a tenure application or a research project. Some librarians with faculty status may resent having to share their constantly changing schedules and go too far in the other direction, so that no one ever knows where they are. This type of behavior is likely to cause substantial loss of trust with co-workers.

Academic library administrators can increase trust among all their employees by providing occasional opportunities for socialization during the workday, creating new employee

orientation programs that teach everyone about the role of employees in every department, and asking for schedule visibility at a reasonable level for all employees. These steps will create a happier workplace for everyone. ✗