

When the Library Makes Mistakes

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Customer Service Webinar Series

Presented by the Wisconsin Valley Library Service,
with support from the Northern Waters Library Service
and the Southwest Wisconsin Library System.

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Key Idea



Tell the truth.
Apologize
immediately.
Make it right.

Bad News is the
Best Information.
Don't hide mistakes!

Mistakes

Cutting corners on ethical, legal,
and financial matters because:

We're small. We're poor. It's too much trouble.

We won't get caught. No one will care.

Rules don't apply to us. We didn't know.

It's their fault (a former stakeholder).

We're short staffed. We did nothing wrong.

We don't have time. It's not our job.

Outcomes

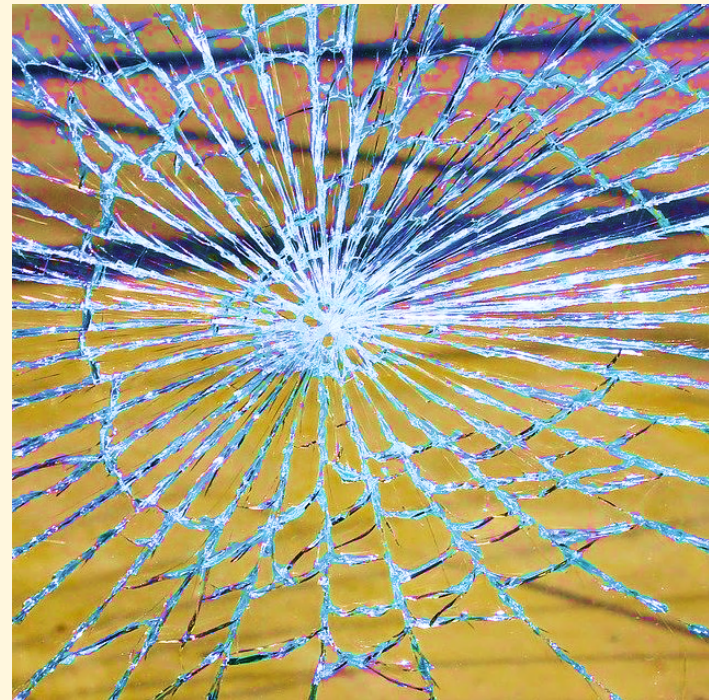
- Seek library stakeholder input on better ways to address problems.
- Empower staff to deal with issues.
- Have written policies and procedures in place to deal with difficult situations.
- Train staff about “*chain of command*”.
- Publicize protocols; inform stakeholders.

People will judge you
not by your mistakes
but how you fix them.



Agenda

- **Case Studies**
- **Preparation**
- **Response**
- **Aftermath**
- **Prevention**



Agenda



Case Studies

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Institutional Mistakes

- Mostly made by managers, administrators, directors, and other leaders
- Might not involve customer interaction
- Hurt library politically, financially, legally: undermine support.



Institutional mistakes

- **Inventing rules and laws**
- **Violating local, state, and federal laws**
- **Missing key financial or legal deadlines**
- **Lack of oversight of people and projects**
- **Legitimate challenges of materials and access**
- **Rushing/delaying decisions and actions**
- **Ignoring stakeholder input**
- **Conflicting interest: Ethical violations**

Mistakes with Customers

- Mostly involving frontline staff and direct interactions with library stakeholders
- Ranging from small mistakes to felonies!
- Disagreeing about library policies
- Demeaning their beliefs
- Interfering with family conflicts
- Escalating discussions
- Allowing customers to behave badly



Mistakes with Customers

- Falsely accusing re book returns and fines
- Treating library customers unequally: favors
- Library personnel behaving badly
- Hiring the wrong person
- Poor treatment of complaining customers
- No consistent grievance policies
- Tolerating staff acting on their biases
- Violating privacy and access to information

Mistakes with Personnel



Usually, **it's not WHAT**
is done, but HOW.

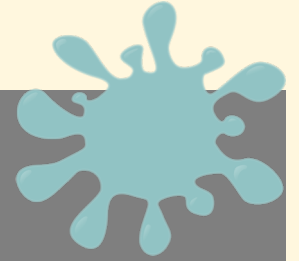
Mistakes with Personnel

- Ignoring union agreements
- Misinterpreting employment contracts
- Sloppy hiring, firing, promotions, raises
- Sloppy assignments, policies, priorities
- Sloppy managing of people and projects
- Favoritism, nepotism, cronyism
- No input on what happens

Mistakes with Personnel

- Making promises during recruitment
- Privately dubbing an “heir apparent”.
- Institutional bias re specific cohorts
- Ignoring state personnel laws
- Gossiping about personnel issues
- Giving employees illegitimate authority
- No transparency regarding finances

Case Study: Escalation



An argument at the circ desk
about a 14 cent fine **ends up**
on the city council agenda
and is televised. **Heads roll.**

Case Study: Wrong hire



The new hire for the children's department had great credentials:

Master's in English literature.

Turned out she was a big city snob,
with contempt for rural life, and
insulted numerous family members.

Case Study: Wrong change



The high school student working at the circulation desk was accused of cheating a customer of money.

The student was exonerated, but not before her parents accused the library and the customer of racism.

Agenda



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Caveat



Anything can go wrong.
Good people make mistakes,
disagree, forget, misunderstand.

Preparation

- Interdepartmental/interagency teams
- Legal and political support
- *What If* scenarios
- Prepare for worst cases
- Who's in charge of what?
- If appropriate, practice.
- Funds and insurance just in case.



The Basics

- Culture of courtesy and respect: manners
- Timely and accurate communication
- You keep your promises.
- Team approach to solving problems
- Courage to admit you were wrong
- Training and cheat sheets

Exercise



Does everyone
know what to do
in case of a mistake?

Tip

**The more confident and competent
your personnel and leaders
are dealing with mistakes?
Better the outcomes for everyone.**

Caveat



Risk management:
How many rules
are too many rules?

Agenda



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The conflict is time:

How to balance *speedy responses* while still respecting the *necessity of due process*, meaning *research, discussion, and communication*.

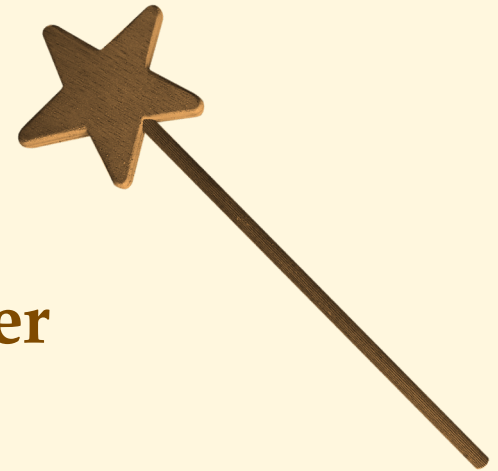
Empowerment



**What types of issues can
a library employee
handle immediately?**

Empowerment

- Scope and scale of their authority
- How cut and dried the issue
- Consistent responses for every customer
- Amount of money/resources involved
- Every incident documented and discussed
- Knows when to kick it up to next level
- Added risk if another mistake is made
- Decision supported by organization



Agenda



Aftermath

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Follow-through

**It's someone's job to follow through
and ensure the issue was settled.**

**Even if they did not get their way,
*was the person satisfied they were
treated with courtesy and respect?***

**They were listened to? The response
was swift? The process was fair?**

Follow-through

- How long did it take to resolve the issue?
- Did the person have to deal with more than one person?
- What questions should we have asked?
- Would the person still want to use and support the library?

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Lessons Learned

Every incident requires a review.

Could the mistake have been prevented?

It was not a mistake, per se, but could we have done a better job communicating?

Did the incident alert us to changes that need to be made in policies and procedures?

Is there any way we can do better next time?

