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

When the Library Makes Mistakes
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Make it right.
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
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.
Key Idea

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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
Key Idea

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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*. 

When the Library Makes Mistakes
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?
Key Idea

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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?