

Everyday Ethics for Libraries*

Part 6: Summary of Common Questions

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In talking about library ethics I get to listen to people from all over the United States, and it's interesting some of the questions that people have. Now in a recent conference the most common question I got really touched me. And the question was something like this. "I live in a small town. I want to do the right thing. How can I control my own emotional response to other people's behavior? How can I treat people who look different from me, who sound different from me, fairly when they come to the counter? How can I stop judging people? Because I realized judging people and giving them less than their due of good service is an issue of ethics as much as of anything else."

Well, I tell people, it comes down to two issues. It comes down to manners and it comes down to practice. If you focus on the manners of making yourself the greeter for the library. That everyone who comes in is welcomed, which is a foundation idea in customer service. And that your job is to make them feel like you're happy to see them and you're there to help them. Most other issues disappear.

The second issue is about practice. And that for some of us, we didn't have the chance to work before with people who are different from us. I'm lucky because I grew up on the south side of Chicago. I grew up in a neighborhood that was diverse in many different ways. It was around the University of Chicago, so we had people from all over the world. We had people of all sorts of ethnicities, cultures, and skin colors. We also had diversity in terms of socio-economic status. So the kid who sat next to you in elementary school could be the son of a janitor or of a world famous professor. So, if you've got the chance to grow up in that kind of diversity, people who are different from you, you feel comfortable with them.

But if you grew up in a town was, or the town where your library is, is pretty homogeneous, new people sort of stand out because they're new, not because they're bad. And what kicks in is sort of a tribal feeling of xenophobia. So the more you are willing to talk about this in your library with staff, and to be able for people to understand that regardless of other people's behavior, regardless of how they are dressed, regardless of how they behaved until they cross a point that you can ask them to leave, we will be as courteous as if they were dear friends who showed up for a dinner party in gardening clothes.

I'm pretty tough about this particular issue these days. And I tell people that if you can't say "good morning" and "please" and "thank you" and be gracious and kind to a member of the general public, you should be doing something different for a living. This is the public sector, and you've chosen to be in customer service. And if it doesn't suit you, there are other jobs that will suit you. But the world isn't going to be 1953 again. And even holding your breath isn't going to work.

A second question is "What do you do when people yell at you?" For example, you make a decision in your library. You think it's the right decision. And people come in to complain about the decision. It may have been a decision that the board made. It may be a decision the director made. It may have been the everyday job of a good, conscientious staff member who really is trying to fairly enforce a rule that applies to everybody. How do we do that?

Well, one way is we make sure that we write things down. I heard a story from Texas a couple of weeks ago where they were talking about the fact that a gentlemen came in, and a staff person said they could only take out, I think it was 15 items, and the man got very angry and started blowing up and saying that he was being discriminated against and so on. And the staff person held her ground, and because the

library was well run, right there at that particular desk, the staff member could reach under the desk and pull out the sheet and say, "Sir, I appreciate your concern, and we take your concern seriously. Here are the printed rules that are also posted in the lobby that explain our rules, and, as you see, what I am asking you to do applies to everyone." And she was very polite to the man, and the man then looked very embarrassed, and he said, "Thank you. I thought you were doing this just because I was Hispanic." And the woman said, "No, everybody. If the mayor came, he would have to abide by the same rule." And because she was courteous and because the rule was written down on a piece of paper, the man calmed down.

Now, does that happen all the time? Of course not, but having people understand that you yourself individually are not just capriciously coming up with a rule that that person has to obey, really helps you if you explain the fact that this is a rule the library has. I know a lot of libraries where if they post policies and rules, they ensure that the board's name is on the policy and that they have the date, the time, and the place that the board approved that particular policy. And some places even have a little written narrative. So the board may say things like "We as a board agree that our library should be a place that is a safe, wholesome environment for everyone to come in. Therefore there are some common sense misbehaviors that if you do we will ask you to leave. You are not allowed to scream. You are not allowed to destroy or hurt property. You are not allowed to physically threaten another person. And we're doing this because we want a place where everyone feels safe to come." Signed by the board on this particular date. Well, that tells people that it isn't just the opinion of that one librarian doing that -- that it's everyone.

Now if a library puts together a policy and people are complaining about it a lot, it's usually a sign that they didn't do their due diligence. One of the concerns in my most recent class that one of the people

brought up to me was the fact that they made a decision and they assumed that everyone would like the decision. They were not prepared for the fallout that came afterwards. And I said, "You know what? One of the rules of ethics is that you ask first. That you get people's opinions. That you get people's ideas about things. It takes a little longer, but if you don't, trust me, there will come a time where you are going to be blindsided because people are going to be upset with you. Not so much for the decision you made, but for the fact that you never asked them for their opinion. People like their day in court. That's important to them.

Finally, someone has said to me that one of the things that is really hard about working in a small town in particular is that you know a little bit too much about the people who work there. You know about their backgrounds, and so on. I was called in many years ago to work with the circulation staff of about a town of about 5000 in Colorado. And we were having problems figuring out why the head of circulation was so arbitrary in how she was imposing some of the rules. One of the problems she was having was allowing people, who perhaps who had damaged a book or had a history of late fines, to take books out again once they had paid off their fines or the damage that they had done to the book.

And there was one family in particular where finally the mother went and complained to the director and said, "Why can't I take out books now that I've paid my fine? Your head of circulation says there's a rule about that." Well, the director was very well-composed, and he just said, "You know, we get a little busy. The circulation manager made a mistake. There is no rule like that. If you've paid off your fines, I will go with you." And the director went and actually checked out her books, and then found the circulation director and said, "What are you doing?" And the circulation director said, "Well, my husband is a deputy sheriff, and he has arrested the husband of this family several times. The wife has been arrested for alcoholism. This is not a nice family. They're under probation. Social services is looking at

their children. So I just don't think that they are the right people to be taking books out of the library because often times that family is so chaotic that the books get damaged."

And the director said, "Everything that you just said is a violation of your husband's ethics as a law enforcement official and our ethics as a library. What is going on in people's lives at home is none of our business and is not a criteria for them borrowing books. As long as that lady has paid her fines, she can take the books out." He said, "Now I happen to know the whole story. This woman has been in treatment for addiction the last year. She is struggling very hard to be a good mother. And one of the ways that she is struggling very, very hard to be a good mother is to bring her children into the library every week. Now sometimes things are hard with the family. They have puppies. They have active two- and three-year-olds, and books get damaged. She pays for the books, and she brings new ones back. Are you to fault her for trying to be a good mother in difficult situations?"

And the circulation manager said, "Oh, I didn't know that. That makes all the difference in the world."

And the director said, "That's the point. It shouldn't. This is none of your business." And the director said, in front of me, "If you would like to keep working here, you better have a conversation with your husband about his violation of ethics and you'd better understand that you will never do this again."

And the woman never did.

So a lot of times ethics comes out of our compassion for people in understanding that we have to be able to see, hear, and understand the world from other people's point of view. Now as I said before, ethics is not just about our heart, it's also about understanding rules and laws and so on. And I think the best way to learn about ethics is to find ways to talk to your friends and family, but particularly your

colleagues in the library community, so you can share stories with them and get a better understanding about what other people are doing when they solve similar problems.

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