# Assertive Management in Libraries

## by Doris Hulbert

How should library managers deal with staff members who have diverse perspectives and intense commitments? Who are inhibited, or defensive, or uncooperative? This article posits that passive managerial techniques foster discontent and disrespect among staff members, and aggressive techniques create defensiveness, mistrust, and hostility. However, assertive techniques, it is shown, allow managers to claim their own rights and responsibilities while respecting the rights and responsibilities of others. The eight assertive management techniques discussed here can help library managers resolve conflicts and problems without resorting to either conflict-avoiding or attacking behavior.

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Managers in all but the very smallest libraries are aware, sometimes painfully, of the rich variety of individuals employed in libraries. Staff members may include "quantifiers" who believe that the value of books is determined by the number of times they have been checked out, "specialists" who value only those books that may not be checked out, "techies" who argue for the latest information technology, and "traditionalists" who resist information in nonbook formats. The increasing size and complexity of libraries also create new challenges. As Robert Runyon notes:

> Many public service and technical processing departments, particularly when they become large and highly specialized, share an uneasy alliance at best. The perceptions of and pressures upon any given staff member are very heavily conditioned by their location within the organization. While administrators tend to assume a superficial unity and commonality of purpose in libraries, the attitudes and concerns associated with various departmental tasks can become highly divergent. Quite often one may be unaware of these different valuations among fellow staff members until an unexpected disagreement flares up over some seemingly trivial point of routine or procedure. The judgment of triviality, of course, is very dependent upon one's own organizational perspective and related scales of priority and pressure.[1]

Individuals possess unique beliefs and often feel intensely the importance of these opinions and visions. Diverse per-

spectives and intense commitments can be organizational assets if they are put to productive use. As Peter Drucker has noted, organizations that permit and even at times encourage dissent adapt better to change.[2]

To be successful, therefore (especially in changing times), library managers must be able to cope intelligently with the inevitable problems and stressful situations caused by diverse attitudes and differing priorities. Hulbert and Hulbert note that, if not handled successfully, conflicts may leave staff members feeling left out, insecure, frustrated, and uncooperative.[3] One way that library managers can deal effectively with problems, stressful situations, and interpersonal conflicts is to practice responsible assertive behavior and to encourage and even train other staff members in the techniques of assertive behavior.

Managers may choose among three basic styles of intervention when dealing with problems or conflicts—passive, aggressive, and assertive management. Each may be viewed both positively and negatively and each may be effective in appropriate circumstances. Drawing comparisons among these styles may provide insight into the personal, professional, and organizational benefits afforded library managers who practice responsible assertive behavior.

### Passive Management

Passive managers are those who tolerate unacceptable behavior, work habits, or schedules, or illogical thinking rather

than dealing directly with these problems. To express disapproval, passive managers make general or oblique comments addressed to an entire group, work around problems, ignore problems, ask someone else to do a job, or even do the job themselves rather than risk confrontation.

Society encourages passivity by advocating concepts such as "turn the other cheek" and by teaching people not to express feelings openly for fear of offending others. Even staff members seem to appreciate passive managers. Why not? They can get their own way without expecting confrontation from passive managers.

Passive managers, however, are surrendering their own rights in deference to others. To avoid disagreement and conflict, they may hold back positive suggestions as well as critical comments. Most employees, however, welcome solid and constructive feedback. Conflict-avoiding managers may offer no feedback. Because the passive approach to problem solving is oblique, problems frequently are neither addressed nor corrected. The passive library manager may feel strongly but is unable or unwilling to confront these feelings and deal with problems in a positive way. Instead, the passive manager may inundate a husband, wife, or colleague with complaints. While this provides an outlet, it may also foster discontent and conflict, as well as subconsciously lower a colleague's respect for the complainant who is unable to deal with a problem.

Passive managers may become the perennial gripers whose constant complaints exacerbate problems and lower morale. On the other end of the continuum, some passive managers may experience stress borne of constantly holding in their opinions. Ignoring problems until they reach crisis proportions may then cause managers to blow up out of anger and frustration.

The results of continuous, inappropriate passive behavior are insidious, cumulative, and ultimately devastating to the individual and the organization.[4] Passive managers are rarely capable of accepting responsibility for this lack of quality in the workplace, however.

## Aggressive Management

"Aggressive" may be used, in a positive way, to describe forceful, energetic people who stand up firmly for their own rights. Here, however, it is used in a negative sense to connote those who behave belligerently and attack others. While aggressive behavior may be subtle as opposed to overt—e.g., using sarcasm, innuendo, and intimidation—it almost always reflects a lack of respect for alternative points of view and very often fosters defensive postures rather than problem-solving attitudes.

Unlike passive individuals, aggressive library managers tend to

- draw quick conclusions about the causes of problems,
- ascribe blame without listening to the ideas of others,
- express dissatisfaction by using highly charged, provocative language,
- overreact to problems,
- insist on their own point of view,
- refuse to seek others' opinions or accept others' priorities, and
- eschew negotiation and compromise.

The most common emotion associated with the aggressive individual in the work place is anger, and the most common expression of this anger is a direct attack on all the "incompetents" of the world. Frequently, aggressive behavior lacks rationality or proportion; statements are peppered with "always" and "never," and demands rather than requests are issued.

While aggressiveness can sometimes prove effective for immediate or short-term solutions to problems, its extreme manifestations are as harmful to individuals and organizations as passive behavior. In the library (as in any other organization), if a manager's *modus operandi* is to blame, attack, and overreact, the most likely results will be defensiveness, an end to the free flow of ideas and communication, and a lessening of team spirit and feelings of being valued and involved. The temptation for staff members is to be careful but not committed or creative when working with aggressive managers. In fact, a volcanic manager may encourage passive-aggressive behavior among staff. For example, a librarian who has been mistreated or humiliated may retaliate by performing only well enough to avoid being fired. At its worst, aggressive behavior creates a climate of mistrust, demoralization, hostility, and antagonistic behavior in return. Aggressive managers may correct specific short-term problems while creating greater long-term problems.

## Assertive Management

Unlike passive managers, assertive managers accept responsibility for their actions and the demands of their positions. In addition, they make sure that staff members know exactly what is expected of them as individuals and as members of a team. Unlike aggressive managers, assertive managers will confront problems without personally attacking the beliefs and rights of others.[5]

How do managers effectively resolve conflicts and problems without making enemies, demoralizing staff, or discouraging creativity? Without seeming to choose sides? While this is not always possible, there are several techniques library managers can learn to use. The most important of these assertive techniques are:

- listening to understand the real nature of a problem,
- stating expectations clearly,
- keeping attention focused on the real issue,
- explaining situational "givens,"
- compromising and negotiating when possible,
- being persistent and patient,
- giving positive recognition, and
- offering effective criticism.

Several suggestions follow for implementing these techniques to establish a more effective, assertive management style. These suggestions are neither comprehensive nor appropriate in all circumstances. To be effective in managing diverse individuals (who are at different stages in their career development, who vary in expertise, seniority, or self-confidence), library managers must vary their techniques—sometimes hesitating or procrastinating, other times stepping in quickly to seize the initiative. These suggestions, however, can lay a foundation for consistent and appropriate assertive behavior for library managers.

**Listening to understand the real nature of a problem.** Managers spend a great deal of time listening. As Gibbs et al. state:

Of the four communication skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—listening is by far the most frequently used. Research reveals that the average person spends approximately 70 percent of his or her waking hours communicating and that approximately 45 percent of that time is spent listening—while only 30 percent is spent speaking, 16 percent reading, and 9 percent writing.[6]

Since almost half of communicating is listening, developing listening skills is essential to assertive management.

Several techniques can be used to

improve the listening skills that are fundamental to increased assertiveness. The first step may actually take place before a discussion: choosing a time and place that afford the proper atmosphere. For instance, if privacy is critical to a discussion, the manager may choose a place that's quiet and without distractions.

Effective listening is also active listening. Gibbs et al. estimate that nonverbal factors contribute between 55 and 80 percent of message meaning.[7] Eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and posture are behavioral components of assertiveness that can be used to advantage to convey understanding and sympathy, as well as decisiveness. Body language, combined with subtle verbal clues, contributes to what Hayes describes as "nondirective listening"—that is, listening designed to obtain as much information as possible without intimidating or leading the speaker.[8]

Staff members, encouraged by questions as well as by nonverbal and verbal clues, should be more forthcoming, but managers need to be cautious about leading discussions rather than asking open-ended questions. Research indicates that speakers tend to format the syntax of their responses on the basis of the syntax of the questions heard.[9] Thus, leading may distort accuracy and serve only to reinforce preconceived notions. An excellent and often unexpected technique is for managers to ask directly what they can do to improve things. Also, to avoid distortion, provide an accurate summary, and possibly formulate a plan for future action, managers may want to pause from time to time to paraphrase what's been said. Paraphrasing is a proven assertive technique that encourages effective listening among all discussants.

**Stating expectations clearly.** A second technique for establishing a more assertive style is to avoid "management by assumption" by learning to state expectations clearly. Managers who find themselves saying "they should have known better" may need to examine their own methods of communicating.

In discussions designed to assess job performance, for instance, clear standards and specific examples illustrating acceptable and unacceptable performance are far more meaningful than vague criticism or praise. Managers too often make the mistake of assuming that, once problems have been pointed out, a staff member knows what needs to be done to correct them. In reality, unless goals and desired results are clearly set forth and under-

stood, the chances for improvement are minimal. Wycoff, in fact, views the most severe communication problem as being unmet expectations.[10]

The same type of explicit communication is critical in working with groups, since listening skills vary from individual to individual. An effective technique is to follow up both performance reviews and group discussions with a summary that reiterates

- conclusions,
- specific problems to be corrected or addressed,
- the role to be played by each discussant,
- the desired results, and
- a timetable or schedule for achieving results.

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Investing the additional time required for providing clear instructions and summaries will lead to more effective communication and improved performance.

**Keeping attention focused on the real issue.** More than 30 years ago, Douglas McGregor described the Theory Y philosophy of management, postulating that people will be basically self-directed and creative at work if given the opportunity. He also offered the view that the essential task of management is to unleash this potential in individuals.[11]

For the past 30 years, organizations have used a wide variety of methods for tapping employee potential. Library managers faced with the responsibility for directing groups of educated, creative, and diverse individuals need to develop skills to focus and channel their staff's potential to achieve goals. While the group approach to goal setting and project management provides for collabora-

tion and recognizes mutual interdependence, it also offers opportunity for endless discussion with minimal results unless managed properly.

For example, it is helpful to seek input for, establish, and circulate an agenda when acting as chairman of a committee or task force or even when leading a staff meeting. The agenda can then serve to focus and then refocus discussion when it seems to wander or become divisive. Posing questions prior to meetings also serves to help staff members prepare by providing lead time in which they may consider relevant issues, consult others, or gather data.

Dealing with problems as soon as they are evident also helps ensure that staff potential is not wasted. Once poor performance becomes habit, it is difficult to correct. A straight-forward and objective approach is more assertive than the vague, apologetic approach favored by passive managers. Mixed messages serve only to confuse rather than to focus on the problem and its solution. Bower and Bower recommend preparing DESC (*Describe, Express, Specify, Consequences*) scripts for effective problem solving and conflict resolution.[12] Such scripts enable managers to focus discussions on major points and avoid being led astray.

**Explaining situational "givens."** Since the committee approach is so common in larger libraries, and since, as Runyon states, the alliance between staff members in different, highly specialized departments may be an uneasy one at best, library managers need to determine the balance between soliciting input and maintaining authority. Participative management does not relieve a manager of responsibility. Power floats about in a vacuum; if a manager fails to claim and exercise it, another staff member, team, or committee may be only too willing to step into the void and take command.

For the collaborative process to be successful, library managers need to make sure that group members understand the extent of their responsibility and the level of their authority. For example, unless a committee recognizes that it is advisory, members may feel frustrated if their recommendations are not implemented. A technique that may mitigate this frustration is to explain "givens"—such as budgetary constraints, the political climate, and reporting hierarchies—before they begin work. Providing context should not diminish authority nor prevent staff members from contributing their best under the circumstances.

**Compromising and negotiating when possible.** The assertive solution to any problem is "I win, you win," and successful compromising and negotiating are essential to assertive management.

Resistance is to be expected when working with divergent individuals whose viewpoints may be adapted to their place in the organization and therefore at odds with those of others. Especially when opposed or threatened, people may find it easier to be negative than to be thoughtful. Assertive managers will recognize the advantages of focusing on needs, rather than on positions, and of examining alternate proposals to determine what can be modified without jeopardizing or vitiating the desired results. When staff members are in disagreement, asking them to suggest alternatives can serve to dispel resistance.

Managers themselves need to accept the fact that divergent attitudes exist and be willing to revise their thinking when new and relevant information is offered. Change requires that conclusions reached in the past be examined critically: not everyone interprets past events in the same way or assigns them the same value. Erwin Rausch admonished that "for any conflict to be reduced and resolved, someone has to assume responsibility [for] and leadership in moving away from the problem toward a more constructive relationship.[13]

**Being persistent and patient.** Library managers have both rights and responsibilities. Mackenzie defined managing as "planning, staffing, organizing, directing, and controlling the activities of others in order to achieve objectives that have been agreed on."[14] Managers wishing to fulfill these obligations need not be disappointed by the lack of immediate results. Change is threatening; therefore, there is an innate reluctance to change. Persistence is required, especially when facing stressful changes such as converting manual procedures to online systems. Library managers can reduce stress by emphasizing the positive aspects of change, patiently reviewing progress, and frequently encouraging staff members.

Too, the ongoing problem solving that must often accompany change can be a very time-consuming and emotionally and mentally draining process for all parties. Assertive managers should realize and acknowledge the potential negative consequences of confronting problems head-on, but they must also realize and convey to staff that ignoring problems will neither solve nor eliminate them.

Especially in cases of change-induced conflicts and problems, it may be advisable to exercise patience, to determine if they can be resolved without managerial intervention.

**Giving positive recognition.** Mackenzie's previously cited definition of management includes the phrase "controlling the activities of others." Blanchard and Lorber note that the greatest influence on performance is the "consequence" that it earns—e.g., praise or criticism.[15] Tangible rewards are not always possible, but the following intangible rewards may be used to enhance staff members' self-esteem and encourage further effort:

- seek their advice,
- provide opportunities for more challenging work or further training,
- ask them to report results to upper management, and
- compliment them and inform supervisors of their contributions.

For positive reinforcement to be meaningful, it should be specific, timely, and appropriate to the individual. Being specific also reinforces self-esteem, especially when the praise underscores the value of an accomplishment to other individuals, a department, or the organization as a whole. Timeliness, too, is important, since it often seems to staff members that only mistakes are noticed quickly. Catching people doing something right and complimenting them immediately is excellent for morale as well as for reinforcing desirable performance.

Taking the time to discover what type of reward is most meaningful to different staff members is necessary since individuals have different value systems. High achievers, for example, may feel more rewarded by increased responsibility than by a compliment. Some individuals value awards or mentions in the company newsletter, while others feel uncomfortable with public praise. The reward that serves as the most positive of reinforcements will be most effective in improving individual performance.

**Offering effective criticism.** Just as giving appropriate recognition can influence the activities of staff members by providing positive reinforcement, so too can offering criticism, if it is handled with skill.

Studies reveal that staff members value feedback. An assertive technique for providing feedback is to engage indi-

viduals in a participative approach to problem solving. The objective of discussions should be to discover causes and work towards solutions together rather than to place blame. Problems are most effectively described specifically, calmly, and objectively, without the use of emotionally charged language or sweeping generalizations, which only serve to antagonize and create defensiveness. Asking open-ended questions and listening empathetically can also bring staff members into the problem-solving process.

Once problems have been described and the need for improvement ascertained, staff members can be encouraged to suggest solutions. This approach emphasizes that criticism is meant constructively, provides a framework for solving problems, and reinforces the idea that staff's efforts are valued. For criticism to be constructive, both managers and staff members should leave discussions with a clear idea of the specific actions to be taken to correct problems and a timetable for both action and follow-up.

While it is management's prerogative to establish work patterns and assign tasks and projects, it is also management's responsibility to get the best from staff members and see that their work environment is pleasant and supportive. Offering criticism constructively is difficult but essential to fulfilling both the prerogatives and the responsibilities of management.

### Conclusion

Not everyone is comfortable with the thought of using assertive managerial techniques. To some, these techniques seem manipulative; to others, indirect and time consuming. Managers who wish to determine their level of comfort with assertive techniques may use the Gambrell-Richey Assertion Inventory, a self-assessment tool designed to determine how much agitation individuals experience in given situations and to help them gain an understanding of barriers to assertive behavior.[16]

Perhaps the most important barrier to assertive behavior is the very human desire for approval. Calling attention to problems or insisting that behavior or work be changed may make a manager unpopular. The potential consequences of pointing out problems should be balanced against the likely results of failing to face issues or acknowledge problems which may be obvious to others. Such failures may earn only disrespect or the suspicion of favoritism rather than approval.

A second major barrier to assertiveness is concern for staff members as individuals and sympathy for their problems. Managers, however, have responsibilities to the entire staff and to the library as a whole. Approaching problems assertively rather than passively or aggressively can ensure that no one's rights as individuals are violated.

Developing skills as an assertive library manager requires persistent, hands-on effort. Practice may not always make perfect, but it certainly can increase a manager's level of comfort with assertive techniques, which should ultimately yield personal, professional, and organizational benefits.

## References

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[2] Peter F. Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (New York: Harper, 1974), p. 470.

[3] Jack E. Hulbert and Doris J. Hulbert, "The Value of Assertiveness in Interpersonal Communication." *Management Review* 71 (August 1982): 24.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Two sources that make further distinctions among these three types of behavior are Susan M. Osborn and Gloria G. Harris, *Assertive Training for Women* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1978), pp. 36-38; and Robert Paul Liberman et al., *Personal Effectiveness: Guiding People to Assert Themselves and Improve their Social Skills* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1978), p. 12.

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[11] See Warren G. Bennis and Edgar H. Schein, *Leadership and Motivation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), pp. 15-17.

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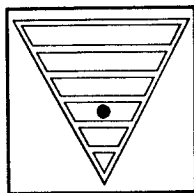
# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

In his review article, "The Subject Specialist in the Academic Library," (*JAL*, March 1990) Fred J. Hay touches on subject bibliography in British academic libraries and makes this parenthetical statement: "It is appropriate that the University of London was then the site of Great Britain's only library school—which it remained until 1963 when other schools began to offer library studies."

This is not so. I speak as one who was born, raised and educated in Sheffield, England, and received my library education at the Department of Librarianship of the Leeds College of Commerce, 1955/56. In response to the urgent need for trained librarians following World War II, a number of library schools were established in 1946 or shortly thereafter. They were located in colleges of commerce or technology in such cities as Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Loughborough, Manchester, and Newcastle. Most, perhaps all of these colleges, later became polytechnics.

It is true that the first university-based library school outside London—Sheffield—was not founded until the 1960s. Also formed around that time was a library school at Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and the College of Librarianship in Aberystwyth, Wales (this has recently been absorbed into the University College of Wales).— *T. Mark Hodges, Director, Medical Center Library, Vanderbilt University.*

To the Editor:

It appears that I made an overstatement, when I wrote that the University of London had the only library school in Great Britain until 1963. As Hodges admits, it was the only "university-based" library school until the 1960s. Russell Duino, in his *Libri* article (29:1), stated "The London School of Librarianship remained the only full-time British library school until 1963, when a post-graduate school of librarianship was established at the University of Sheffield." I should have qualified my statement by saying that the only graduate-level program in librarianship in England was, until 1963, located at the University of London.— *Fred J. Hay, Reference and Acquisitions Librarian, Harvard University.* ▼