

Interpersonal Relations in Libraries

By WILLIAM H. JESSE

IS IT NOT LOGICAL to assume that the Staff Organizations Round Table, of all the groups in the library profession, represents the one best acquainted with—and the strongest proponent of—the art and science of interpersonal relations in library organization? If it were a general-interest group rather than a special-interest group this assumption could not be made, and a great deal in the way of definition of subject would be in order; for in all philosophies definitions must be stated first, or no one knows what you are tacking your small contribution on to. And interpersonal relations is nothing less than a philosophy; with many it is a theology; and with many more, a belief which has existed so long in their minds that it must appear to them to be inherent. Certainly many of the experts feel it is inherent, being spiritual rather than practical, and, as has been expressed by one author, "...he who goes out to meet a person meets God."¹

There are those who feel, and to some extent justifiably, that the exploitation of interpersonal relations for increasing work production is a misuse of management. From an administrative standpoint it can readily be concluded that it is not a misuse, but a convenient justification for proceeding humanistically, or at least individually, with the business of personnel administration. That is, in an institution which recognizes the value of interpersonal relations, it is no longer necessary to justify adopted policies of treating the individual as an individual instead of merely as a member of the group, even though this at times

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may seem to be a very expensive way of administering a library. But many of us recall the times during the depression when jobs and money were so scarce it was necessary to prove that each step taken with each individual would pay off in a measurable way. Today, however, it can probably safely be said that most of the people to whom librarians are responsible (college and university presidents, public library board members, business and industrial executives) are, by and large, better acquainted than are most of us with the values of staff participation in administration and other creditable interpersonal relation policies.

An earlier paper² delineated and illustrated my belief, based on twenty years' experience in library administration, in the values of interpersonal relations, with specific application to staff participation in administration. It affirmed that Tennessee has presently and for many years has had a complete policy of stressing interpersonal relations, staff participation, and, as nearly as it can be defined, democracy in action. There are definite limitations to these concepts, but they should not be pointed out until it is understood that we are sold on the principles. This would be unfair to my institution, my associate librarian, department heads,

¹ Paul E. Johnson, "The Theology of Interpersonalism," *Sociometry*, XII (1949), 225-34.

² William H. Jesse, "Staff Retention," *CRL*, XIX (1958), 129-33.

supervisors, and others who have worked, without too many exceptions, rather hard to bring about a condition which is permitting us to operate primarily with a permanent staff and to fill most vacancies, often new positions, with repeaters. By and large, we would rather be judged on a relative rather than a per se basis. No effort is made to have an ideal situation in which every staff member can work, because while one should strive for the ideal, we know perfectly well it will never be attained; but some people are unhappy merely striving for the ideal, and they might as well go elsewhere. They simply are never going to be happy, and we don't want to be blamed for it.

Mr. Edwin Castagna, librarian of the Long Beach Public, in his understanding, perceptive, and intelligent *Library Journal* article³ admits to limits to democratic administration while advocating it in general. Using his check list, I shall attempt to point out limitations, as I have experienced them, in terms of specifics.

Planning is an obvious area for staff participation, and staff participation in planning can be done on a broad area in a university library, unless it is assumed that all broad planning must have staff participation. Some can and some cannot. In 1946 when the GI's returned en masse to flood the campus, the staff met the problem practically without the help of those of us in library administration. In the branches and in the main buildings, suggestions were made by people on the firing line, who knew student habits better than we in administration did. A couple of illustrations might serve here, but would nowhere near cover the extent of the staff contribution at that time.

It was noticed in the reading rooms that many students were engaged in non-library pursuits, such as working on their

math problems, etc., but they did not all have good dormitories or a student union to go to then. At the suggestion of the staff, a "no smoking" rule was relaxed and the students were permitted to sit on the many, many steps in and outside the library, thus to some extent dividing the library user from the person who merely wanted a place to study. The reserve room people quit trying to keep the books in the reserve room. They put the material on a time loan and let the student go where he would.

Shortly thereafter came the tremendous increase in acquisitions at the University of Tennessee to meet the new Ph.D. program. Even before this started, the stacks were filled. The staff suggested lining the walls of the stacks with wooden shelving (crowding aisles but not making them impassable), thus housing successfully thousands of volumes for which there had apparently been no space.

But at the same time a limitation in planning occurred. The staff was of practically no value in helping the administration of the library and of the university meet the problems of the Ph.D. program, except for checking bibliographies, measuring holdings, etc., and this is not assistance in planning. The planning was done in conferences with deans, directors, administrative officers, and in the Graduate Council, groups of which the director of libraries is a member, where one must express a considered opinion of his own outfit's potential, or else go home and send someone else who can and is willing to do so.

There was some library planning done when the university drew up contracts with Oak Ridge's Institute of Nuclear Studies. This planning took the form of budget estimates, etc., and there was neither time nor opportunity for staff planning. The program was a reality in a matter of minutes, and the library staff's job was to catch up as quickly as possible. This is not participation in plan-

³ Edwin Castagna, "Democratic Administration," *Library Journal*, LXXII (1957) 3138-44.

ning, either; it is participation in execution, and that hasn't anything to do with planning.

Another limitation can be pointed out here. At that time the head of one of the major departments came in to see me, feeling so sorry for herself that she wept twice: once because the increased acquisition program was so great the work could not be done with the staff provided; again, all in the same thirty-minute conference, because she was so busy trying to get the work done there simply was not time to train new people. This was not a conference; it was a monologue, and I did the listening. Now it wasn't her fault that she could do neither of these things, and probably not even her fault that she could not see the conflict. The whole thing was just too much for her, so she was dumping her problems on the administration. The fact that she had completely tied the hands of the administration on both counts, one counteracting the other, never occurred to her and probably hasn't since. Her answer to her problem, of course, would have been to tell the administration, Oak Ridge, and especially the Graduate Council, to stop trying to start any graduate and research programs.

Contrary to the beliefs of some administrators, *organization* is an area in which there can be permitted considerable staff participation. The University of Tennessee Library simply is not organized the way I originally meant it to be, but I am convinced that its organization is much better because of this fact. The result was brought about through the customary procedure of having decisions made at the point where the most knowledge was, and most often this point is not at the administrative level.

The limitations are many, however. Often when the staff is organizing something, it painstakingly (and appropriately) ignores the ability of the individual to do the new work, or it ignores

the fact that he is not getting his current job done in the manner expected. It is the function of the hierarchy, not of the staff, to evaluate an individual. Each person is paid to be willing to evaluate the person under him, and he is foolish to evaluate the person to the side of him, thus getting himself in a lot of trouble with no reward. Staff participation in organization should not be attempted in assignment of personnel, but should be limited to function.

The next item is *staffing*. Mr. Castagna states that this is merely a function of the administration but that there is every reason for consultation with the immediate supervisor before making every appointment or personnel change affecting his department. I do not agree.

First, in my opinion, the function of the administration is to provide candidates for the consideration of staff down the line, with the sole exception of his own secretary and his assistant or associate directors. We never hire a person and then assign him to anybody. We provide candidates, and in most cases insist that there be a personal interview, whatever the expense, before appointing the staff member. In the very, very large library, where personnel must apparently be separated from the hierarchy, this might not be possible. Personnel should not be set up as a separate agency except as a last desperate resort, or possibly because of sheer size of staff. Naturally, personnel records, etc., should be centrally kept and classification, pay, vacations, etc., kept equitable. But it is much better when complaints can go the next step up in the hierarchy, or all the way to the top, for that matter, rather than to a personnel officer. The fact cannot be overstated that this is not being recommended as a policy to be adopted universally. This is another area in which there could be much wider applicability of staff participation than is generally found.

Directing is giving orders, a function

of the supervisor which cannot be shared without inviting confusion: "In order to create a situation which will be conducive to good working relationships, an old rule of thumb of personnel administration must be observed: everyone must be responsible to someone and no one must be responsible to more than one person."⁴

There is no question but that *coordinating* is par excellence a group activity. Even a full-time coordinator can do no more than get people to do the coordinating, and coordinating is quite a different thing from cooperation. Cooperation can often be assumed. Coordinating must be striven for consciously. There is a limitation, however, even here. Actually the limitation has more to do with communications and reporting than anything else. The staff sometimes feels that the administration does not communicate enough, but from my experience I am convinced that the communication of intended action is done less well and less frequently by the staff to the administration than by the administration to the staff. In other words, where you have a large, fairly loose administrative assignment that reaches, as some do, as far as four hundred miles across the state, you have considerable difficulty keeping up with what even a fine, mature, eminently capable staff is coordinating on. I have felt at times that I could not even report adequately on my own operation, since—in many cases within well defined policies of delegation—the energetic, decentralized librarians have raced far, far ahead. A recent example was with the extension division being housed in permanent quarters in Nashville. There was so much space in the old Methodist Publishing House building which the university purchased that the School of Social Work, Nashville Division, and several other operations were invited to join ex-

⁴ Jesse, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

tension. By the time I got there, plans were well along for an extension library, but it did not include proper provision for the non-extension phases of the university's Nashville programs.

It was only through an annual report that I learned that audio-visual materials and personnel at one distant branch had been paid for in the initial year from the book budget, a fund already too limited. Admittedly, it would have been most unfortunate to have a branch librarian who did not meet most of his own problems, but some communication in time to the administration of the library, and in turn immediately to the university administration, would undoubtedly have brought financial assistance. The branch librarian, an excellent one, had done a better job of shouldering his own burdens under a general policy of delegation and autonomy than he had of reporting. He had in a sense coordinated his operation in connection with the immediate problem of the change in program. Coordinating is a most fertile field, if the communications will just come up as well as they sometimes go down.

Reporting, another area for participation, is not used in the sense of "communications," but rather of report-writing. I personally feel that the annual report of an institution Tennessee's size or larger should not be written by the librarian, but by somebody who is closer to the branch librarians and the department heads. Sometimes annual reports written by a librarian who is pretty far removed from the day-to-day work are reports written in abstract, often dealing heavily with resources or with need, let us say, for a new building. In most large libraries the annual reports seem to do one of two things—either they overwork the reality of the minutiae of accomplishment and need, or they merely transmit the statistical reports, often poorly interpreted, to the superior per-

son or body, who in turn cannot understand them. Many of the research library reports tabulating gifts and stressing desiderata are among the most tiresome reading encountered. I do not believe this is the case when the report is written by someone who knows the operation day by day, but who still is not assigned to a tight schedule of daily work, as are most staff members. A good executive officer somewhere between the department heads and the librarian should be able to do a much better job. I am not familiar enough with public library work or even special library work to say that this idea should have wide application or even consideration. Tennessee is about medium in size of the Group I universities in *CRL's* annual statistical report, and that group averages 1.5 assistant or associate librarians or division chiefs per institution.

News or feature stories in connection with newspaper publicity are often misleading. There have been instances at Tennessee when the university community and the public at large were badly misinformed as to total need by having some one phase of our program receive undue attention. Stories in the local undergraduate paper once gave the impression we did not have money enough to keep up with current production of good trade books; actually we had plenty of money for that type of thing. What we were worrying about primarily was strengthening our serial holdings in the sciences and mathematics. That experience and others led to centralizing our publicity as well as reporting.

Mr. Castagna states that *budgeting* offers a fine opportunity for cooperation and that "all levels should have a hand in making up the budget, since it is actually a program for the library for the next year expressed in terms of money." I disagree, but, I think, only because of the differences in the nature of libraries which are serving educational institu-

tions and those which *are* educational institutions: for instance, a public library.

In the public library, the staff must pretty much determine the needs of the community, I imagine, and, with the help of the board and a few other individuals and groups, decide what the educational program is going to be, and therefore what the library program should be. Libraries which serve educational institutions have their programs pretty well made up for them, and the librarians merely have to estimate the library services load which those programs will require. Since the library staff is not the group on the campus primarily responsible for the institution's educational and research programs, the staff should not develop the library's program directly from detection of need of the clientele. This is a prerogative and duty of the faculty. In institutions like Tennessee where the professional staff has faculty status and rank, the librarians do participate in determining the programs, but not to a very considerable extent; and this is proper. It seems to me, however, that even in institutions of higher education the staff ought to be expected to state needs which in turn can be reduced to dollars and cents by the administrator. This is particularly true when there is great expansion or drastic change in program.

It has been so long since things in education were at a standstill that we have almost forgotten what a plateau is. But once a plateau is reached, I doubt the necessity of very much staff participation in budget making, since most of the changes are minor and not programmatic.

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Democratic administration, as represented by the preceding categories, does not comprise the whole of interpersonal relations, which, while more detailed

than democratic administration, is at the same time broader. The illustrations which follow will demonstrate.

You are no doubt aware that there are times when becoming well acquainted with a staff member more than one step removed in the hierarchy can damage that person and even the library operation itself. We had a young man whose interests made for a very quick friendship between us. It was impossible to avoid talking shop when together outside the library. During the course of the conversations his department head was often criticized by implication when he commented on how the department was operated. Consider for a moment the position in which this placed me. If he were not corrected (and I felt he was mistaken), he would assume agreement, as one is entitled to do. To correct him would have been assuming the duties of his immediate supervisor. This contact, while it led to a friendship which is still lasting, also led to certain intense situations in the department and an atmosphere of strain.

Another type of interpersonal limitation is that of access to anyone up the line for counsel. It must be recognized that some people seek counsel as other people go swimming or play golf: just for the fun of it. This counsel-seeking sometimes takes trumped-up or imagined degrees of intensity. You might as well face the fact that there are some people too lazy to go out and get a date who enjoy nothing more than going over their personal problems, sometimes in the most exhausting fashion, with another human being. My salary is adequate to my position and competency, but is not enough to make me feel that I should pinch-hit for a psychiatrist. For this reason, undoubtedly, staff members sometimes feel that administrators or other people up the line from them are not willing to hear their stories. The story grows tiresome, may not have too much reality, and there are no real solu-

tions anyway, except for the person to face his problems himself, perhaps with the aid of a psychiatrist or, more often, with the aid of his own M.D.

Staff should not be assigned to an immature person, and it can be assumed that he is mature only when he is able to make up his own mind regarding his own behavior in a social and moral world. When he has reached this stage, there is a fair chance that he will be willing to extend this privilege to people under him. There are many ways to determine when a person has reached this point, and it is at times more meaningful than the acquisition of further degrees or the attainment of greater professional competence, where supervision of staff is concerned. In other words, leave the staff alone as individuals and do not try to run their lives, and they may in turn treat their staff that way; if not, they simply shouldn't have any staff any longer.

A shocking limitation is that many people who insist loudest on being left alone as individuals and not having their lives managed are the ones who, ironically, assume that their relative maturity makes it incumbent upon them to mother or boss—and one is as bad as the other—their own staff. It has become widely recognized in management that the person in a position of administration or supervision must not proceed as an amateur psychologist, psychiatrist, or physician. One should merely learn to recognize and refer. This referral to the specialist is coming near enough to the position of practicing outside one's own profession. Sometimes referral calls for tact, strength, and insistence, and creates misunderstanding.

There is probably less need to stress this now than there was ten or fifteen years ago, but some people still seem to feel that the moment they occupy a supervisory or administrative post they are ex-officio endowed with the tools of counsel and even with curative powers. An-

other extremely dangerous practice is to dig too deeply for motivation when your counsel is sought. If a person has good sense and is in good health, he is simply not going to reveal his true motivation. Certainly I would tell no one mine, least of all a superior. A great deal of guessing goes on about motivation, and people supervising other people are always coming up with a reason why the person did this or that or wants to do this or that or won't do this or that. I am very careful of my use of statistics, but without hesitation I would say that nine times out of ten these reasons are all wrong and would be proved so if we would check through the years and get verification or refutation of our hypotheses concerning the motivation of a given individual. Naturally, when you guess about motivation, then dismiss the whole thing and never check on it, you are apt to become pretty certain of your ability to detect true motivation. This is a presumptuous, asinine, and dangerous position into which one can easily slip.

Further examples of the detail and the scope of interpersonal relations are set down in *Twenty-Five Short Cases in Library Personnel Administration*, by Ken-

neth R. Shaffer,⁵ in which, it would surely seem, is described every aspect of personnel relations which could conceivably arise, from staff use of phones to forgery and theft. But these are by no means delimitative; the ramifications of interpersonal relations spread in every direction to encompass all phases of employee-employee / employee-employer communications.

It is my hope that the above comments have been of interest to you and may somehow or other help further your work toward increasing the amount and quality of interpersonal relations in libraries; for to quote Mr. Castagna, who is rapidly becoming one of my favorite authors, "although there has been relatively little on the subject in professional library literature there is evidence among librarians of increasing interest in democratic administration. The Staff Organizations Round Table and the old ALA Board on Personnel Administration have devoted time to it at conferences. It is especially important for us to be aware of the SORT interest. As administrators we cannot afford to be too far behind the thinking of staff organizations."

⁵ *Twenty-Five Short Cases in Library Personnel Administration* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1959).

Technical Information Service

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