

Practical tips for first-time managers

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Abstract: In this column, the authors provide practical advice for new librarians who find themselves in management positions for the first time in their career history.

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It's rare these days that a professional librarian, even in an entry-level position, is not responsible for the supervision of personnel, whether paid employees, volunteers, or student workers. This column offers new librarians who are facing this responsibility for the first time some tips and philosophies based on our own experiences during our first years in formal management positions. Managing people, as opposed to managing physical inventory, is uniquely challenging, because it is, at its core, about establishing and nourishing relationships. A "good" manager is able to understand what their direct reports need to be successful, and how they prefer to go about achieving these goals.

Some practical advice for first time managers: It's a great idea to find a mentor, perhaps through a formal program sponsored by a professional organization, or by identifying someone in your organization whose management style you'd like to emulate. It's helpful if this person is someone you are comfortable talking with. In addition to a personal mentor, new managers can consult a myriad of online resources, such as the Ask a Manager column (<http://www.askamanager.org>) or LLAMA's New Professionals Section of the American Library Association.

Many formal supervisory roles come with the honor of interviewing, hiring, training, and evaluating new staff. It can be a good idea to take time to do a skills assessment with everyone you oversee. The most well-known (and likely most accessible) of these assessment tools is the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), though other popular tools include StrengthsFinder, Traitify, and the Big 5 Personality Test. Making sure that everyone shares their own results with the group can illuminate an individual's particular strengths, allowing everyone to be cognizant of different working/ learning styles, and create a more cohesive team environment.

You know that famous phrase, “No man is an island.” Such is true not only of new managers, but also of the people they will be supervising. An effective supervisor always tries to remember that everyone they supervise is a person with feelings and vulnerabilities. Taking a moment to remind yourself of all the wild and wacky ways people choose to communicate with each other helps you to be respectful of your reports’ humanity, even in the face of less-than-desirable behavior. That said, you are also a person with feelings (in addition to a new librarian and manager), and a good manager embraces their own humanity and vulnerabilities. Your library administrators have vested authority in you because they trust you to use it responsibly. Supervisors have a responsibility to the people who work for them, and they must be as objective as possible when mediating disputes or confronting problem behaviors. Always strive to balance your authority and confidence in your education, training, and skills with humility and empathy. When it comes to developing healthy, functional relationships with coworkers, your ego is your enemy. For more practical advice on how to address personnel issues tactfully and effectively, you can employ the FIRR (Fact, Impact, Respect, Request) method, extensively addressed in management literature. The FIRR method works wonders for organizing your thoughts, eliminating awkwardness, and quelling jitters you may have. By using a clear statement for each category (Fact, Impact, Respect, Request), managers can more effectively communicate issues in the work setting (Church, 2013). Additionally, creating an agenda or outline before a disciplinary meeting can make it easier to direct a productive conversation, and keeping notes about how your feedback was received during the meeting can help you create documentation for any long-term disciplinary cases, which may need further action from higher-ups.

But let’s not end on a kind of sour note! Managing others sounds really tricky until you start doing it. (Like, say, your first library instruction sessions!) You can, however, quickly become better at it

with a little time, practice, and discipline. You're not usually expected to be perfect at it immediately. No one is ever truly "perfect" at managing others, as we're all just people with our own peculiarities and foibles but you can hopefully get to a point where you feel confidence rather than dread. Supervising is never an easy responsibility to assume, but it can be an extremely rewarding one when you help someone develop new skills, or when you are able to give them a glowing recommendation for the next step in their career path.

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