

Case Study #3: Berkeley Public Library

In the summer of 2015, the Berkeley Public Library (BPL) seemed to be doing well – recovering from an economic downturn and even planning to expand. But a change in policy by library Director Jeff Scott led to weeks of controversy and years of turmoil for the library organization. The spark that ignited what would become a bonfire of controversy started with a routine process for most libraries: weeding out old material from the collection. Like many libraries, the Berkeley Public Library struggled in the wake of the 2008 “Great Recession” with “staffing shortages, and increased workloads, resulting in lack of regular weeding” (Berkeley Public Library, n.d., p. 2). The economy eventually recovered, and a major expansion was planned for the library in 2014, which required a rather aggressive weeding of the collection. BPL removed 53,681 items all told that year. By contrast, the weeding that resulted in so much controversy for Scott included the removal of only about 40,000 items, or 0.3% of the total 13 million resources in the collection (p. 3). In reality, the issue was less about culling the collection and more about a managerial misstep in failing to take the time to understand and work within the library’s unique organizational culture.

An Explosive Situation

Prior to Scott’s tenure as director, weeding only occurred after up to thirty-five different librarians gave their opinions as to which books or other materials should be removed. The director decided to streamline the process to alleviate what seemed a burdening process for overworked staff. The new weeding process pared that back to a panel composed of a pair of senior librarians aided by four specialists in children’s books, teen books, art and music, and reference materials. However well-intentioned, the change was not well received. A group of fifteen librarians and other staff members sent a letter to the board of trustees stating that such a drastic move should have been handled differently. Librarians asserted that books were being removed at an unprecedented pace of up to 5,000 a month and that they were destroyed rather than being donated to Friends of the Berkeley Public Library for sale. Adding fuel to the fire, Scott originally stated that only around 2,200 books had been removed and all had been offered to the Friends organization. He accused several librarians of “running a ‘disinformation’ campaign” (Dinkelspiel, 2015a). Scott walked the comments back after a city council member released a list of almost 14,000 books that had been removed from the library. He then said that

39,000 books had been removed and he had relied on bad information (Dinkelspiel, 2015a). Despite the acknowledgement, damage to trust in the library's leadership had already been done.

From the library's perspective, Neighborhood and Youth Services Manager Sarah Dentan maintained that the weeding process was done carefully rather than haphazardly, although reports did indicate inconsistencies in how the policy was carried out, such as some librarians told to save records of removed materials while others were told to delete them (Dinkelspiel, 2015a). Friends of the Library had two bookstores that sold donated items to benefit the library but generally did not accept many of the weeded volumes due to poor condition or low resale value (Dinkelspiel, 2015b). Even with that, Dentan reported that less than 1 percent of books weeded from the system were ever pulped. Most were sold to thrift stores to raise money "to fund job training and soup kitchens and drop-in homeless shelter for women, men and children" (Saric, 2015). Regardless, the controversy quickly spiraled as the public discussion shifted from what many saw as an overly aggressive weeding policy to a lack of honesty from library administration and a hostile working environment for BPL employees. Some reported retaliation for having spoken out against the library's collection management policy (Dinkelspiel, 2015a). Several staff members reported being threatened "with 'consequences' in order to prevent them from going to the library board's meetings and from speaking to the public about the weeding process" (Saric, 2015). The consequences supposedly even went so far as to include firing of library staff (Berkeley Public Library, n.d., p. 2). Dentan said she had no knowledge of any such instances (Dinkelspiel, 2015a), but she directed the library's human resources department to investigate the allegations as one of her first actions after being named acting interim director. Scott voluntarily stepped down following a conversation with the board of trustees Chair Abigail Franklin in which both reportedly agreed that Scott was not a good fit for the library (Dinkelspiel, 2015b). Scott went to work elsewhere, and the Berkeley library began a tumultuous period of addressing the aftermath.

What Went Wrong?

The problems do not appear to have truly been about the weeding itself. That was merely the catalyst. BPL weeded almost 54,000 books from the library system in 2014 before Scott took over (Dinkelspiel, 2015a). Large libraries routinely weed out 5% to 10% of their collections. But Scott reportedly came across as arrogant, with reports emerging that he would not admit that there might be an issue to address. Retired BPL employee Diane Davenport suggested that while

the method of weeding Scott implemented might be fairly standard in the industry, Berkeley was different “because it serves such a literate and engaged community and it takes a certain kind of knowledge and experience to understand what kind of books appeal to that community” (Dinkelspiel, 2015b). The problem, Davenport said, was not the volume of materials being weeded, but the speed at which it was done. The new process did not allow for review to double check whether certain volumes should be eliminated. (Dinkelspiel, 2015b). Furthermore, local observers to the controversy said that Scott may not have adjusted well to the organizational culture. He had previously worked at a library that served a much larger population (almost half a million people) and was staffed by non-union workers, unlike the Berkeley library. Franklin further reported that Scott “was more accustomed to working with more autonomy and not necessarily needing to rely on such a large team to effectively make decisions” (Dinkelspiel, 2015b). One unnamed board member told local media that they “thought Scott erred in not taking the time to get to know the community by visiting the mayor, city council members, the city manager and other officials” (Dinkelspiel, 2015b). All evidence points mainly to a failure in learning the organizational culture.

When he was first appointed, Scott reportedly “emphasized the importance of understanding and adjusting to community needs and priorities” (Pitcher, 2015). However, his actions did not support that assertion. Having worked in libraries for several years prior to Berkeley, Scott must have known quite well that that libraries’ long history have given rise to “specific conceptions of function and method that often make for rigid structure and resistance to change” (Moran & Morner, 2018, p. 151). Based on media reports, however, he seemed determined to force change upon the organization without any consideration for the impact it would have on the people who make up the institution. Every organization, whether a corporation, a non-profit, or a governmental entity like a library, has its own organizational culture that develops more or less organically over time as a collection of “assumptions, value systems, and norms that groups develop to cope with problems of external adaption and internal integration” (p. 153). People embedded within that culture tend to get attached to it and resist efforts to change. Scott’s approach in particular was likely doomed to failure because he was trying to change the accepted group norms, which are so basic and “deeply held within a group that its members will find behavior based on any other premise inconceivable. They are so fundamental that they are likely to be neither confronted nor debated, and thus they are

extremely difficult to change” (p. 156). A manager seeking to change such a basic facet of the organizational culture needs to tread carefully and get staff buy-in rather than trying to simply mandate change.

Although a library director is in charge of the organization, they remain an employee, and one of the first things a new employee should learn is its unique operational idiosyncrasies. It may be that Scott forgot the fact that even when “the culture of two organizations of the same type may be similar, each will have its own distinctive features” (Moran & Morner, 2018, p. 158). One should not attempt to dismantle or modify a machine without first making sure they understand the equipment, regardless of how similar it may be to other machines encountered before. The same is true for any organization because if the “culture and an employee’s expectations are not a good fit, the result is an unhappy employee. In many cases, when this mismatch occurs, employees resign from their jobs or are asked to leave because they cannot conform to the culture” (Moran & Morner, 2018, p. 158). Case in point: Scott began his tenure as director of BPL in November 2014 and ended it the following August.

Beyond the impact to Scott’s career, the managerial missteps created waves for the library that took years to settle down. Even after Scott’s departure, Berkeley Public Library remained troubled. Several staffers left, one was terminated and rehired following the threat of a wrongful termination lawsuit, and the employee union filed a number of grievances – most against a single manager. The city’s mayor even declared February 28, 2017, as “Berkeley Librarian Whistleblower Day.” A year and a half after Scott resigned, local media described the library as having “an atmosphere of fear and intimidation in many departments” (Dinkelspiel, 2017a). Heidi Dolamore, who next took the reins as the library director, named improving morale as a high priority, but staff said that they found her attempts disappointing. According to media reports, Dolamore might have been following Scott’s misstep of not taking “the time to fan out among the workforce to get to know them individually or ask about their concerns. ... She only met with union officials for the first time in January, three months after she started as director” (Dinkelspiel, 2017a). The selection process for Scott’s replacement followed a similar pattern. When Dolamore was named the new director in September 2016, the board declined to seek input from staff as with prior director selections. Instead, the decision was reached solely “by the board and a panel of community stakeholders with the help of a search firm,” a move

that many at the library saw as “indicative of a growing divide between the staff and management” (Dong, 2016). The tension did not end there.

The working atmosphere remained uneasy for many employees. For example, an investigation at the library following Scott’s departure centered on a practice among some library workers of checking out books and returning them so that the system flagged them as having recent activity, which would save the materials from weeding. The investigation into “potential misconduct” reportedly included employees’ circulation records, which one unnamed employee said violated the library’s “own privacy policies, as well as other city and state codes” (Dinkelspiel, 2017a). The move also violates the American Library Association’s code of ethics, which calls for libraries to “protect each library user’s right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted” (American Library Association, 2021). The tension apparently took its toll all the way to the top of the hierarchy; Dolamore stepped down unexpectedly in September 2017 after less than a year as director without explanation (Dinkelspiel, 2017b). The current director, Tess Mayer, has been in the position since 2020 (Berkeley Public Library, 2020). The length of Mayer’s tenure suggests that some of the turmoil has settled finally.

Conclusion

It should be acknowledged that the top position in a community institution like the local library tends to be a lightning rod for criticism and makes for an easy target when people are disappointed or disgruntled. For example, an anonymous source claimed that the whistleblower who initially sparked the controversy “was a disgruntled employee who lacked understanding of the weeding process and broader library strategies” (Berkeley Public Library, n.d., p. 3). Scott himself continues to draw controversy, as well. Following his time at Berkeley Public Library, Scott moved on to the Washoe County Library System in Nevada, where he has served as director since 2015 (LinkedIn, n.d.). His ten-year stint has been much longer than at Berkeley, but similar issues seem to be surfacing there as the library board is poised to consider his termination. Unlike BPL, at Washoe County, Scott “is largely viewed favorably by library staff ... [and a] survey showed most staff are happy working for the library” (Conrad, 2025). The board of trustees, however, has rated Scott poorly, describing him as “difficult,” “combative,” “almost holding contempt” for the board, and resistant to direction (Conrad, 2025). The move could be politically motivated as much as legitimate concerns; the details are not clear. But it

does show how a director can receive potentially warranted and unwarranted criticism due to the high profile nature of the position. It also serves as a lesson for the need to understand and work within an organization's culture rather than trying to mandate change from the outside.

Libraries comprise one of the longest-lived organizations in human history, an evolutionary success that tends to make institutions resistant to change. After all, it is far "easier to cling to the tried and true than to make changes, especially when none of the new models has been shown to be a reliable replacement" (Moran & Morner, 2018, p. 159). However, libraries cannot afford to cling to procedures and policies just because they once worked well. In order for libraries to survive and flourish, "librarians must do more than rest on their laurels. They must make changes" (p. 160). At the same time, changes cannot be made willy-nilly nor by fiat. Such efforts almost invariably fail and create costly problems for an institution where they do not sink it outright. Scott likely had the right idea in streamlining the weeding process and lightening the workload of a number of staff members. But his apparent "it's good to be the king" approach self-destructed spectacularly, and it blew holes in the library organization as well – consequences that could have been avoided with greater patience and understanding.

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