



University of Kentucky
UKnowledge

Library Faculty and Staff Publications

University of Kentucky Libraries

9-2019

Dealing with Dysfunction

Jennifer A. Bartlett

University of Kentucky, jen.bartlett@uky.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries_facpub



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

[Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Repository Citation

Bartlett, Jennifer A., "Dealing with Dysfunction" (2019). *Library Faculty and Staff Publications*. 317.
https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries_facpub/317

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

Dealing with Dysfunction

Digital Object Identifier (DOI)

<https://doi.org/10.5860/llm.v33i4.7389>

Notes/Citation Information

Published in *Library Leadership & Management*, v. 33, no. 4.

Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.

New and Noteworthy: Dealing with Dysfunction

Jennifer A. Bartlett

It's hard to find a workplace without some degree of confusion, lack of coordination, slow decision-making, and poor communication. The real problem occurs when organizational dysfunction is systemic, springing from the underlying culture of the organization. Common characteristics of truly dysfunctional workplaces can include lack of established procedures, backstabbing, favoritism, gossiping, bullying, incessant turf wars, and so on. The first step in dealing with these issues is recognizing and making an effort to deal with them. Several recent publications offer guidance on how to identify and, more importantly, improve dysfunctional library workplace settings.

One obvious symptom of a dysfunctional workplace is the departure of staff for other institutions, or high turnover. The 2019 Association of College and Research Libraries program, "Why We Leave: Exploring Academic Librarian Turnover," presents the results of a 2018 survey that investigates some reasons why academic librarians leave their positions. Librarians Amy Fyn, Christina Heady, Amanda Foster-Kauffman, and Allison Hosier identify 20 factors of academic librarian job dissatisfaction in four overall categories: work environment, compensation and benefits, job duties, and personal factors. The top reasons survey respondents identified as contributing to leaving were work environment, chances for advancement within the organization, and future salary prospects. Other factors included workplace morale, supervisors, and library administration.¹ Some of the factors prompting librarians to leave, of course, are out of library administrators' control (such as geographic location or a mismatch of personality with job duties); others, however, can be dealt with. The program paper suggests strategies in the areas of empowerment and flexibility, transparency and communication, and mentorship and training.

A recent title from ALA Editions offers an excellent overview of the underlying causes of library dysfunction, as well as possible strategies: *The Dysfunctional Library: Challenges and Solutions to Workplace Relationships* by Jo Henry, Joe Eshleman, and Richard Moniz.² The book is based on a study of the available research literature in library and management, as well as the authors' survey of 4,186 library workers. The resulting text is a well-organized, thoughtful presentation of common organizational dysfunctions, including organizational culture; individual behaviors, both minor and more toxic; the impact of dysfunction on property and political relationships; poor communication; conflict management; ineffective collaboration; general team-based barriers such as lack of trust and workplace design; and staff's resistance to collaboration and change. The final chapter talks about the importance of functional leadership teams and their impact on the future of their organizations.

The authors emphasize that while it may be a temptation to externalize the causes of workplace dysfunction (in other words, it's somebody else's fault), solutions start from within: "It may seem cliché, but if librarians and administrative staff really hope to improve their respective libraries and the work that is done in them, it starts with improving themselves... It is the authors' contention that emotional intelligence, or a lack thereof, plays a central role in dysfunctional decision-making and behavior in the library workplace" (pp. 1-2). *The Dysfunctional Library* is a useful resource for not only library administrators, but all library employees who want to make a positive difference in their organizations.

A benchmark study directly related to dysfunctional workplaces is Kaetrena Davis Kendrick's 2017 research article, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study."³ Kendrick notes that the topic of low morale is not one extensively covered in library literature, but which appears frequently in business research. Of relevance to dysfunction in libraries are publications on workplace bullying, toxicity, and burnout, which point towards ways in which toxic organizational cultures, behavior, and systems can lead to low morale.

Kendrick employs a phenomenological research method in her study, which "finds and reports meanings in a person or group's lived experience of an event or state or being" (p. 849). Her interviews with 20 self-selected librarians revealed 12 common themes of the low morale experience, including the significant role of the "trigger event" ("an unexpected negative event or a relationship that developed in an unexpected and negative manner," p. 851), exposure to protracted workplace abuse, engagement in coping strategies, and lessons learned from experience low morale, among others. Each theme includes representative participant comments as examples.

The study finds that low morale in the library workplace is largely caused by long-term, repeated exposure to emotional, verbal or written, and systemic abuse or neglect; further, library and campus administrators are the primary offenders. As the author suggests, more qualitative work can and should be done on specific types of workplace abuse, as well as non-academic library environments. While offering few suggestions on how to improve library staff morale, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians" can be read as an interesting and useful springboard to further discussion and research.

Public libraries, like academic and other library settings, are also vulnerable to dysfunction, especially given the ever-changing services their patrons demand. In a recent article in *Public Libraries*,⁴ Amy An from the Boca Raton (FL) Public Library observes that "public library staff and the organizational climate in which they work are far less healthy, collegial, or civil than we imagine. This has a deep impact on the ability of a library to serve its patrons" (p. 26). A key reason for this, according to An, is the "disruption" of the traditional purpose of the library, which was to provide access to print information. Library staff lacking a clarity of mission are more prone to dysfunctional behavior, including bullying and incivility. Responsibility for communicating the organization's mission lies with library administrators, who need to be aware of workplace bullying and other toxic behaviors and be prepared to address these issues. An suggests that library administration refocus on the library mission and core values; further, they should pursue a strategy of "internal marketing" to promote mission and values to their staff. "The Mission-Informed Library" concludes with suggestions of several internal marketing strategies and an extensive list of references.

While library staff certainly need to focus on the organizational mission and goals, a problem arises when they are asked to do too much, another source of dysfunction in the workplace. In their 2018 article "Responding to and Reimagining Resilience in Academic Libraries," published in the *Journal of New Librarianship*, authors Jacob Berg, Angela Galvan, and Eamon Tewell articulate the concept of workplace resilience and how it can be a factor in workplace dysfunction.⁵ Many librarians are being asked to "do more with less," to manage up, and to keep service levels consistent regardless of available resources. "Resilience," write the authors, "is repackaged trauma for organizations in a state of perpetual recovery" (p. 1). A better approach is to reimagine the concept of resilience as a tool for recognizing and dealing with inequities, having productive conversations about services and staff, and "sunsetting" tasks that

are no longer tenable. While brief, this article opens the difficult conversation about how librarians can move towards a healthier workplace by insisting on their own professional health.

Jennifer A. Bartlett (jen.bartlett@uky.edu) is the Interim Associate Dean of Teaching, Learning, and Research at the University of Kentucky Libraries

Published: September 2019

¹ Amy Fyn, Christina Heady, Amanda Foster-Kaufman, and Allison Hosier. "Why We Leave: Exploring Academic Librarian Turnover and Retention Strategies." *ACRL 2019: Recasting the Narrative Proceedings* (April 2019): 139-148. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2019/WhyWeLeave.pdf>. Also see a program summary from Sally Stieglitz, "Why Librarians Leave: Study Examines Academic Librarian Turnover" [blog post], The Scoop Blog, *American Libraries* (April 12, 2019). Retrieved from <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/acrl2019-why-librarians-leave>.

² Jo Henry, Joe Eshleman, and Richard Moniz, *The Dysfunctional Library: Challenges and Solutions to Workplace Relationships* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2018).

³ Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study" *Journal of Library Administration* 57, no. 8 (2017): 846-878. DOI: 10.1080/01930826.2017.1368325.

⁴ Amy An. "The Mission-Informed Library: Internal Marketing to Improve the Organizational Climate in the Public Library," *Public Libraries* 58, no. 1 (2019): 26-31.

⁵ Jacob Berg, Angela Galvan, and Eamon Tewell. "Responding to and Reimagining Resilience in Academic Libraries," *Journal of New Librarianship* 3, no. 1 (2018): 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.21173/newlibs/4/1>