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Diversity Dialogues . . .

Managing Conflict*

Raquel J. Gabriel**

Ms. Gabriel discusses conflict within organizations and how it poses a challenge for employees from diverse backgrounds. In an organization without awareness of diversity issues or a supervisor who is able to provide support, a new employee may find it harder to acclimate. A supervisor's multicultural awareness increases the likelihood of success for new employees and the effective management of the library as a whole.

¶1 In earlier columns, I have discussed definitions of diversity,¹ how it might be recognized within the context of one's organization to improve diversity and a library's value to an institution,² and how librarians should explore the similarities that underlie our profession to truly examine diversity.³ I write these columns based on a reflection of my work in a variety of libraries over the years where I've had a wide range of responsibilities, and the privilege of interacting with many interesting and inspiring colleagues. Overall, I have been lucky to find positions that have offered me constant opportunities to learn and to contribute what I can to the field I've chosen to pursue as a career.

¶2 But as much as I love my profession, I would be dishonest if I did not also acknowledge that there have been moments when I have seriously questioned whether or not I have pursued the right one. I have, at times, questioned whether the work I do or the particular path I chose was in the best interest of my professional or personal fulfillment, and had moments when I've debated whether or not I should consider moving into another type of work. While preparing to write this column, I reflected on those brief periods of questioning and examined them more closely. I tried to understand what motivated a particular moment's strong, almost overwhelming, dissatisfaction with where I was and what I was doing and what had precipitated those negative feelings.

¶3 Looking back, I can see that in most cases it was due to a conflict of some kind—of cultures, of personalities, or of expectations. Usually at the root of each

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1. Raquel J. Gabriel, *Diversity in the Profession*, 102 LAW LIBR. J. 147, 2010 LAW LIBR. J. 8.

2. Raquel J. Gabriel, *Tying Diversity to Organizational Culture*, 102 LAW LIBR. J. 507, 2010 LAW LIBR. J. 28.

3. Raquel J. Gabriel, *Finding Common Ground*, 103 LAW LIBR. J. 313, 2011 LAW LIBR. J. 20.

conflict was a fundamental lack of communication between groups or individuals, or a situation that was handled poorly due to miscommunication. In some instances, the cause of the conflict had nothing to do with the competency of any individual to perform the requirements of a position, but instead with the inability of one party to understand the priorities or expectations of the other, or perhaps with the pressures on a particular individual at the time.

¶4 Although there is a stereotype of the library as a calm oasis, I am sure that every librarian would scoff at the suggestion that conflict doesn't exist within our institutions. Whether it is with the communities we serve, our colleagues, or our supervisors, I find it hard to imagine any library—just like any other workplace—without some level of conflict that needs to be managed and addressed. External pressures, in the form of budget cuts, staff shortages, or conflicts with the larger institution—be it a law school, university, law firm, or government department—can also have a marked impact upon the amount of stress affecting library employees.

¶5 The concept of conflict management is not new to academic librarianship,⁴ and while it may not use this term, the law library literature has noted the difficulty of management in challenging situations, whether it is with employees, institutions, or expectations.⁵ Organizational culture and conflict management or conflict resolution—or what may simply be called “politics” in an organization—have been studied with vigor in other fields but were never covered in any librarianship course I took.

¶6 Nowadays, I hope that the idea of conflict—and how to deal with it—is at least discussed in a basic management class. With an increasing emphasis on diversity in the workplace, I believe it is imperative that librarians have a foundation from which they can manage conflict—whether it's with a coworker, a supervisor, or a member of the public. That foundation might derive from reading the literature, talking to a colleague, or taking advantage of a program or service designed to assist employees. However one obtains it, the ability to manage conflict is, I firmly believe, key to increasing diversity within law libraries and the profession.⁶

4. See, e.g., Robert S. Runyon, *Power and Conflict in Academic Libraries*, 3 J. ACAD. LIBRARIANSHIP 200 (1977) (discussing how recognition of organizational culture and the idea of power dynamics has implications for academic librarians who have traditionally not thought of themselves as having to deal with conflict resolution). See also Jane McGurn Kathman & Michael D. Kathman, *Conflict Management in the Academic Library*, 16 J. ACAD. LIBRARIANSHIP 145 (1990) (discussing how conflict management is normally not part of librarianship training); William Pettas & Steven L. Gilliland, *Conflict in the Large Academic Library: Friend or Foe?*, 18 J. ACAD. LIBRARIANSHIP 24 (1992) (discussing the development of conflict theory and the various types of library conflicts that may occur in an academic library). For a good overview of different types of organizational conflict and conflict theory as well as a selected, annotated bibliography of additional sources, see Leah Plocharczyk, *On Organizational Conflict: Reaping the Benefits of Effective Conflict Management*, J. ACCESS SERVS., nos. 1–2, 2006, at 85.

5. See, for example, the many “Managing by the Book” columns written by Jean M. Holcomb for *Law Library Journal*.

6. The Center for Creative Leadership, for example, publishes a variety of publications aimed at the “practicing manager” that deal with conflict management. See, e.g., TALULA CARTWRIGHT, *MANAGING CONFLICT WITH PEERS* (2003); JENNIFER J. DEAL & DON W. PRINCE, *DEVELOPING CULTURAL ADAPTABILITY* (2007); BARBARA POPEJOY & BRENDA J. MCMANIGLE, *MANAGING CONFLICT WITH DIRECT REPORTS* (2002); MEENA S. WILSON ET AL., *MANAGING ACROSS CULTURES* (1996).

¶7 For those wondering how to recognize the sorts of conflict that might be at work within a library, Joan Howland has written an insightful article, *Challenges of Working in a Multicultural Environment*,⁷ which specifically addresses working in a library with an increasingly diverse workforce. She discusses six challenges facing a library when dealing with a changing staff: (1) “fluctuating power dynamics”; (2) “merging a diversity of opinions and approaches”; (3) “overcoming perceived lack of empathy”; (4) “tokenism, reality or perception?”; (5) accountability; and (6) transforming challenges into opportunities.⁸

¶8 While each of the six challenges could be the basis of an article on its own, it is the first challenge of fluctuating power dynamics that I anticipate could be the hardest for a newcomer to an organization to readily discern, especially if she is from a different background or culture from many of her colleagues. Acclimating to a new environment can be stressful, particularly if it is the librarian’s first professional job, or if she has substantially different responsibilities than in her last position. Recognizing that organizational culture exists is one thing, but to take the information you perceive about an organization and understand who holds power within it can be much more difficult.

¶9 In certain institutions, it might be relatively simple to understand who holds the power. For example, in theory, the director of an academic law library holds a measure of power or influence. But that power might be tempered by the value the larger institution places upon the library as a whole, or on individual staff members, including the director. It could also be affected by the relationship members of the library staff have with the entire faculty, or even with an individual faculty member who is vocal about her dealings with the library. The inability to interpret power dynamics within an organization can be an enormous source of potential conflict for new employees, especially those from a background different from the majority of employees. What happens when an institution or administrative structure makes it harder for one to understand where the power dynamics exist in an organization, when clear lines of authority both within and outside the library are not easily defined or explained, or when the institution as a whole is so riddled with internal conflicts that it is difficult for different departments even to communicate with one another?

¶10 It is not uncommon for individuals new to a job to be so overwhelmed that they focus only on fulfilling the immediate demands of their position. The easiest option is to determine who your immediate supervisor is and which people you must answer to above your supervisor, and begin from there. For example, in an academic law library, you would know who the dean of the law school is, and you would also learn which faculty or administration members interact the most with your particular department. You might try to lie low for a bit as you get used to your

7. Joan S. Howland, *Challenges of Working in a Multicultural Environment*, 33 J. LIBR. ADMIN. 105 (2001). Howland’s article should be required reading for anyone in a management position or aspiring to one, as it sums up many of the issues that organizations find hard to articulate when discussing diversity issues.

8. *Id.* at 109–117. The first four challenges are similar to those found in Janice R.W. Joplin & Catherine S. Daus, *Challenges of Leading a Diverse Workforce*, ACAD. MGMT. EXECUTIVE, Aug. 1997, at 32 (1997). Howland, *supra* note 7, at n.18.

new responsibilities while also trying to figure out whose opinions are thoughtfully considered or whose ideas are immediately dismissed. In essence, you spend a lot of time when new on a job trying to determine the organizational culture—where you fit within it, and where the power dynamics are. In the best case scenario, you have supervisors or individuals to whom you can quickly turn to help you fill in the gaps, and you also have the personal confidence to reach out to those people for assistance.

¶11 The type of personal confidence needed for such discussions with colleagues or supervisors may be more difficult for those with diverse backgrounds. Someone from a different culture with different models of communication may be uncomfortable approaching a supervisor with a question about organizational politics, believing it reflects poorly on her professionalism to ask how to communicate with others. Alternatively, if direct questioning about such matters is not accepted practice in an organization, these queries could alienate coworkers. For new employees trying to understand organizational culture, the potential to misunderstand power dynamics can be a very real threat to establishing credibility.

¶12 It might be even more difficult for an employee from a different cultural background if she does not have a mentor within the organization who is from that same culture. In that situation, it is important for the manager to reach out to the new employee. Otherwise the employee might quickly feel isolated or hesitant about voicing her ideas or opinions for fear of saying the wrong thing.

¶13 Even if there is someone willing to act as an unofficial mentor, the newcomer might not know whether or not it is best professionally to consult that person if she gets a sense that the mentor is not respected or valued by the organization for some reason. An organization with limited awareness of diversity and a small number of employees from different backgrounds may unwittingly label all members of the same background similarly, assuming that they will all feel or act the same way as the most visible member of that group. In some instances this might benefit a new employee, but if the most visible member is viewed negatively, the new employee could suffer by association. A library with little diversity among its staff should be especially careful to examine the merits of each employee individually. In a worst case scenario, negative attitudes toward one person may subtly work to influence hiring committees and prevent organizations from employing any additional members from a specific background or culture.

¶14 It is the hesitation to hire *additional* employees who belong to a specific culture if there has been one negative experience with *any* individual from that group that is of the greatest concern. In addition to being subject to the perceived stereotypes that may exist about a particular group, candidates from diverse backgrounds also often inherit the positive *and* negative opinions about every previous individual of that same cultural group who has worked within that organization. Such new hires must often work harder and longer to be taken seriously as distinct individuals with unique strengths and weaknesses.

¶15 In my opinion, it's critical that there be a manager or supervisor with an acute awareness of such diversity issues who can help new employees from diverse backgrounds acclimate to the organization. Ideally, the manager not only helps new employees understand the power dynamics within the library, but is especially aware of the different communication styles that may be present in a particular

culture, and works with new employees to determine the best method in which to interact with other individuals within the organization.

¶16 This does not mean that a supervisor should suppress any legitimate concerns about the new employee—what it does mean is that a supervisor committed to diversity needs to be proactive in working with new employees from diverse backgrounds, and acknowledge that different modes of communication exist and must be accounted for when trying to explain the expectations of an organization to an increasingly diverse workforce. In order for a new employee to succeed within the organization, the methods a supervisor uses to communicate the ways productivity or accomplishment is measured in an organization may need to be expanded or revised to reach the greatest number of employees.

¶17 For instance, a supervisor could structure meetings differently, so that everyone with a stake in a decision understands that they must state their opinion at a department-wide meeting, not leave the discussion to the individuals who are usually the most vocal during meetings. Otherwise, a new employee might feel hesitant about voicing an opinion critical of a colleague. Or the manager could approach staffers individually to hear their opinions on a matter, giving them an opportunity to be heard alone before calling a meeting if raising an issue for the first time might spark an argument based on assumptions or miscommunication. If a colleague complains about another's work, the manager must delve deeper to understand what the expectations and assumptions were on both sides of the issue, instead of assuming that the more experienced employee necessarily provided the most accurate description of the problem.

¶18 All of these approaches are dependent on having a supervisor who works not only with an awareness of multicultural issues, but also with an understanding of the power dynamics specific to the organization. The supervisor can take that knowledge and do her best to ensure that new employees feel comfortable adjusting to the library or organization while giving them the best possible base upon which to succeed.

¶19 I believe that a manager who develops a conscious awareness of the needs of the culturally diverse members of her staff becomes a better manager for all library employees. The ability to identify and comprehend the issues that may be confronted by those from different backgrounds can only increase a manager's ability to understand the issues faced by all employees. The successful management of these issues minimizes the impact of politics and of fluctuating power dynamics, which can only mean a stronger, more positive work environment for all members of the staff.

¶20 Clearly, even before diversifying the profession became an issue, conflicts existed within law libraries. But whether termed "politics" or "power dynamics," the fact remains that managing conflict within organizations gets more difficult with an increasingly diverse workforce, and poor management effectively hinders the likelihood that culturally diverse candidates will be attracted to the profession. Like other professionals, law librarians should look to an awareness of multicultural issues to help increase the ways in which they can better manage conflict within their organizations. By doing so, they increase the ability of the profession as a whole to appeal to a diverse group of individuals who can only enrich the field with their experiences, and who reflect the larger world.