

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon.

My name is Stephanie and I've been the Person in Charge Co-ordinator at Multnomah County's Central Library in downtown Portland for nearly two years. I'm very glad to talk with you about what I think is the most critical part of working successfully with the public in any capacity: building relationships.

Before we dive into that topic, though, I'd like to talk briefly about safety and security in our public libraries (especially our urban public libraries), specifically about whose job it is to maintain it. I have encountered two schools of thought about that since I came to MCL. Some people want to compartmentalize safety and security. They want it to be the job of designated personnel so that they can focus on the real work of the library. Others think that all library staff have a role in maintaining a safe and secure environment, that as the needs of patrons change, so should library staff's focus. I am in this latter camp. Even in libraries that have staff whose role is focused on security, it is important to recognize that the effort needs to be a unified one. No matter what different skills and and comfort levels we have when it comes to talking to patrons, we all have something to contribute to ensuring the environment in which we work is welcoming and safe.

How many of you have staff in your libraries who are in designated safety and security roles?

One aspect of my role as PIC Co-ordinator is to guide the group of library staff who are primarily responsible for issuing exclusions. At MCL we have an exclusion progression, so for lower level behavioral issues patrons are excluded for one day for the first infraction, one week for the second, one month for the third, and so on.

Before coming to work at MCL in 2016, I spent 18 years working at Powell's Books, just a few blocks away from the Central branch. One of my roles there was to respond to security-related and customer service issues. Occasionally we'd have to exclude someone for being disruptive, but that didn't happen frequently. Because Powell's has a generous book-borrowing policy for employees, I hadn't set foot in the Central Library for 18 years. In my mind the library was still the same place it was when I was fourteen and a page in the small library in my hometown. Even my interview for the position, with its questions about prioritizing security-related incidents and welcoming diverse populations, did not prepare me for the intensity of the environment. Have any of you been to Central Library in the past five years? Beautiful building. Amazing collection. And very evidently serving a wide variety of people who are largely without resources: people who are unhoused; people struggling with mental health issues; people who are addicted to alcohol or controlled substances. Sometimes all three.

I started thinking about the services the library provides that most of us are able to find elsewhere: access to restrooms, power, the internet, water. And the intangibles the library

provides: the feeling of having four walls around you; a quiet corner you can sit in all day; a place where you aren't labeled as soon as you walk in the door; a feeling of being served. I thought about constantly *having to think* about when and where I would urinate and defecate; where I would charge my phone; what I would eat; where I would sleep. I couldn't say with certainty that I'd be able to expend energy on all of those things and still be pro-social. I *am* certain that I'd be spending a lot of time in the library.

I realized the customer service approach I'd developed at Powell's--the enthusiastic, high-energy, smiling "how can I help you" approach--was not going to work with many patrons. (The answer to that might be--spoken or not--"you can get the bleep away from me, is how you can help me.") and I began thinking about how I could both do my job of applying the behavior rules and build relationships at the same time. I wanted to help make the library a welcoming place, and I was also very aware of what a tremendous impact a longer-term exclusion would have on many of our patrons.

How many of you have checked in with a patron about behavior?

I wanted the behavior rules to feel less like punishment and more like guidance. I didn't want patrons to feel chided when we attempted to educate them about the rules. I wanted the process of understanding and following the behavior rules to feel collaborative. I wanted to elicit patrons' co-operation in maintaining a safe and welcoming environment. So I started thinking about what collaboration looks like. I identified three components:

ACTIVITY #1

COLLABORATION

WHAT DOES COLLABORATION FEEL LIKE TO YOU?

I identified three components:

- Ask questions
- Offer options
- Be genuine

ACTIVITY #2

WRITE RULE, DISCUSS PHRASES THAT ARE MORE LIKELY TO ELICIT COOPERATION

Examples:

Rule 20 Sleeping or appearing to sleep in or on library premises

Non-collaborative: There's no sleeping in the library.

Collaborative: Hey, how's it going? Are you going to be able to stay awake in here today?

Rule 6 Engaging in conduct that disrupts or interferes with the normal operation of the library, or disturbs library staff or patrons, including, but not limited to...conduct that creates unreasonable noise, or conduct that consists of loud or boisterous physical behavior or talking.

Non-collaborative: Please stop talking so loudly.

Collaborative: I'm glad you're liking what you're watching so much, but can you lower your volume a bit?

Rule 16 Consuming food on library premises

Non-collaborative: I'm sorry, but there's no eating in the library.

Collaborative: That sandwich looks great, but I need you to either put it away or finish it outside. Thank you!

Rule 21 Improperly using library restrooms including, but not limited to, bathing, shaving or washing hair.

Non-collaborative: Hello. You can't do that here, you'll have to finish up.

Collaborative: Hello. We need to keep the sinks available for everyone to use, so can you finish up? If you'd like, I can check to see if there's a day shelter nearby that might have showers.

General notes

Many interactions involving the behavior rules don't require an exclusion. In most cases, the interaction is successful if the patron stops the inappropriate behavior. This might mean just listening to someone vent, finding an alternative solution to their issue, or giving them the option of leaving on their own.

You do NOT have to take verbal abuse. It is ok to say, "I can see that you're upset. Let's both take a deep breath, and see how we can resolve this." Or "I want to help you, but I won't be able to if you continue to use that language in our conversation." Even venting has its limits. You can end the conversation without promising any action.

Don't get caught up in the argument. Be aware of how far you will let this go before asking the person to leave or involving other staff.

Do a self-check on your own feelings, attitudes, and biases. Are you looking at behavior objectively? . Are we creating an equitable/inclusive environment?

COLLABORATING WITH COWORKERS TO MAINTAIN A SAFE AND WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

To be successful at building relationships with our patrons, we have to rely on each other. We learn from each other, we trust each other, we look out for each other.

ACTIVITY #3

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT OUR COWORKERS IN OUR EFFORT TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS?

Being aware of the interactions coworkers are having--being ready to step in if necessary

The warm transfer

Recognizing when a coworker might have a better relationship with a patron than you do

Communicating with coworkers about patrons' needs.

PERSONAL SAFETY AND DE-ESCALATION

The person who is best able to maximize your personal safety is you!

- Be aware of your surroundings--emergency exits, doors that lock, etc.
- Responder safety – Your safety, coworkers' safety, patrons' safety
- Generally, don't touch patrons, chase patrons, or obstruct a patron's exit
- Be alert & look alert (visibility, awareness, engagement)
- Distance = time = options
- Anyone can become violent - quickly and without warning
- Physical intervention guidelines
- Clothing considerations and risks (ties, hoods, scarves, shoes, etc.)
- If in doubt while facing a possible emergency, call 911
- Know who is available to fulfill response roles
- Enlist backup and witnesses (interior and exterior response considerations)
- Coordinate and communicate (before, during, and after incidents)
 - A,B,C,D (accuracy, brevity, clarity, discretion)
- Vary walkthrough patterns
- Survey and monitor the scene (exit options, communication options, other people, possible weapons, patron's hands, etc.)
- Manage the incident area (position responders, direct patron traffic, clear exit avenue, etc.)
- Use appropriate stance, position, and non-verbal communication
 - Appear confident, not meek or confrontational
 - Keep hands free, open, and visible
 - Maintain balance and stability
 - Maximize mobility options
 - Position responders effectively relative to staff, patrons, and exits
- Walk and talk

- Issue verbal commands with conviction
- Respond safely to patrons who appear to be asleep or unconscious

Basic de-escalation techniques

A crisis can be defined as a moment when a person loses rational control over his/her behavior. You can intervene in these ways to prevent the situation from becoming dangerous.

Remain calm. If the patron is escalating, you need to keep calm. Don't let the patron see you get worked up or it will only escalate the situation even more.

Give attention. If a patron is distressed and feels no one is caring or paying attention, they may escalate their behavior to get more attention. Be validating and present.

Nonverbal cues. Keep it non-threatening. Calm voice, slower voice, hand gestures, facial expressions.

Ignore challenging questions or statements. "I bet you have no idea what it's like..." "You're too young to know anything..." etc. They may be challenging you personally, your authority, or the policy. Don't refute or answer challenges directly; but address the concern at hand and redirect. What's underneath the challenge?

Be empathetic and non-judgemental. Even if you think the feelings are unjustified, they are real to the patron.

Clarify feelings/needs. Listen to the real message underneath. Ask questions. Show you care and are trying to understand.

Set appropriate limits. If too extreme (belligerent and disruptive), give some clear directions as needed. Offer choices and consequences.

Affirm when done. When it's all done, if successful, thank the patron. "Hey, thanks for working that out."

Related links:

[California State Library's Mental Health Training Videos](#)

SETTING BOUNDARIES WITH PATRONS

Sometimes we're a little too successful at relationship building and we need to establish some boundaries with patrons who may be asking personal questions or giving unwanted attention.

Why set boundaries?

Setting and keeping boundaries helps you **and** it helps our patrons. It is better for the patron to know what is appropriate/allowed right away, rather than doing something inappropriate for a while and then finding out it's not right. Setting boundaries is not unkind or impersonal - it is professional and helpful.

When do boundaries apply?

Boundaries always apply. It does not matter if the patron is hungry, upset, sick, tired or even if there is a mistake on their account. Do not get involved in the details of the patron's story when that person is crossing boundaries. Deal with the boundaries first, and if you are able to resolve that issue, you can move on to help with the library-related need.

Tips for establishing boundaries

Take a breath

Take a moment to recognize that you have time to deal with this situation and to gather your thoughts.

Be the authority

You are not the person in this situation who is crossing the line. Treat the patron calmly and respectfully, and act in a way that demonstrates you deserve and expect respect.

Get help from a coworker

You are not alone in the library. Ask a coworker if you need help if you feel yourself getting upset or if you are uncomfortable.

Use these three steps to assertiveness:

1. Name it (behavior): *You are cursing.*
2. Claim it (reason why): *That is not allowed in the library and it makes me feel uncomfortable.*
3. Tell them what to do
 - One option: offer choices - what would you like to do?

*You are cursing at me. That is not allowed in the library and it makes me feel uncomfortable. **Would you like to speak to me in a respectful way, or would you like to come back tomorrow and try again?***

- Another option: state the current behavior and its consequences. State the new behavior you would like to see and what will happen.

*You are cursing at me. That is not allowed in the library and it makes me uncomfortable. **I would like you to speak to me in respectful way so that we can figure out what is happening with your library account.***

Examples

What you just said is inappropriate. Do not make personal comments about me. If you need help with something related to the library, I can help you. Otherwise, move away from the desk so I can help the next patron.

You are standing too close to me. That makes me uncomfortable. Will you move away from me or would you like me to find someone else to help you?

You are asking me questions about my personal life. I am here to help with library resources. Do you have a library related question? Otherwise, I have other work to do.

Tips for setting boundaries modified from:

Setting Boundaries With Patrons (Infopeople)

<https://infopeople.org/civicism/event/info?id=284&reset=1>

Empowered LLC, "Cut the C.R.A.P."

http://www.empoweredfacts.com/cut_crap_keep_compassion/

Other resources

Personal Safety Awareness class (see [County training calendar](#))

Ready to Respond - Building your skills

<https://commons.multcolib.org/learning-organizational-development/building-your-skills>