

LLAMA President's Message

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We are leaders at a time when leadership has become more complicated in a conflicted and highly visible world being played out through a lens of social media. One is constantly bombarded with reports or messages that seem intended to incite a sense of outrage on every front and calls for leaders to take immediate punitive action to fight injustice. Headlines report individuals being immediately removed from or threatened with termination from their positions because of public allegations of misconduct, ranging from verbal or written comments, symbolic statements of protest, or sexual harassment. In reality these headlines are reporting on dysfunctional cultures, often high profile, and in many cases representing a scenario similar to the story of the Emperor's New Clothes, where too many people were actually aware of and complicit to the toxic culture which is finally imploding under the weight of changing social norms. Fortunately, most library cultures are not like this. While there may be conflict and interpersonal interaction mistakes, they are typically not indicative of a culture of abuse and open discrimination. That said, even library leaders need to anticipate and have a plan for responding to a complaint of discrimination or harassing conduct.

As leaders, it is critical that we focus on appropriate and timely responses to problematic situations that may develop within our organizations. At the same time, we must avoid being swept up into a sense of panic or feed into escalating a conflict based on pressure from social media or an individual's personal agenda. This can be more difficult that one realizes when dealing with the strong emotions that accompany a complaint of discrimination or harassment. However, we have to recognize and apply

some of the key tenets of the justice system in this country, which is based on a presumption of innocence until proven guilty. There are many different levels of proof, but there must be sufficient information that supports determining fault and applying sanctions. In those situations where there is inadequate evidence for sanctions, one can still apply elements of coaching for better interpersonal skill and judgment.

When faced with a complaint or allegation of inappropriate conduct, the first step is to acknowledge it in a way that respects the individual's perspective and commits the organization to an investigation and follow-up. One should take care not to commit to a particular outcome at this point or get drawn into a perspective of sympathetic outrage. The next step is to gather facts and perspectives, this might include activities such as pulling email records and interviewing participants and witnesses. Similarly, if disciplinary action is indicated, it is important to confirm this through institutional human resources or legal support staff. This can all take time. It is important not to let yourself get pushed into premature decision-making based on partial knowledge. If you do have to issue a message, continue to reiterate that the issue is being taken very seriously and is being investigated. It is important to provide status updates, such as "we are still gathering facts and interviewing those involved" or "we have completed the fact gathering and are discussing with counsel the next steps." This will reassure the individuals involved that the issue is still a priority.

Unfortunately for the court of public opinion, personnel actions are generally protected by confidentiality rules and guidelines. Similarly, most cases of inappropriate conduct do not result in a public termination of an individual so the impact of required training, a letter of reprimand, or loss of privilege may not obviously appear to others. The most that you can do is reassure all parties that appropriate actions have been taken and to let you know if there is a recurrence of the behavior. In all cases, we must acknowledge the courage of the complainant, let them know we take the information seriously, and encourage them to let us know anytime there is a concern. It is actually my experience that the sanctioned individual will often share the outcome with a "few close colleagues" in an effort to find a sympathetic ally and the organizational grapevine will do the rest.

However, another more frequent outcome of the investigation will be that there is insufficient evidence of the perceived inappropriate conduct, that it was of a lesser degree than had been reported, or was a true misunderstanding of the behavior. This actually happens very easily when an individual assigns erroneous intentions to another's action or comment. However, an investigation will subsequently reveal a totally different intention that truly was misunderstood. In some cases, it may be that the behavior represented a lack of environmental sensitivity, empathy, or basic manners. Even the latter scenario does not make the person evil or the intent to be discriminatory or a sexual predator. In these cases, one has the leadership opportunity

to foster positive dialogue for a teachable moment on professional engagement for the alleged offender. But it may also be critical to address the importance of continuing to work together as a team and rebuilding collegial respect. It is our responsibility as leaders to challenge the current practice of escalating conflict into a public arena and engage in a way that moves issues, relationships, and organizations forward rather than letting them continue to be divisive and destructive.

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