

Customer Service Series: Part Three  
**Dealing With Hostile and Potentially  
Dangerous Library Users**  
**Arrowhead Library System**  
*With Pat Wagner –patternresearch.com*

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Hostile and Potentially Dangerous Users

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**Dealing With Hostile and Potentially  
Dangerous Library Users**  
Customer Service Series: Part Three  
Tuesday, October 20, 2020  
**Arrowhead Library System**  
[www.alslib.info](http://www.alslib.info)

**Pat Wagner**  
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**Are All  
Hostile Library  
Customers Dangerous?**

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Key Idea

**We need to plan as if anyone might turn out to be dangerous.**  
*Not paranoid: prepared!*

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Key Idea

**Therefore, practice consistent courtesy. And trust your gut.**

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Outcomes

- Ensure everyone on the staff knows what to do in emergencies.
- Lower the drama of difficult encounters with library customers.
- Develop consistent responses to challenging customer behavior.
- Improve basic security features of your workplace.
- Institute regular safety programs with professionals.

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**Agenda**

- How We Influence The Behaviors Of Others
- Setting Limits On What Is Acceptable
- Prevent Escalation: Don't Engage Emotionally
- Distractions, Alternatives, Disengagement
- Trust Your Gut: When To Call Authorities

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**Assignment #1**

**How prepared is your library today?**

- Cheat sheets for procedures
- Emergency phone tree
- Staff meetings with leadership
- Law enforcement speakers
- Supervisor meeting:
  - Consistent responses

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**Your Internal Customers**

- Applies to employees and volunteers
- Yearly program on personnel issues:
  - Grievances and employees' rights
  - Management rights
  - Clarifying issues
- Take all threats seriously.
- No one is exempt from the rules.

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Agenda

**How We Influence  
The Behavior of Others**

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Caveat

Do you use your “*disapproval*” face  
with library users and co-workers  
you don’t like or know...  
so they know to shape up?  
Did you put that chip  
on their shoulder?

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First Impressions

**Verbal and nonverbal messages**

- The look of your face
- The tone of your voice
- Your posture and mannerisms
- The first words you say

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**Your Environment**

- **Community policing strategies**
- **Outside: No trash, clean windows**
- **Inside: Clean, uncluttered, pretty**
- **What staff wears**
- **How they see/hear you treat others**
- **First signs they read at your library**

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**Hire for Emotional Maturity**

- **Calm and friendly demeanor**
- **Flexible and willing to learn**
- **Treat others with respect: Manners**
- **Understand personal boundaries**
- **Don't default to blame/complain**
- **Take responsibility for mistakes**

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**Hire for Emotional Maturity**

- **Understand they're part of a team**
- **Like folk, even when they misbehave**
- **Like children and teenagers**
- **Have life outside of work**
- **Can build/maintain healthy relationships**
- **Have sense of humor about themselves**

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**People who do bad things  
are opportunistic.  
They look for: people  
who seem weak, dark corners,  
and the chance to do wrong.**

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**Two Levels of Service**

**One for people we know and like  
For people who look like us  
For people who are "nice"**

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**One for people we don't know or like  
For people who don't look like us  
For people who are "unpleasant"**

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**Supervisor Issues**

- Supervisors not on same page  
Different sites; different rules
- No supervisors on weekends  
or evenings: *False economies*
- One person staffs small branches
- No one alert to dicey behavior

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Assignment #2

If you *watch* the faces  
of library personnel  
as they interact with customers,  
what would this *show* you about  
their opinions regarding  
the people they are serving?

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Assignment #3

If you *listen* to the voices  
of library personnel  
as they interact with customers,  
what would this *tell* you about  
their opinions regarding  
the people they are serving?

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Agenda

Setting Limits on  
What is Acceptable

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**Manipulative behavior  
by library customers  
is a sign of inconsistent  
enforcement of the rules.  
The problem is library staff,  
not the library customer.**

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**The Policy Process**

- **Transparency breeds respect and trust.**
- **Include library stakeholders in processes.**
- **Meetings and advisory boards**
- **Invite professional advice:**
  - **Law enforcement and social services**
- **Engage the media in education**
- **Commonsense signs in library**

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**Typical Mistakes**

- **Too many rules**
- **Rules dominate interactions.**
- **Old ladies versus teenagers**
- **Few people enforce the rules.**
- **No way to test/evaluate rules**

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Assignment #4

How many employees would be able to accurately describe the library's or institution's rules regarding unacceptable behavior?

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Agenda

Prevent Escalation:  
Don't Engage Emotionally.

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Avoid Triggers

- Status issues:
  - Who knows more?
  - The "Credentials" Contest
  - Correcting customers
- "Singsong" condescending voice
- *Domination under guise of service*

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## Stop Arguing

- It's about the library, not your opinions.
- Provide information for their concerns.
- Find a way to say *yes* or agree with them.
- Find a way for them to say *yes*.
- Avoid political discussions.
- Change the subject:
  - Ask their opinion about something safe.

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## Assignment # 5

**Do you know  
your own triggers?  
Ask your friends,  
family, colleagues.**

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## Agenda

**Distractions,  
Alternatives,  
Disengagement**

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### Distractions

- The toy basket
- Sitting down and writing down
- Prepare something they like
- A glass of water
- Asking for advice

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### Alternatives

- Generate options and choices.
- Learn the customer's goals:  
Will another path serve?
- Substitute something more interesting than their anger.

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### Disengagement

- Can you say *no thank you*?  
Learn to interrupt politely and deflect.
- The formula:
  - Thank them.
  - Set the limit.
  - Offer an alternative.
- Walk away or hang up: Stay calm.

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Assignment #6

**Discuss with co-workers  
how to develop  
the "option" frame  
of mind.**

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Agenda

**Trust Your Gut:  
When to Call  
the Authorities**

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Education

- Legal and law enforcement community
- Who has jurisdiction for what issues?
- What you can and can't do
- Consistent and transparent process:  
Communication: Rules, and  
the consistent enforcement of rules

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## Resources

- *The Gift of Fear*. Gavin de Becker
- *Prisoners of Hate*. Aaron Beck
- *Stop Walking On Eggshells*. Mason and Kreger
- *I Hate You--Don't Leave Me*: Kreisman and Straus
- *Don't Shoot the Dog*: Karen Pryor
- *Fixing Broken Windows*: Kelling and Coles
- [www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/](http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/)
- [ala-apa.org/newsletter/2013/11/12/workplace-violence-are-you-prepared-to-manage-a-crisis-situation/](http://ala-apa.org/newsletter/2013/11/12/workplace-violence-are-you-prepared-to-manage-a-crisis-situation/)

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