

When the Library Makes Mistakes with Pat Wagner

Customer Service Series: Part Four

When the Library Makes Mistakes

Arrowhead Library System

With Pat Wagner –patternresearch.com

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When the Library Makes Mistakes

Customer Service Series: Part Four
Tuesday, October 27, 2020

Arrowhead Library System

www.alslib.info

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Key Idea

**Tell the truth.
Apologize
immediately.
Make it right.**

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**Bad News is the
Best Information.
Don't hide mistakes!**

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Mistakes

**Cutting corners on ethical, legal,
and financial matters because:**
We're small. We're poor. It's too much trouble.
We won't get caught. No one will care.
Rules don't apply to us. We didn't know.
It's their fault (a former stakeholder).
We're short staffed. We did nothing wrong.
We don't have time. It's not our job.

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Outcomes

- Seek library stakeholder input on better ways to address problems.
- Empower staff to deal with issues.
- Have written policies and procedures in place to deal with difficult situations.
- Train staff about "*chain of command*".
- Publicize protocols; inform stakeholders.

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**People will judge you
not by your mistakes
but how you fix them.**

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Agenda

- **Case Studies**
- **Preparation**
- **Response**
- **Aftermath**
- **Prevention**

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Key Idea Reminder

**Tell the truth.
Apologize
immediately.
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Library Mistakes

**Usually, it's not
WHAT was done, but
HOW it was handled
during and after.**

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Institutional Mistakes

**Mostly made by managers, directors,
administrators, and other leaders**

—

Might not involve customer interaction

—

**Can hurt politically, financially, and
legally; undermines stakeholder support**

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Institutional Mistakes

- Inventing rules and laws on the fly
- Violating local, state, and federal laws
- Missing key financial or legal deadlines
- Lack of oversight of people and projects
- Mishandling materials and access challenges
- Rushing/delaying decisions and actions
- Ignoring stakeholder input
- Conflicting interests: Ethical violations

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Mistakes with Customers

- Mostly involving frontline staff and direct interactions with library stakeholders
- Ranging from small mistakes to felonies!
- Disagreeing internally about library policies
- Demeaning customer beliefs
- Interfering with family conflicts
- Escalating discussions
- Allowing customers to behave badly

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Mistakes with Customers

- Falsely accusing re book returns and fines
- Treating library customers unequally: favoritism
- Library personnel behaving badly
- Hiring the wrong person
- Poor treatment of complaining customers
- No consistent grievance policies
- Tolerating staff acting on their biases
- Violating customer privacy and access

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Mistakes with Personnel

- Ignoring union agreements
- Misinterpreting employment contracts
- Sloppy hiring, firing, promotions, raises
- Sloppy assignments, policies, priorities
- Sloppy managing of people and projects
- Favoritism, nepotism, cronyism,
- No input on what happens

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Mistakes with Personnel

- Making promises during recruitment
- Privately dubbing an “heir apparent”.
- Institutional bias re specific cohorts
- Ignoring state personnel laws
- Gossiping about personnel issues
- Giving employees illegitimate authority
- No transparency regarding finances

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Case Study: Escalation

**An argument at the circ desk
about a 14 cent fine ends up
on the city council agenda
and is televised. Heads roll.**

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Case Study: Wrong hire

The new hire for the children's department had great credentials: Master's in English literature. Turned out she was a big city snob, with contempt for rural life, and insulted numerous family members.

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Case Study: Wrong change

The high school student working at the circulation desk was accused of cheating a customer of money. The student was exonerated, but not before her parents accused the library and the customer of racism.

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Caveat

**Anything can go wrong.
Good people can
make mistakes, disagree,
forget, misunderstand.**

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Preparation

- Interdepartmental/interagency teams
- Legal and political support
- *What If* scenarios
- Prepare for worst cases
- Who's in charge of what?
- If appropriate, practice.
- Funds and insurance, just in case

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The Basics

- Culture of courtesy and respect: manners
- Timely and accurate communication
- You keep your promises.
- Team approach to solving problems
- Courage to admit you were wrong
- Training and cheat sheets

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Exercise

**Does everyone
know what to do
in case of a mistake?**

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Tip

**The more confident and competent
your personnel and leaders are
when dealing with mistakes, the
better the outcomes for everyone.**

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Caveat

**Risk management:
How many rules
are too many rules?**

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- Prevention

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Response

The challenge is time:
How to balance *speedy responses*
while still respecting the *necessity*
of *due process, meaning research,*
discussion, and communication.

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Empowerment

**What types of issues can
a library employee
handle immediately?**

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Empowerment

- Scope and scale of their authority
- How cut and dried the issue
- Consistent responses for every customer
- Amount of money/resources involved
- Every incident documented and discussed
- Knows when to kick it up to next level
- Added risk if another mistake is made
- Decision supported by organization

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Aftermath

**It's someone's job to follow through
and ensure the issue was settled.
Even if they did not get their way,
was the person satisfied they were
treated with courtesy and respect?
They were listened to? The response
was swift? The process was fair?**

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Aftermath

- How long did it take to resolve the issue?
- Did the person have to deal with more than one library employee?
- What questions should we have asked?
- Would the person still want to use and support the library?

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Lessons Learned

Every incident requires a review:
Could the mistake have been prevented?
It wasn't a mistake, per se, but could we have done a better job communicating with stakeholders?
Did the incident alert us to changes that needed to be made?
Is there any way we can do better next time?

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