

SURVIVAL FORUMS: Response from the LAA Queensland Branch

Basic policy

The Queensland Branch strongly supports the idea of survival forums, believing that this kind of assistance to members — especially in smaller libraries — should be regarded as a basic service of the LAA. We recommend however that the term 'advisory service' be used instead of survival forums. 'Advisory service' is less restrictive in scope and more accurately reflects the kind of work involved. Outlined here are some of the issues involved and guideline suggestions for the operation of the scheme.

Conditions of need

Circumstances which might warrant the assistance of a survival forum would include:

- threatened closure of a library;
- cuts in staffing, budget or accommodation of such magnitude that a library's service is severely impaired;
- threatened dismissal of staff or downgrading of positions;
- imposition by management of policies directly inimical to library ethics and LAA policy.

Survival forums as established by the LAA should be called into action only when circumstances in the library are obviously deteriorating. Other formal and informal sources of support should be drawn upon first wherever possible. Too much reliance on the survival forum might place its members under undue strain.

Eligibility for assistance

Assistance should not be limited to members of the LAA though non-member beneficiaries should be strongly encouraged to join. The LAA must reserve the right to assess eligibility for assistance.

Membership of forum

The convenor of the forum in each state should be a Branch Councillor and the forum should be answerable to Branch Council. In Queensland we recommend that the convenor be the Branch Councillor responsible for industrial relations, initially at least.

A separate forum should be established for each individual case. Forum members need not all be members of the LAA, nor need every one be a 'survivor'. There may be some members of the local library community with experience in peer support or special management skills which might equip them for the task. The fact of having survived a previous crisis should not itself be a qualification for membership: rather it is the way in which this survival was managed that is of crucial importance. In short, LAA Branches should exercise some discretion in choosing suitable members of the survival forum. Decisions regarding the membership of any 'advisory group' should be agreed between the Branch President and the Branch Councillor in charge of industrial relations.

There may at times be good reason to co-opt additional members from outside the library profession: people with special skills to contribute on a voluntary basis. Members of the forum should feel free to equip themselves with the best possible range of human resources.

Forms of assistance

The nature of the assistance that can be provided is likely to be limited. For the most part it will simply be advice. This is not a bad thing, for it is in the client librarian's own interest that he/she be the author of whatever action is required. In exceptional circumstances the Branch President may be asked to intervene, either by letter to the librarian's employer or by personal contact. However this is not a course that should be adopted lightly.

Advice pure and simple is likely to have no great effect. Indeed different members of the forum might offer contradictory advice, thus only confusing the client librarian. The forum should seek to recommend coherent strategies, sets of straightforward steps to follow with achievable goals.

Methods of operation

The librarian seeking assistance should first provide detailed documentation of the problem so that the survival forum is fully briefed. A panel of three should suffice for each case. In some circumstances a time limit may have to be set.

The survival strategy which is drawn up should include performance indicators that will enable evaluation of the intervention process at a later stage. The client librarian

should be required to give feedback so that this evaluation can take place. At the end of a written report should be made to document the case.

Confidentiality, ethics and liability

Confidentiality should be preserved in all communications between the librarian and the panel, where the librarian so wishes. This will mean that reports may be made to Branch Council but without naming the library concerned. Discretion and tact should also be used in any dealings with management. The LAA must act — and be seen to act — in a fully ethical and proper manner. Thus, for example, middle management or other non-library employees of the institution should not be approached without first gaining the permission of senior management.

We recommend that the LAA consider carefully the matter of legal liability and duty of care in advice given by survival forums.

Resources

This kind of service is one that the LAA can provide at little or no cost to itself, other than the time of forum members which is given voluntarily. We would therefore not contemplate charging any consultancy fee. On occasions, advice might have to be sought from the Industrial and Educational Services Manager. It might also be helpful to have a collection of articles on peer support or how this sort of service has been given elsewhere.

Preventive action

At the same time as helping beleaguered colleagues survive, we should take every action to prevent these circumstances arising. In this respect such things as the CAPL campaign and Special Libraries Publicity Campaign are good moves. Peer review, development of official standards, library promotion kits and CE activities with a management focus are all activities that the LAA or its divisions can use to strengthen libraries so that survival crises are less likely to arise. We commend the LAA's efforts in this direction.

Conclusion

In the current climate of economic stringency there is a pressing need for measures such as the establishment of survival forums. We fully endorse this idea and urge that it be speedily implemented.

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