

the last word

Dealing with the 'one percenters'

Libraries are funny places, full of contradictions. For the vast majority of clients they are places of great culture, a safe haven from the hustle and bustle. But then occasionally, very rarely in fact, their very nature invites a disruption that can have everyone ill at ease.

Occasionally you'll have an angry library user. The reason can be any number of things from the lack of newspapers to receiving an overdue fine. Generally speaking, the angry patron poses a minimal security risk, but if things do escalate, do you know what to do? Does your library have a plan or procedure for this?

Public libraries are also visited by people who are affected by either some degree of mental illness or under the influence of drugs and alcohol. They can make the library feel a little less safe. For slightly different reasons, university library and school library staff may also need to deal with these issues as well.

Strangely, most LIS qualifications don't really cover how to deal with these situations. So let's look at them one at a time.

The angry customer:

An angry customer usually has a reason for their behaviour. It might be an unreasonable reason, but in their mind there is an issue that needs to be dealt with. If you can treat such a person respectfully, hear them out, and seek to resolve their issue to the best of your ability, this will placate the vast majority of such people. Any escalation in their behaviour is often the result of either their needs not being accommodated, or how they are dealt with by staff. Now what should you do?

Mental illness and intellectual disability:

Contrary to popular belief most people living with mental illness and intellectual disability are not particularly prone to violence. There is a good chance they just came in to look at or borrow your stock. However sometimes through lack of treatment, lack of medication, or perhaps because of the way we interact with them, events might escalate.

However, if their behaviour is causing distress to you, other staff, or to the library clients what should you do?

Substance abusers:

As to those affected by drugs, their behaviour can be erratic and unpredictable, but again generally speaking most are not prone to violence. The exception to this is when they are withdrawing from the drug and someone stands between them and the relief from that pain. It's not the place of this article to discuss the moral or legal issues of drug taking except to say that a library is not an appropriate place for people to be consuming illicit drugs.

As well as the potential for aggression, the drug user poses a theft risk as their particular issues are more expensive than most. In either case would you know what to do? Would your behaviour be reducing or inflaming the situation?

What to do:

I'm sure there are many more situations, enough to fill a book or two. Even under these general headings, there are an infinite number of possibilities and a 'one size fits all' would be lovely, but unfortunately doesn't exist. However, here are some general principles that may help:

1. **Observation:** Before getting involved observe the individuals involved to determine the issues and the risk to self and others. If it is not safe, seek external help (another team member, the duress button, or call the police).
2. **Calming:** If it is safe to approach the individual, see what you can do to calm them down. This involves actively listening (even if their issue is a little 'odd'), treating them with respect and dignity, and remaining calm yourself. You should also think about moving them away from the source of their distress and other library users.
3. **Reassurance:** Let them know that you will try to address their concerns and provide them with any information they may need. If they are in personal distress, ask if there is anyone they would like you to call (a family member or case worker).

Any action you take must align with your organisation's policies and procedures (so you'll need to know what they are). Your actions must also be socially acceptable. Three questions here: Would you like your own child treated that way? How would this look in the media? Finally, are your actions legally defensible?

Also consider how to get out of the situation as quickly as possible if you need to. Can you get to an exit easily? What about the aggressor – do they have a clear line of escape? Many injuries occur because a person is blocking the exit point of an irrational individual.

As most libraries are a team environment, it is important that we keep a watch out for each other. If one of our team is feeling vulnerable or threatened, then sometimes the simple act of offering to assist our colleague can not only make them feel more secure, but lessen the actual threat as well.

Of course the overwhelming majority of people who enter the library are pleasant and easy to deal with, so it doesn't pay to become obsessed with these 'one percenters,' but it is important that we feel safe at work and know how to confidently deal with people who use our service in whatever capacity they choose, and that we treat them with dignity and respect.

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