NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY: UNLOCKING THE BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SECURITY AND STAFF

In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in 2020 and the ongoing crises and challenges that New Yorkers were experiencing during and after the global pandemic, our frontline library staff were feeling very unsafe, unsupported and confused about policing in our nation in general, in our city and also in our 92 libraries.

The mission of The New York Public Library is to inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge, and strengthen our communities. Our communities are not only the patrons that we serve, but also our community of staff. In reaction to world events, our frontline staff who work directly with the public created a group, called STACSS. *Staff Taking Action Creating Safer Spaces*. They had specific areas of work that they wanted to review in the hopes of brainstorming better, safer ways for them to serve and engage our patrons.

The STACSS group was divided up into 6 working groups:

1. General Rules & Policies and Regulations Review
2. Restorative Justice
3. Social Services
4. Social Work Interns
5. Training Needs Analysis - Dealing with Conflict Course(s)
6. Action Learning with Security

I was asked to lead working group #6, Action Learning with Security. My role was to lead the many interested staff in Action Learning sessions with our Security leaders, other STACSS members and Senior Leadership to find forward actions for fostering better communications and ways of working between branch library staff, our Security,

and our patrons. These groups definitely have challenges communicating. The groups would explore "What is the role of Security at the New York Public Library?", "How can we keep ourselves safe?" and "How can we keep our patrons safe?" It was my hope and my goal to break down the barriers to communication and to foster and build better partnerships between staff and security. Our staff had concerns about policing at the Library, but were often afraid to speak their mind. Our Security supervisors are NYPL staff, but most of our actual security guards in our neighborhood branches are contracted with an outside firm. They are not our employees.

Having staff that were wary of, or afraid to trust in our Security department was definitely a problem of great urgency to our organization, so utilizing Action Learning methods seemed like a unique and creative way to address this significant and urgent problem.

We recruited participants through the 200+ group listserv of the STACSS group and also via email to our approximately 90 Library Managers. We had a great response and great interest. We convened 7 groups of 10 people. Each group met for 90 minutes on 2 consecutive days. All of the groups met in May and June of 2021. I led every group and asked 1 person to be the problem presenter. The problem being for all of the groups the questions mentioned earlier. "What is the role of Security at NYPL?", "How can we keep ourselves safe?" and "How can we keep our patrons safe?" One person in each group volunteered to present the problem or a similar version of the problem.

One week prior to each meeting, and 1 day prior to each meeting attendees received a reminder email from me with a link to a two minute video explaining Action Learning and a link to our ground rules and leadership skills that they might choose to focus on.

Leadership skills the groups chose to work on:
Be Brave	Listen intently
Stay Focused	Focus on what emerges
Communicate	Teamwork
Be Concise	And during trying times…Be Hopeful

Because Action Learning positions questions at the core of each session, it helps members of the groups to develop critical thinking skills and fosters communication and respect among the group members.

Action Learning's Ground Rule #1: Statements can only be made in response to questions (and anyone can ask a question to anyone else), ties in beautifully with one of the New York Public Library's Core Values:

- Be Curious in all aspects of your work

Asking questions helps us to develop and expand upon our curiosity. Actually the methods of Action Learning tie in with all of NYPL's core values:

Be Helpful, Be Resourceful, Be Curious, Be Welcoming and Inclusive

The level of participation in every group was amazing. Everyone in every single group contributed. It was especially helpful having more than one session with the same people because it allowed for trust to develop and the groups worked better together by session two. This enabled everyone to speak freely, both when asking difficult & probing questions and when responding to them. This feeling of a safe space to express themselves made our sessions more productive and our outcomes more positive.

Also, putting together diverse groups of people makes it really interesting as they try to empathize and understand problems they may never have experienced before YET they can offer solutions to each other that WILL work.

It was very eye-opening for staff to be able to ask questions of and listen to answers and stories from our Security teams. And from our Security staff to really have the dedicated time to listen to and ask questions of staff on the frontlines in a very open and supportive environment. So much learning and sharing was taking place! It was great!

All the groups explored questions such as:
- What does safety mean?
- Which rules are the most important?
- What is crossing the line?
- When do we call the police?
- What does it look like when the line of "when to call the police" looks different for everyone?
- Regarding Disruptive youth - how do we assess as things are escalating?
- We don't know what our contract guards are supposed to do. What are their duties?
- Security...what would you like staff to know in conflict situations? What would you like staff to do in conflict situations?
- How do we build relationships with guards when they aren't present for our staff meetings because they are not NYPL staff?

- Do our incident reports ask the right questions? Are they filled out properly? Some staff don't know about them until they need to fill one out.

Certain themes seemed to appear in every session:

Safety, Incident Reports, Training, Policing Policies

Labeling & Phrasing: The Words that We use to describe people and the words that we use to describe incidents and Library rules vs Library Operations.

In September of 2021 we reconvened again as a smaller group, to discuss our progress. Many of the suggestions and ideas that were surfaced during these summer AL sessions were already being incorporated into the current staff trainings. I am pleased to report that many new trainings and resources were instituted for staff as a direct result of our Action Learning Sessions. Additionally, and most importantly, attitudes were changed. Instead of the *Us vs. Them* attitude that staff and Security entered the meetings with, they left with the sense that we are all part of the same team, the same organization. A question that was often asked in each group was, "What can we all agree on?" As one Security supervisor emailed me afterwards, "That was extremely powerful!"

Some of Results & Outcomes for staff in all 92 locations:

1. Training Called *Incident Reports: Keep Calm and Write the Report - 17 minutes. Covers the What, When and How of Incident reports. It addresses concerns that were surfaced during AL sessions.*

2. Training Called *Working with Your Security Guard.* Features 3 Library Managers talking about Best Practices when starting a new security guard or also to be used as a refresher with a current guard. Again, it *addresses concerns that were surfaced during AL sessions.*

3. Both of the trainings mentioned are pre-work for **in-person training** given by our Interim Director of Security. Our Bronx networks completed their training in June. Our Staten Island Network met this past July and all Manhattan staff are participating now, in September.

4. In addition, our Special Investigation Officers are being trained to lead team sessions for every branch location. The contract security guards will be paid to attend those meetings, which is completely new and has never happened in the NYPL in the past! So that was a great win!

5. More resources have been made available to staff in the form of both online and in-person De-escalation Trainings.

In conclusion, our Action Learning Sessions definitely DID

Unlock the Barriers to Communication Between our Security and our Staff and they were successful in making changes in our organizational culture. This could not have happened without utilizing Action Learning methods.

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