

UNLOCKING THE BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION BETWEEN NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY SECURITY AND LIBRARY 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 the United States in general, in our city, New York, and also in our 92 neighborhood 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. I was asked to lead the working group, 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 of the NYPL 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.



NYPL Kingsbridge Library in Bronx, NY

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 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.

Because Action Learning positions questions as the central tenet of each working session, it helps members of the group 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, ties in beautifully with one of the NYPL'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 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 and probing questions and when responding to them. This feeling of a safe space to express themselves made our sessions more productive and our outcomes very positive.

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.

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?
- 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?

Certain themes seemed to appear in every session: Safety, Incident Reports, Training, Policing Policies and Library rules vs Library Operations.

In September of 2021 we reconvened again as a smaller Action Learning group, to discuss our progress. Many of the suggestions and ideas that were surfaced during these summer AL sessions were already being incorporated into 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 the positive outcomes for staff in all 92 locations were:

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.

Action Learning Sessions definitely DID help us to **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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