

# **Balancing Employee Dedication with Responsibility to Clients: A Case Study of the Argentine Library**

**By Julia Westhoff  
PA 725 – Professor Loney**

## **Introduction**

There are numerous rules and regulations put in place by federal, state, and local governments to aid Human Resource Managers (HRM's) in public organizations. These regulations are an attempt to ensure fairness and safeguard against discrepancies. Unfortunately, as any HRM knows, many personnel issues require more than just a knowledge of policies and procedures. Indeed, many personnel issues require HRM's to weigh a number of factors before deciding on outcomes. This particular case highlights the complexities that an HRM may encounter when attempting to deal with a problem in an established public agency. It sheds light on some of the difficulties that come about when workplaces (especially public workplaces) attempt to carry out seemingly cut and dry human resource issues.

## **Background**

First, some background on the case. It involves a public library in a fairly small town in the Midwest. The demographics of this city, called Argentine, have changed dramatically over the past decade. It has gone from being a mostly white, English-speaking, low to middle class neighborhood, to a community that consistently attracts a steady stream of Mexican immigrant families who speak mostly Spanish.

The library, located in the center of town, has been somewhat slow to accommodate the new clientele. Although many of the library workers have good intentions, it is difficult for most of them to communicate with the new patrons, due to

the language barrier. Most of the library employees have been working at the library for several decades. Their ages run from 55-75. They are all residents of the town and are fairly active community members.

Argentine's recent demographical shift has taken many of the town's residents (including the library employees) by surprise, and many of them are not happy with it. Some attribute local crimes to the immigrants, although there is no evidence to support these claims. The mood in Argentine continues to be somewhat tense as the immigrants attempt to settle in.

The library is one of the main sources of information in Argentine. It is a place where patrons can go to find information about jobs, housing, schools, healthcare, and many other necessities. It is also a source of free entertainment, providing shows, story hours, and other activities, as well as renting out books and videos. Because of this, the library is quite attractive to the town's new residents, who are in need of vital information, as well as a place to bring their children.

One of the library employees, Edith, has worked at the library for about 20 years. Edith is a nonexempt employee. Because she lacks a high school diploma, Edith was never able to get an exempt position. She is 75 and a widow, supporting a son and a grandson who do not work. She makes about \$8 an hour shelving books and compiling arts and crafts materials in the children's library. She has very little money saved, and plans on continuing her work in the library for as long as she is able. Edith (and all of her Argentine Library co-workers) is a state employee.

Edith has made it fairly clear that she has a negative view of the Mexican immigrants who have moved to Argentine. She has made racist comments about them

while shelving books, and has avoided helping them when they approach her. Previously it was known among her coworkers that she held racist views, but the issue was dismissed. However, once patrons began to make formal complaints about being mistreated, it was clear that Edith's manager had to do something.

Jane, the manager at the Argentine Branch Library, is a fairly new employee at the library. Although most of her staff has been working at the library for a while, Jane has been there for less than a year. She is an accommodating, friendly manager who is still trying to get to know both her employees and the library's clientele. She generally likes to avoid conflict, but she knows that she must step in to curb this problem before it turns into a serious issue. When the first complaint came to her attention, Jane met with Edith to explain the situation, and, after speaking with the library's HRM, insisted that Edith watch a video that promoted multiculturalism. The video was made by the state specifically for situations like this, and its purpose is clearly to enlighten employees such as Edith. This was Jane's first attempt to change Edith's behavior, which she found preferable to simply punishing her. The idea of correcting misbehavior is seconded by Dennis M. Daley (2002) on page 239 of *Strategic Human Resource Management* when he stated, "...the purpose of discipline is not to punish but to modify behavior."

Edith watched the video at Jane's insistence, but it did not appear to make a difference in her behavior. Only two weeks afterwards, Edith used a derogatory name to identify a patron who asked her for help. This patron also issued a formal complaint against Edith. Again, Jane went to the library's HRM, who signed Edith up for a day-long diversity class. Edith attended the class, but again seemed to be unchanged by the messages of the training. Today Edith continues to act out towards ethnic library patrons,

and it has become clear that certain patrons have stopped patronizing the library because they feel uncomfortable around Edith. It also seems evident from the library's policies that Edith should be fired, but Jane cannot yet bring herself to do so, hoping to find other options to deal with the problem. After all, Edith's age and her lack of skills mean she will have a tough (if not impossible) time getting hired elsewhere, and she cannot afford to retire. Still, the problem continues to worsen, and it is time to conceive of some alternative solutions. First, however, Jane needs to be aware of any legal or ethical implications that pertain to the matter.

### **Legal and Ethical Issues**

In his chapter *Ethics and Human Resources Management* Jonathan P. West (2003) discussed the concept of an ethical environment in the workplace. He described the institutionalization of ethics as "a major challenge for public institutions" (p. 301). West stated that most HR professionals respond to ethics issues in two ways: legal and behavioral (p. 302). Legal action, West stated, is meant to "curb wrongdoing" (p. 302). Training attempts to raise the "ethical consciousness of employees".

Clearly Jane and her HRM attempted to change Edith's behavior by enlightening her. In this case, however, training did not solve the problem at hand. It seemed as though Edith was not open to the idea of training. Perhaps she was not clear on what she was expected to obtain from the training. Said Daley (2002), "Employees must know what it is they are expected to learn and why it is important for their future job performance" (p. 223).

However, even if Edith had been adequately prepared for the training, it still may not have been enough. It is difficult to expect that spending one day in class would be

enough to make up for a lifetime of behavior. As Daley (2002) stated, ‘Training is not a panacea’ (p. 217).

Jane should also take into account the organizational culture of the Argentine Library. Clearly, Edith’s racist comments are not the result of a recent change in her behavior. Rather, Edith’s comments are simply being treated more seriously now that Jane is her boss. The culture at the library had previously been one that tolerated racist behavior, essentially allowing Edith’s rudeness to persist for decades undisturbed. Edith’s previous boss had not intervened in similar situations, making it even more difficult for Edith to understand that her behavior was unacceptable. Daley (2002) stated, “The overall, long-term organizational environment sets the institutional tone and enunciates the basic principles that are used to guide individual behavior” (p. 25). Jane’s emphasis on cultural understanding and employee accountability was new to Edith, whose behavior had previously been condoned and perhaps even encouraged. West (2003) touched on this issue on page 313 when he said, “In short, building organizational integrity and advancing a strong sense of public service ethics is one of the major human resource challenges in the twenty-first century.”

Jane’s handling of this issue could be a pivotal point in her acceptance by the rest of her staff, who no doubt feel more loyalty for Edith, whom they have known for many years, than for Jane, whom they met only recently. It will also set the tone for her managerial style. She must be sure of any decision that she decides to make. She can always refer to state employee rights if she has questions about the legality of the issue.

Legally, because Edith is a state employee she is protected under the Constitution’s Bill of Rights (Rosenbloom & Bailey, 2003). In this case the issue applies

to freedom of speech, and raises the question – are Edith’s racist comments protected under free speech? According to David Rosenbloom and Margo Bailey (2003) in *What Every Public Personnel Manager Should Know About the Constitution*, the key issue in cases such as this is, “...whether the employee’s remark is about a matter of public concern” (p. 32). If the remark is a matter of public concern, the authors stated, then it is simply part of a general democratic discussion. However, statements about private matters, such as an employee’s personal opinion of another employee, “...are afforded minimal (if any) protection when they interfere with the proper functioning of government offices” (p. 32). In this case, because Edith’s remarks caused library patrons to discontinue library use, it does appear that her remarks fall in the latter category and are not subject to the same rights as other free speech issues might be.

### **HRM Suggestions**

Having concluded that Edith’s comments are not protected under the Constitution, the question now becomes one of morality. Specifically, although it may be legal to terminate Edith’s employment, is it ethical? It would seem unnecessarily cruel to fire her, as she has been a valued and dedicated employee for much of her life. Is there no way that Edith can continue her work at the library? Most HR professionals seem to agree that it is preferable to make a concerted effort to retain an employee, rather than fire him or her without first attempting to resolve the problem. As Daley (2002) stated, “The organization also has a disciplinary system because its focus is not to savage but to salvage the employee. Although some offenses are so severe that termination is the only recourse, most are minor infractions by otherwise valuable employees” (p. 239).

On the other hand, Jane must decide how seriously to treat the customer complaints. While Edith and her co-workers may consider this to be a “minor infraction”, surely the insulted patrons take it much more seriously, and Jane seems to agree that something must be done. She is left with few options, but they might be worth trying.

If Edith cannot, or will not, change her behavior, she must not continue to work in her current position, where she is in constant contact with library patrons. One solution might be to move Edith into an area where she will not interact with patrons. If this will not be possible, perhaps her hours can be switched to mornings or evenings when the library is closed. This may not be a problem due to the fact that she can shelve books at any time. The obvious problem with these solutions is that they are simply “band-aid” treatments.

### **Conclusion**

Jane and her staff are clearly concerned for Edith, and they want to ensure her livelihood after her numerous years of dedicated service at the library. But equally important is the livelihood of the library, and the community which it serves. Jane is putting her staff, the library, and the state government for which she works in peril if she fails to solve this problem. If library patrons continue to complain, and nothing is done, they may take their grievances to the next level and sue the library. It is important that Jane either convince Edith to change her behavior, or at the very least, put her out of contact with library patrons. These solutions, however, are not preferable. My recommendation is that Edith’s employment be terminated. Jane has gone through the appropriate steps for dismissal, and at this point she has no option but to let Edith go.

## References

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