

Title: The Saboteur in the Academic Library

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Abstract

In 1944, the U.S. Office of Strategic Services released the Simple Sabotage Field Manual. Originally intended to aid the WWII-era citizen in committing small acts of sabotage within an enemy organization, the Field Manual developed a second life on social media after its declassification, as its advice on how to make erroneous decisions, stonewall, and lead others astray echoed the pitfalls of modern office work. We observe that academic library staff also use ‘neutral’ actions to actively delay and derail work, including an insistence on following proper channels, creating committees, haggling over precise language, and holding unnecessary meetings. This chapter shows how academic libraries find themselves uniquely susceptible to unintentional and willful saboteurs alike. Library saboteurs have the potential to derail and impede our organizational missions, as well as to push back against toxic leadership and mismanagement. This chapter explores the power and powerlessness of the library saboteur, and outlines how staff at all levels can identify the saboteur in the next cubicle—and in their own learned behavior.

Keywords

Sabotage; Academic Libraries; Organizational Theory; Organizational Dynamics

Introduction

Do you ever feel that your best ideas have been countered, stonewalled, or gently tabled for an ever-receding ‘later?’ Have you been invited to join expanding committees and task forces that exist to envision how libraries ‘should’ work without actually changing the institution? When sharing your concerns, have you learned to request that others take more time to consider more ideas, do more research, and seek just one more expert opinion before projects are finished?

Congratulations! According to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), you have perfected organizational sabotage. During World War II, the United States published a small booklet called the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual* (CIA, 1944). This guide for those resisting fascist regimes in Europe showed both how to slow industrial production as well as how to divert office work and delay strategic decisions. Best of all, the office saboteur can divert plans just by adding to the usual confusions of a workplace. This timeless advice shows how regular people can block leaders and peers through quiet choices to delay, distract, and defer collective action. This manual grew popular after declassification because it showed how easily you can undermine a team’s efforts. The CIA’s suggestions, as shown in Table 1, are those that you may have witnessed in action at your own institution. These suggestions are unlikely to remind you of a stealth operator in the French Resistance. Instead, you may think of situations when a colleague – or even you, yourself – have stifled progress towards a proposal with which you disagreed.

Label: Table 1

Advice for the Saboteur	Section
“Attempt to make the committees as large as possible — never less than five.”	11a3

“Make ‘speeches.’ Talk as frequently as possible and at great length.”	11a2
“Haggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions.”	11a5
“Advocate ‘caution’ ... urge [colleagues] to be ‘reasonable’ and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on.”	11a7
“Be worried about the propriety of any decision — raise the question of whether such action... lies within the jurisdiction of the group.”	11a8
“Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to re-open the question.”	11a6
“Insist on doing everything through ‘channels.’ Never permit short-cuts to be taken.”	11a1
“Give lengthy and incomprehensible explanations when questioned.”	12a
“Be as irritable and quarrelsome as possible without getting yourself into trouble.”	12d

Caption: Advice for the organizational saboteur, from the CIA’s Simple Sabotage Manual

Sabotage: Not just a Beastie Boys song

Anthropologist James C. Scott (1987) calls sabotage a weapon of the weak, an everyday form of resistance which is “informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate ... gains” (p. 33). Workers use a mixture of compliance and resistance to cover their tracks, giving plausible excuses for their deviation from expectations:

A boycott ... can be rationalized as a delay or difficulties in assembling the workforce. And, of course, acts of theft, sabotage, and vandalism have no authors at all. Thus, while there is a fair amount of resistance in Sedaka, there are virtually no publicly announced resisters or troublemakers. Even the more purely symbolic resistance – malicious gossip, character assassination, nicknames, rumors – we have examined follows the same pattern (pp. 281-282).

With these indirect tactics, individuals can resist direct power while avoiding “direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms” (p. 29). Such evasions let workers defend their interests without open resistance or power struggles.

Scholars in management and organizational studies call such behaviors workplace deviance, counterproductive behavior, organizational misbehavior, insidious workplace behavior, resistance, agency, and recalcitrance (Bryant, 2015; Edwards & Greenberg, 2010; Lawrence & Robinson, 2007), and more specifically observe a range of human behaviors under pressure that include absenteeism, shirking, gossip, incivility, bullying, violence, harassment, careerism, retaliation, lying, and humor (Bryant, 2015; Edwards & Greenberg 2010; Lawrence & Robinson, 2007; Linstead et al., 2014). From the management perspective, such behaviors subvert official organizational norms, harming the institution and its members (Robinson & Bennet, 1995).

We attempt to bridge these perspectives, using Bryant’s (2015) argument that workplace behavior is not inherent to individuals as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but is rather “a consequence of social contexts and ... interactions” (p. 489). Bryant challenged the idea that employees are the site or cause of problematic behaviors and noted that behaviors which violate supposed norms often make sense in the context of how a given organization’s norms are constructed and contested (p. 491). Even problematic behaviors naturally follow from some “organizational boundaries and logics” (Linstead et al., 2014, p. 178), and employees adjust behavior as they work to take back control of their work and renegotiate the rules (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). Seabright et al. (2010) noted that employees may have a range of reasons to impair a company’s “reputation or subvert its processes” (p. 80), including resistance to injustice, asserting power in the face of powerlessness, expressing frustration, subverting the rules to get things done, or even just having

fun (Edwards & Greenberg, 2010). While leaders are concerned with overt sabotage, Seabright et al. (2010) noted that less visible *covert* sabotage may have a greater impact in the long run.

What theorists call insidious work behavior may be legal, stealthy, and ambiguous, and can be targeted at people or institutions (Edwards & Greenberg, 2010, p. 329). Managers, employees, and even customers may be motivated by fear, anger, shame, powerlessness, uncertainty, or a desire for retaliation. Employees can feel powerless if their autonomy or desired social identity is threatened (Lawrence & Robinson, 2007). This is noteworthy as librarianship is a feminized profession (Emmelhainz et al., 2017) and a social identity which is often framed as a ‘calling,’ drawing librarians in through feelings of both autonomy and identity (Ettarh, 2018; Harris, 1992). While there is extensive literature on sabotage by public workers, we are focused on library workers in particular and how we perpetuate sabotage within our organizations (Kao et al., 2014).

Why we sabotage

Those who have never worked in libraries view our work with the empty awe of admiration (Seale & Mirza, 2019), as a place where librarians fulfill a noble calling (Ettarh, 2018). Library employees, however, at times experience their workplaces as marginalizing, demanding, disempowering, discouraging, frustrating, and draining, yet still are drawn into a chance to ‘make a difference’ and ‘follow our passions.’ Within this context, librarians may commit sabotage for several reasons:

Librarians sabotage initiatives to preserve status or increase power

Library employees are constantly renegotiating their professional identities and the expectations placed upon them. Employees who have built an identity as a leader, scholar, faculty member, servant of science, or mover-and-shaker may resist organizational changes that would limit their ability to fulfill these roles (Moriarty, 2019). An employee who has found a protected haven in an unstable hierarchy may seek to maintain their relative security. Self-promoters may increase their reputation through taking on new appointments they cannot fulfill. Academic employees may also work under leaders who scuttle some projects and promote others in order to quickly climb the ranks and win the eye of the next institution (Vaillancourt, 2020).

Librarians sabotage new projects to preserve past work

A librarian who spends years building a database, exhibit, or service is understandably reluctant to undo decades of hard work; after mastering one process or content management system, they may not want to close it down and learn another. As our profession shifts from bibliography to instructional design, from original cataloging to discovery services, and from systems to digital scholarship, library workers may resist those who challenge their expertise. Starting new projects by honoring prior work and skill (a process of ‘sunsetting’) is essential for moving into the work that is necessary for our organizations now (Davidson & Ronallo, 2018).

Librarians undermine and refuse requests in order to keep jobs manageable

Library employees who face budget cuts and the loss of colleagues through attrition or hiring freezes may resist new work in order to keep their spiraling jobs manageable. When libraries develop ever-expanding services in order to stay relevant (‘mission creep’), workers may push back by asking to withdraw into their core contributions. When managers see high-

performing staff as willing to take on more work or compensate for less focused colleagues, these performers may push back on new projects in order to maintain a sense of equity and balance within their peer group.

Librarians sabotage to protect themselves and their patrons

Employees in healthy libraries can safely raise concerns and join in real and appropriate decision-making, while leaders at times adjust course to response to perspectives gleaned from employees and other stakeholders. Librarians who work under neglect, favoritism, and powerplays, however, may experience a breakdown of trust in their institution (Fosslein & Duffy, 2019), and respond first by attending to self- and peer-care rather than to organizational initiatives.

Resisting biased initiatives in the form of what Ortega (2017) called ‘toxic library leadership’ can also be a form of ethical sabotage. Librarians may refuse to protect national leaders by erasing past harms (e.g. blackface images) from digital collections. They may resist reopening library buildings without protective gear during a pandemic, or stymie efforts to dismantle important services for students and the public (Schmidt, 2018). When unethical orders are given and direct pushback is ineffective, workers may feel that quietly dragging their feet is the only remaining response. Workers who are Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC) might also subvert their own oppression and undermine white supremacy through gossip and exaggerated compliance against the opaque structures of bureaucracy (Nataraj et al., 2020, p. 12).

The costs of sabotage

With an understanding of why workers engage in sabotage, we now ask: Why would library workers *not* take advantage of sabotage? At times sabotage benefits our organizations, workers, and the people we serve, yet workplace sabotage also makes our collective work harder and diminishes our ability to openly collaborate for change.

Some library workers experience sabotage in the form of workplace bullying (Freedman & Vreven, 2016, p. 727), in situation where they are set up to fail, mobbed, marginalized by turf wars, or forced out of their library. As Andrews (2020) noted, librarians of color may internalize a hostile work environment as a struggle with *impostor syndrome*, an experience characterized by doubting one's abilities while clinging to an irrational fear of being exposed as a fraud by others. When librarians and senior leadership avoid conflict by referring ideas to committee or further input, deferring decisions, or obstructing projects, they create more work that is often redistributed to employees who lack the autonomy to refuse, such as library staff, secretaries, student workers, contract employees, and early-career librarians obliged to service.

Stonewalling, subversion, and venting can lead to collective discouragement, fractured teams, lowered morale (Kendrick, 2017). When staff respond to this situation by leaving toxic jobs, libraries lose their labor and institutional knowledge. At academic libraries, sabotage gives collaborative projects an uncertain future, yet connecting across campus is essential for contemporary library services and infrastructure. Sabotage raises the maintenance costs of long-term projects, leading to turnover and reactionary decisions at the expense of collective efforts. Academy-owned infrastructure can be uniquely vulnerable to local sabotage, as ambitious projects are commonly supported by small teams within each library (Dohe, 2019).

Saboteurs, then, do more than just push for a personal agenda or create team challenges. Because we collaborate nationally and internationally, our most visionary initiatives are vulnerable to the same power struggles we find in local libraries. The founders of Hathitrust (<https://www.hathitrust.org/>), for instance, struggled to realize their vision due to competing values and politics. As one interviewee described:

The library community is very catty. Because they've been deprived of power for so long they engage in horizontal violence at the local level. [They think] that Michigan is doing this thing that really benefits us so that they can control us [. . .] We had a vision, which was that we really needed to back-up our digital scans, but the rest had to be settled by the library community (Centivany, 2017, p. 2365).

If political maneuvers born out of fear had not been recognized and navigated, a key resource for cultural heritage, would never have materialized.

How sabotage contributes to power structures

At times, library workers can use sabotage to effectively counter unethical or ineffective decisions, but sabotage also can be used as a weapon *against* the weak or unwary. This form of organizational violence occurs when the politically adroit use shared governance, feedback mechanisms, or administrative processes to consolidate power and sideline others. Academic libraries, like the institutions they occupy, are often deeply hierarchical organizations masquerading as egalitarian ones (Freedman & Vreven, 2016). Administrators, librarians, and staff navigate a complex mix of hierarchy, control, surveillance, bureaucratic structures, shared governance, unions, and the ideals or practical contingencies that led them to this work. In a

profession founded upon rules, classification, and organization (Graeber, 2015), workers use standards to advance collaborative initiatives at the local, consortial, and inter/national levels. We make decisions by consensus through committees, councils, and taskforces. In this way, we open the door for one holdout librarian to stop a committee, defer decisions to a working group, or activate other hindering mechanisms. Staff working in bureaucratic and hierarchical situations may find working beneath the surface through polite derailment a sensible way to advance our own interests while deferring to those with veto power. Yet when librarians pursue different goals under the cover of surface unity (Moriarty, 2019), it becomes easy to derail key people or projects using gossip, passive aggression, and proceduralism.

Sabotage as structural and racialized violence

Given how race, class, gender, ability, and other ascribed identities structure library staff experiences of the workplace, sabotage can also reinforce existing power structures. Toxic environments may disproportionately harm BIPOC library staff, who are more likely to experience direct bullying, a loss of support, and being set up to fail. Libraries that privilege the needs of affluent, white donors and audiences create a community that leaves behind the needs of BIPOC students, staff, and collections.

Many libraries have been shaped to meet the needs of primarily white actors, a process labeled white supremacy. In this context, it is no accident that we derail each other using what has been called white supremacist culture (perfectionism, defensiveness, one-sided thinking, objectivity, worship of the written word, and aversion to direct conflict (Okun, n.d.)—traits which are closely mapped to survival in a bureaucratic social world.

Ferretti (2020, p. 142) argued that “libraries, like academia, are historically white serving, have been complicit in the white racial project of the United States during the 19th century, and perpetuate the racial inequity in the field today.” Indeed, libraries are racialized organizations where race is performed and reinscribed (Ferretti, 2020; Ray, 2019). Ray (2019, p. 27) noted that such structures can reduce the agency of othered groups and legitimate the unequal distribution of resources. In researching causes of low morale in BIPOC library workers, Kendrick and Damasco (2017) noted that BIPOC workers experience abuse and neglect, as well as stereotype threat and deauthentication. Hathcock (2015) and Galvan (2015) described how white supremacy is institutionalized through what Nataraj et al. (2020) calls ‘white institutional presence’ (WIP). This dominating presence coexists with formal commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and alongside an organization’s supposedly ‘neutral’ structures, exemplifying Ray’s (2019, p. 42) understanding of racialized decoupling, where organizations “decouple formal commitments to equity, access, and inclusion from policies and practices that reinforce, or at least do not challenge, existing racial hierarchies.”

Nataraj et al. (2020) argued that academic libraries are bureaucratic organizations according to Max Weber’s six characteristics of an ideal bureaucracy: “authority over specific, jurisdictional areas; office hierarchies; maintenance of written documentation; technical competency through expert training; labor that extends beyond the obligatory time spent in the bureau; and an objective and impersonal adherence to rules and regulations” (p. 3). While bureaucracy is not itself harmful (large-scale bureaucracies have existed around the world for millennia and been led by BIPOC people to great effect), the specific context of BIPOC

subordination through bureaucracy in recent centuries in America and Europe reinforces white leadership and white centrality.

Drawing on critical race theory, Nataraj et al. described how bureaucratic structures promote conformity via ‘relations of domination’ bound up with legal rational authority and racial liberalism. Bureaucracy maintains power over those lower in a hierarchy (in the US case, BIPOC workers), and in academic libraries, it may “provide the appearance of work being accomplished while simultaneously keeping library workers occupied, without enabling the actual accomplishment of work that might upset existing... power structures” (p. 5).

When staff sabotage through bureaucratic structures, subverting while mimicking compliance, BIPOC staff can be disproportionately affected. Staff who are historically excluded by race, class, culture, and/or other barriers must often perform ‘interpretative labor’ to “understand and conform to librarianship’s (white) professional standards without being fully apprised of these qualities” (p. 9). Patrons and staff may also sabotage BIPOC employees and women through deauthentication or microaggressions. Dismantling this white and professional-class supremacy helps us become more effective in our mission, inclusive in our services and collections, and less toxic in the cultivation of workplaces for all, and in particular for BIPOC workers.

On helpful saboteurs: The race-class-gender nexus of workplace expectations

When we see our work as helping and making a difference, it is harder to untangle how power actually operates in our workplaces. This ‘vocational awe’ shifts the focus from the conditions of our labor to the sacrifices expected of a priestly class (Ettarh, 2018), those ‘called’ to librarianship (Emmelhainz 2020; Emmelhainz & Bukhtoyarova, 2016). Vocational awe

obscures the class and gender realities of our lives. Social scientists study librarians alongside feminized ‘helper professions’ such as nursing and social work (Still & Wilkinson, 2013). Many potential librarians and staff are barred by economic realities if they do not come from educated, affluent, or dual-income families, or if they need to support parents, partners, children, or family abroad, and partnering with high-earning professionals may feel necessary in order to remain in a service career that requires extended education for modest financial return (Emmelhainz, 2018; Glusker et al, 2022). Some researchers assume our field is “of less interest to individuals with high needs for prestige, social attention, power, and admiration from others” (Hill & Yousey, 1998, p. 164). Under these expectations of self-abnegation, librarians engage in a range of activities which lead to burnout (Accardi, 2015), such as providing emotional labor to patrons (Emmelhainz et al., 2017), managing others’ emotions (Sloniowski, 2016), and collaborating with stakeholders that may not have our best interests in mind.

Demographically, most American librarians are white women, who occupy an ambiguous position in US society: visible yet erased, valorized yet castigated, included yet excluded, and both experiencing and perpetrating physical, emotional, and social harm. Yet professional-class white women are expected, on the surface, to be generous, helpful, and non-confrontational in order to access the benefits of their class and race (Galman, 2012). While white male librarians may distinguish themselves through rational all-seeing Future of the Library predictions (cf. Haraway, 1988), white women are entangled in a long history of work as ‘culture missionaries’ improving the world through their bookish service (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016). Compared with other professions, librarians score low enough on narcissism scales to be accused of ‘echoism,’ or deferring your own needs and desires for the sake of others (Malkin, 2016), although it is not clear whether these traits precede or follow from work under library structures.

While working within the “helping class,” librarians may reinforce existing structures in spite of any subversive intentions, reinforcing the noble librarian role as they navigate the particular race-class-gender nexus of work they find themselves in. Patrons and peers reinforce this expectation that we enact a culture of niceness and service by resolving conflicts indirectly and deferring to those with a loud voice. As Walker-Barnes observed:

The pressure to conform makes it very difficult for White Americans ... who enter these conversations without critical awareness of their own cultural socialization [and] expect that antiracist dialogue will conform to the hallmarks of White middle-class propriety. In *Waking Up White*, Debby Irving identifies these as avoiding conflict; being judgmental, defensive, competitive, and status oriented; valuing formal education over life experience; having a perceived right to comfort or entitlement, a sense of time urgency, and a belief that there is one right way; valuing emotional restraint; and engaging in either/or thinking. To these, I would add adhering to social etiquette and ‘being nice.’ (2019, ch. 3).

In the context of library culture, people who join our workplaces from a range of backgrounds all learn to remain silent or appear compliant and flexible, rather than to risk their positions through direct opposition. When we are asked to cloak our motives and perceptions in altruism, our real needs and concerns cannot be directly expressed, sometimes even to ourselves. It is easier to talk about what we want for students, faculty, books, or the future than about the conditions of our own work and life. Alarm at the sacrilege done to books is more effective than expressing reservations. In other words, the valorization of our work, alongside our cultural norms, easily leads to sabotage in academic libraries.

A framework for addressing sabotage: The Dohe Role-Mission Framework

Once sabotage is ingrained in an organization, it may seem insurmountable. When we blithely assume each person can opt out of participation, we underestimate how our work meshes with identity, economic needs, and the desire to make an impact on the world. Using an ethics of care (Tronto, 2001) and restorative justice, we propose the Dohe Role-Mission Framework as a response to workplace sabotage. This framework is outlined in Table 2.

Label: Table 2

Role	Mission
Job Candidates & New Hires	Detect and Avoid Toxic Organizations.
Staff & Librarians	Take care of others and yourselves
Middle Managers	Build trust and respect on your teams
Senior Leadership	Establish standards to prevent sabotage

Caption: The Dohe role-mission framework for addressing sabotage

Role: Job candidates and new hires

Candidates for library jobs face significant challenges as outsiders coming into an organization, as both candidate and library personnel will project their best qualities in the hiring process. You may uncover revealing aspects of the library's culture through creativity and subtlety.

A key part of your interview is when you get to ask questions. For example, when interviewing for library jobs, one of us waits for a casual moment to ask how the library's

website is managed and governed. Responses may reveal a lack of structure (“anyone with an interest in the library” manages the website), or politics in which the outcome has been predetermined. Another of us asked about diversity; responses pointing to the only person of color in the room are revealing. There is power in your adroit question as a candidate. Responses can illuminate the library’s culture, as well as power dynamics that search committees hope will remain invisible.

You may also ask questions that directly uncover power dynamics and how people cope with imbalances or exploitation. Ask how decisions are made, how committees are formed, how collaborations are formalized, and the process for piloting new programs. Are liaisons and curators in the ‘front of house’ given more authority than colleagues in IT and access services? Are there hesitant glances within the search committee or patterns of disengagement or control among those interviewing you?

When you are considering joining a library, consider whether the power dynamics are likely to favor you. Look at how the search committee works together and keep an ear for silences or shifts in discussion. If you already work at a library, identify how power dynamics affect relationships and decision-making, in order to moderate your personal exposure. This is a practical application of Conway’s Law: “When organizations design a system, they design a structure which mimics the organization’s own communication structure” (Conway, 1968). Libraries may tell on themselves as communication patterns warp around the saboteur. Mapping power structures before joining an organization will help you identify dynamics before you are caught up short or mired in palace intrigue. The best way to protect yourself from sabotage is to avoid joining a library that is prone to it, which is easier said than done.

Open-source intelligence

Much of what you hope to learn about an institution can be learned from public materials. Look at the library's mission, values, public reports, and strategic plan: Whose needs are centered, and how? Does the library valorize prestigious collections and collaborations, chase high-value donors or grants, or serve local communities? Is there evidence of conflict or controversy, and how have they handled it?

Look also to public discussion of what others say about this library and the college or community of which it is a part. Look for evidence of repeat job postings (high turnover), or surveys or governance materials posted online that highlight areas for improvement. In ineffectual organizations, external reviews or mediator reports can be very revealing.

Next, study the website. Does the library have a unified public presence, or do different units have separate branding and marketing or duplicate services like digitization or instruction? Does the library have many boutique or pet projects, with some now abandoned? Do they use duplicate or redundant technologies to accomplish the same goals? If so, there may be a breakdown in trust or an unwillingness to compromise across units.

Then, look carefully at the organization chart. Does the organization's structure enact the library's values, or are their identified priorities over- or under-staffed? Are there departments that seem too broad, strangely specific, or 'mashed up' in confusing ways? How large is the managerial layer compared to the layers of workers? Is there evidence in current or past documents of vacancies or interim appointments, or high turnover, either in a specific area or spread across the organization? (The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine could help you uncover past organization charts alongside present ones.) Any of these characteristics of an

organizational chart could indicate points of political strife, challenging managers or colleagues, or groups that are afterthoughts or dumping grounds for library projects.

Human intelligence

The most valuable intelligence of all is human intelligence, or learning from others. Keep an ear out online and at conferences for discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of various libraries. When possible, cultivate a wide network. Check in with colleagues who have worked there or may know someone who does. Your whisper network can inform you of library leaders which are respected by their subordinates or of effective and collaborative teams to join—or of ineffectual leaders, hiring dynamics, challenging teams, or persistent political and budget upheaval.

A library that raises concerns in a few of these areas may still be a great place to work – after all, most organizations experience conflicts and interpersonal issues. It is how these conflicts are handled that matters, as well as assessing if that type of relational style is one you can work within. Do not be afraid to decline a toxic organization if needed; they are rarely changed by one new hire. If walking away is not possible and you need to secure the job, understanding potential dynamics will help you to handle the situation you are entering.

Role: Library staff and librarians

When you find yourself in a situation where your fellow library workers are undermining and obstructing projects, or where sabotage seems the most effective way to navigate the workplace, check in with your own internal saboteur first. A key shift we can make in a sabotaged organization is introspection. If ‘the way things get done’ often involves subterfuge or

delay, it becomes all too easy to take on these behaviors yourself over time. Even when you later move on, it can be difficult to break away from the psychic model of a sabotaged library. When interacting, recognize where you obstruct. We recommend that you pause here and note times where you might have sabotaged your organization. Consider who and what you are resisting, and who or what you are supporting and protecting.

Next, listen when others point out the effects of your actions. Acknowledge where you have co-created your organizational culture, even as there are elements outside of your control that you are doing your best to respond to.

Then, reflect on possible actions. There may be real costs and risks to directly challenging those in power. In situations when there is not a core ethical issue at play, consider shifting into alignment with your peers rather than pushing back or waiting for a more perfect solution. Volunteer for the one aspect of a new initiative you can agree with, or join a team to advocate for others. It is challenging to hold on to core principles yet remain flexible, or, as Vaillancourt suggested, “to use outrage sparingly” (2019, para. 10).

Finally, speak up. As a courageous follower, you can support yet challenge your leaders in order to improve your library’s initiatives (Chaleff, 2009). Your respectful challenge or considered advocacy is not sabotage; rather, sabotage happens when trust and communication break down.

Extract your allies – and yourself – from a hot zone

You cannot fix toxic cultures or environments with resilience and self-improvement, or with debriefing and decompressing with peers alone. Instead, look to build resources that support both you and others. Together, you may be able to stand up to bullies or advocate for those with

less power. You can ally to press for needed changes in processes and culture, as well as raise and document issues of concern. Find people of goodwill with a keen political understanding, and work with them. Work with administrators and HR as well, but thoughtfully, as they are charged first with protecting the organization. Repeatedly raising issues can mean you are the ‘fire’ to be put out; there may also be unspoken dynamics that shape the situation and leadership’s response.

If you cannot resolve a situation, look at options to leave. If those in power cannot or will not address a key issue, ask to shift teams, apply elsewhere internally, or look at options to leave the organization altogether. There are many great places where you could flourish in a healthier environment.

Role: Team leads and managers

Middle managers are often the best barometer of how compromised an organization is. In some academic libraries, management is a marginal reward for experience or expertise in a functional role. For instance, a reference librarian with more years of service is preferred for promotion to supervisor, or a talented software developer who might leave is promoted to a unit head as a retention strategy. Making the role more challenging, little about a middle manager’s previous job prepares them for their current one, and any training provided is often generic and outdated. Given most libraries’ lack of succession planning and mentoring in management, middle managers must learn survival skills from their peers and to respond to unexpected action and reactions. Like the most worn sponges in the library break room, middle managers absorb all sorts of toxicity from across the organization, and may struggle to buffer that from their staff.

The middle manager as double agent

Supervisors, department heads, and other middle managers enact the values of a library's cultural ecosystem, even as they are caught between the demands of senior leadership and the needs of direct reports. Middle managers sit at a curious intersection of power, as significant factors in employee morale (Glusker et al, 2022; Kennedy & Garewal, 2020) yet relatively powerless to effect meaningful organizational change beyond their unit. Middle managers are subject to undermining from every level in academic libraries, whether from peer managers establishing their turf, from unhappy or ambitious direct reports, or from senior leaders that use shakeups or austerity measures as a way to establish power and demonstrate innovation and impact to campus leaders. In response, managers can turn to their own forms of sabotage, deceit, and undermining to navigating a fraught organization and interpersonal environment.

Yet middle managers have an opportunity to build intentional, caring practice in developing work groups that are resistant to sabotage. Supervisors can nudge toxic employees out the door, or shield employees from a great deal of dysfunction. Changing work cultures is challenging in places where submerged strategies to build power have become the norm. Yet managers can help their work groups move the overall organization towards one that takes risks, builds trust, and position each person and unit for success for success.

When middle managers find themselves or their direct reports resorting to sabotage, here are nine actions to consider:

First, assess your own motives as a middle manager. Are you hoping to move upwards? Do you feel obliged to manage up to a difficult boss? Or does your own work style, whether hands-off or detail-oriented, lead staff to 'manage up' to you in a way that creates organizational difficulties (Abbajay, 2018)?

Second, look for ways to establish feedback culture. Providing balanced feedback rather than just praise or critique, and inviting your team to give you regular feedback, makes it more challenging for saboteurs to exploit silent grievances and uncertainty within the work group.

Third, share information when possible, and note when you are unable to share. Managers who stonewall and withhold, or who appear to only tell ‘half the story’ when there are good reasons to keep information back, can inadvertently create an environment where secrets, conspiracy thinking, half-truths, and even paranoia are normative. Supervisors that share updates from meetings and likely future trajectories, while making clear their limitation in knowledge and ethical obligation to withhold some information, are harder targets to exploit.

Fourth, address budding personnel issues promptly. When toxic dynamics go unchallenged, people start to avoid certain colleagues (Marksteiner, 2012, p. 72), disrupting the work of the team (Liff, 2007, p. 18).

Fifth, set transparent standards across the team. May library workers appreciate being trusted and given autonomy. At the same time, clear standards and goals, individual and joint goalposts to meet, and mechanisms to share progress can all help staff to keep pace with each other, to trust each other, and to see and value each other’s work.

Sixth, refine and close meetings. Consider ending standing meetings that lack a clear goal. Consider giving status reports in text or by a voice recording, rather than expecting broad attendance at update meetings. Then, set a focused cohort, substantive agendas, and assigned action items and follow-ups for the meetings that remain. Managers can borrow from the *Agile Manifesto* (2001) by asking their teams to periodically reflect on how to become more effective.

Seventh, keep information flowing. Encourage input, but move decisions forward by sticking to an agenda and reducing opportunities for stonewalling. Consider discussing the

“General Interference with Organizations and Production” section (pp. 28-32) of the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual* with your staff, and work with them to find other ways to challenge proposals and dynamics they do not agree with.

Eighth, establish job priorities. Take time to listen to what each employee values in their job, and if necessary, to discuss where they could move within your organization to increase their effectiveness.

Ninth, offer employees an ‘out.’ Let people leave committees or roles they have not been engaged with. Encourage them to set priorities and say no to external pressures. And coach, document, and remove people from roles in which they are persistently ineffective or harmful, even if they are tenured faculty, unionized, or productive in other ways.

Role: Library administrators and leaders

Library leadership frequently has a bad reputation among staff, and the location of this chapter in a book on toxic workplaces may appear to be an extended critique of senior management, an undeniably challenging and often invisible job. Yet we encourage upper management (directors, associate deans, university librarians, and so on) to read with thought to the challenges in their own organizations, and with an eye to creating a more inclusive environment and set of social norms. Libraries have long memories – indeed, our business is permanence – and as upper management, you may inherit a well-established culture of sabotage. Campus leaders, too, may be resistant to meaningful change from a library they perceive as a building with books and seats in it, filled with employees who buy things for them. Challenging power dynamics at the university level may also result in pushback from the agendas of other leaders, or challenges from traditionalist faculty who have benefitted from saboteurs.

As noted in our literature review, sabotage often manifests as a tool of people who feel powerless, so it would be a misstep for senior leaders to address sabotage by attempting to assert more control over day-to-day decisions and dynamics. Library workers who feel a lack of autonomy and authority may be more likely to use subversion in the workplace; conversely, staff become more engaged, more accountable, and more satisfied with their job and organization when they can make meaningful decisions about their own work (Williams & Anderson, 1991).

Strategies that management may consider improving workplace culture and morale overall are as follows. First, collect and use exit interview data. We have at times given honest exit interviews when leaving an employer, only to hear that the same problems we observed were reported before. As Harris and Ogbonna (2009) noted on sabotage in the service organization, “exit interviews are particularly useful in providing managers with information on clandestine and concealed organizational activities” (p. 331). Library administrators can use this information to shift the environmental conditions that currently induce sabotage.

Second, reflect on organizational history. When new to a library, listen for sources of organizational trauma that might be resulting in present sabotage. Past or feared conditions of resource scarcity, fear and uncertainty, neglect and devaluation, mixed messages, pitting one group against another, or even outright abuse can all affect how well a library adapts to necessary change.

Third, assume responsibility for the library’s culture. By establishing expected norms, management can take meaningful steps to reduce sabotage. Yeşiltaş and Tuna (2018) indicated that this is most effective when modeled. If you value collaboration, then refrain from making arbitrary and unilateral changes without seeking to draw together teams affected by the change. If you value rapid and responsive decision-making, refrain from asking for staff input in a veneer

of democracy. If you value shared action toward a common goal, minimize structures that would set up a competition for resources within the organization. If you value creativity and learning, set up situation where library employees to experiment fearlessly—and yes, even fail in their interactions or their labor. Throughout, make it clear that you do not engage in or tolerate hostility, favoritism, micromanagement, undermining, or other antisocial behaviors.

Fourth, implement reward structures for performance that are rooted in an ethics of care. Librarianship is ‘invisible’ work, and leaders can show the value of their workforce by seeing the individuals within it, noting contributions at all levels, and recognizing performance in a wide range of challenging roles and situations. It is challenging to do this in ways that are meaningful to the employee, but this may include public or private recognition, reward and incentive programs, a personal note after a successful project or presentation, or creating other venues in which people can be recognized or awarded.

Finally, foster trust at the senior levels of your library. Staff may be motivated to undermine initiatives when they sense a lack of real opportunity to be involved in decision-making (Williams & Anderson, 1991; Harris & Ogbonna, 2009), whether because the process is unclear, or because leaders have not been honest about whether they are looking for collaborative decision-making or acquiescence to top-down plans. Respectful debate and thoughtful feedback are vital for work in leadership, but neither can happen when people are working from a position of fear and anxiety.

Much as one worker cannot combat a culture of sabotage, directors and administrators can also not single-handedly fix an organization, especially given external factors across the university or other governance structures. Yet leaders do have a broader opportunity to model

trust, equity, and clear decision making, which can serve to reduce the frequency of sabotage in the library workplace.

Conclusion

In its enduring relevance, the *Simple Sabotage Manual* shows how sabotage is woven into workplaces and into our relationships with each other. This chapter has explained how the human behavior of sabotage has the potential to harm libraries and their staff, as well as subvert unjust power structures in creating a more just and humane workplace. While sabotage is always an option in the human relational toolbox, it is not inevitable for any organization. As library workers at all levels become aware of how sabotage functions in our libraries, we can call it out and work to ameliorate the stresses and inequities that lead to dysfunctional organizations. From whatever role we find ourselves in, we can work to transform toxic and dysfunctional library workplaces into ones that are more humane, equitable, and courageous, and which allow us to be more effective in our shared organizational goals.

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