

Analysis of library problem scenario: staff response to layoffs

1) Diagnosis of main problem

The library board has informed library director Mildred Kenehan that she must lay off her three most recent hires (equivalent to half her staff) due to city-wide budget cuts. The trustee who gave her the news has promised that the lay-offs will most likely be temporary, and that he himself will work hard to restore the RIF-ed librarians as soon as possible. Now the three remaining staff members refuse to double up shifts or otherwise attempt to compensate in their own work for this (hopefully temporary) reduction in force, arguing that if they go all out to keep the library functioning the board will only conclude that the “extra” staff isn’t really necessary.

How should director Kenehan respond to this staff rebellion?

2) Statement of cluster problems

- Director Kenehan has staff with minds of their own, who aren’t afraid to voice their opinions. She might normally consider this a good thing, but in this instance it means that they are not willing to respect her authority to give them orders or direction.
- The library staff are willing to sacrifice customer service in order to make a point to the board and the county. In fact, they think this is the appropriate response to the problem—that they *shouldn’t* strive to maintain normal levels of service, so that it will be clear to everyone that the three supposedly “extra” staff cannot be spared. Kenehan obviously assumed that service to patrons was the bottom line here, and expected her staff to respond in kind. Their refusal has taken her by surprise. Which managerial priority is more important in this situation: maintaining standards of service to patrons, or supporting the staff?
- The fundamental problem here is the county’s budget—and the valuing of the library and its services. Why was there so little community support for the library that the millage increase was rejected in the November election? Does Kenehan need to take steps to build the library’s public image and profile?

3) Possible courses of action

- Authoritarian: Kenehan schedules the remaining staff according to her wishes. If they do not comply, she imposes penalties (such as a formal rebuke in the employee’s record, affecting any merit increases or benefits considerations).
- Passive: Kenehan “caves” to her staff, not arguing with them further. She grumbles and stresses to herself, and perhaps complains about the situation privately to Rickie (the trustee who broke the news to her) and/or to patrons, but does nothing to address the disagreement or to seek a solution. Angry at both the board and her staff, she decides to just let them all deal with the consequences of their decisions.
- Basic/Practical: Kenehan appeals to her staff informally, with a focus only on the immediate pragmatics. If you won’t double up your shifts, what *will* you do? Help me out here! This is what *I’m* willing to do. We’ll only have to make it work a short time, and we don’t have to knock ourselves out. I’m not asking you to move heaven and earth, just come with me a little way.
- Proactive/Collaborative: Kenehan agrees with her staff that three people should not be forced to do the work of six. Given budgetary constraints, however, what would they

have her cut instead? She presents the library board with a list of programs and services that she will be forced to reduce or completely cut if her staff is reduced (even if it is “only temporary”). She seeks a budgetary compromise that will allow her to retain her staff. She communicates the response of the board to her staff and solicits their ideas for a solution. She works with her staff to plan inexpensive ways of promoting the value of the library in the community, to build support for their cause in the next budget struggle.

- Creative/Collaborative: Kenehan does not attempt to fight the board, but does try to turn the situation around with her staff by involving them in finding creative solutions within the library and in making the difficult decisions that this situation requires. She stresses to them that while she agrees that three people can't do the work of six, service to patrons remains an important priority. Even if we can't maintain the level of service we provide now, we owe it to our patrons (and to the image of the library) not to let our library collapse around our ears. Punishing the patrons is not a productive response to the situation. What kinds of work can be shifted to volunteers, pages, non-professional staff, part-timers? Can we recruit more volunteers for some responsibilities? What services or programs should we limit or put on hold? Will staff be willing to temporarily increase their duties somewhat if not all of the burden is falling on them? What can we do to promote the library in the community? Should we involve patrons in this particular controversy, to rally support? Do we have any fences to mend in the community?

4) Pros and cons for each alternative

- Authoritarian: Pros are that Kenehan asserts her authority and does not back down on her principles or allow her staff to “buck” her decisions. Cons are serious, however: cracking down on her staff will only add to their discontent. She may breed further rebellion and resentment among her staff, as well as create a hostile environment for herself that will seriously hinder other decisions and operations. This approach also does nothing to address the underlying problems or prepare for positive outcomes in the future. Not a recommended course of action.
- Passive: Pros are that Kenehan evades further direct conflict and gets to feel both sorry for herself and superior to everyone else involved. Cons are that nothing gets solved, the library seriously declines, and Kenehan sets herself up to be steam-rolled again in future both by the board and by her staff. Not a recommended course of action.
- Basic/Practical: Pros are that Kenehan addresses the conflict with her staff and works to present her own views more effectively while seeking practical solutions. She does not allow this problem to drive a wedge between herself and her staff, and works to ameliorate the stress the situation imposes on all of them. Cons are that no long-term solutions are being considered; these are only stop-gap measures to deal with the immediate crisis, not strategies for addressing the underlying issues of budget, relations with the board and with the community, and staff responsibilities.
- Proactive/Collaborative: Pros are that Kenehan allies herself with her staff and takes a leadership position both with her staff and with the board. Ideally, this approach gets everyone involved in the realities of the problem, and in seeking solutions. Communications are opened so that the board can see more clearly how their decisions impact on staff. Precedent is set for how to deal with future conflicts between the board and the library staff. Cons are that the board may be hostile or at least unsympathetic.

Lighting a torch for the staff may only result in singeing the library further if the board is not willing or able to compromise. The board may view this action as an attack, making a bad situation worse. After all, they didn't set the budget (the county did), and they're only doing what they have to do. Besides, they stressed (through Rickie) that this is supposed to only be temporary: why all the fuss, when every department (not just the library) is facing cuts and we're doing the best we can? They may start looking for a reason to seek a new director, or may at least be less responsive to Kenehan's concerns and requests in future. In addition, if this plan is successful it puts a lot of pressure on Kenehan as the intermediary. Is she willing and able to do the work required? A bold but risky strategy, it may be worth trying if Kenehan feels she has the skills and "weight" to pull it off, and if she knows the board members well enough to judge accurately how they might respond.

- Creative/Collaborative: Pros include the promotion of teamwork between Kenehan and her staff, emphasizing that they face this crisis *together* (not in opposition to one another). Since her staff already appear to have an equal-footing relationship with Kenehan, it is a good idea to capitalize on that attitude by involving them in finding creative and long-term solutions. Like the Proactive strategy, this approach builds resources for the future and sets good precedents for dealing with future problems. It is more immediately practical than the Proactive approach, and more forward-thinking than the Basic approach. It involves the staff in finding real solutions—not just in complaining about the situation. Cons are that it will take a lot more effort from both Kenehan and the staff at a time when they are already feeling beleaguered and resentful. For this strategy to work, Kenehan will have to combat that resentment and promote positive attitudes in the library in the middle of a stressful and demoralizing situation. If she can do that, however, this becomes an advantage, transforming a serious threat to the library's healthy functioning into a real opportunity for positive, lasting change.

5) Preferred alternative, and why

At the very least, Kenehan should pursue the Basic approach to at least address the conflict with her staff. Ideally, however, she will collaborate with her staff in finding long-term solutions, a la the Creative approach. Seeing how easily discouraged Kenehan appears to be in the excerpt given, the more ambitious Proactive strategy is probably too risky. I would endorse the Creative/Collaborative approach to this problem as the strategy with the most long-term benefits for resources invested, with the least risk.