

A Failure to Communicate:

A Communication Scenario Using Difficult Professional Topics

Tanya Stewart arrived at work thinking about one thing- lunch!

“There are so many good Mexican food places by our library now,” she thought to herself, and it was making her hungry.

“I think I’ll go out for lunch today,” she continued aloud.

But first, she needed to check the hourly desk assignment schedule to ensure she had enough time to enjoy herself. She normally brought her lunch to work, but if she was going to go outside the library, she wanted to make sure she wasn’t rushed. As one of many librarians at the Williamson Park Public Library, Tanya was becoming more and more aware of the increasing variety of users at the library, and she was finding it hard to balance her knowledge of library service with what the library’s community needed these days.

Almost daily, a library user would come in and ask for books in Spanish. When staff took them to the library’s three meager shelves of books in that language, she almost felt embarrassed. Tanya had even looked for some Spanish language selection resources and book reviews in hopes she could try to find and purchase some more recent and relevant materials. Unfortunately, she hadn’t had much luck. And now, the community demographic seems to be changing further. Would Spanish material even be necessary in a year or so? She wasn’t sure.

To satisfy her curiosity, Tanya went to the U.S. Census website to search for community information. She was surprised to find how easy it could be to find demographic information online. She even found she could enter the library’s zip code to get specific neighborhood information. Tanya knew that most of this Census information was only gathered every 10 years

and was therefore a bit dated, but she discovered the Census also provided yearly population trends, estimates, and projections. She made a mental note to share this “discovery” with her colleagues.

Just as she was about ready to click on the table for her library community’s population demographic on the Census website, Tanya was interrupted at the Reference Desk. In front of her stood an Asian man who was visibly uncomfortable and struggling to ask a question in English. Tanya smiled in an attempt to diffuse his discomfort, but she sensed she was not being successful in that regard. In the next ten minutes, she tried to understand what the man needed. She became frustrated as she wondered to herself how to conduct a reference interview with someone who doesn’t speak the same language.

She heard the man say what she thought was the word “article,” so she walked the gentleman over to the Periodicals section. Glancing at the clock on the wall on her way, she realized she was already late for her lunch break. Not understanding why Tanya had walked her here, the man—speaking in broken phrases and with a very heavy accent—said “no” and then, once again, turned to the language he was comfortable in.

“What language is that?” she wondered. “Is that Vietnamese?”

Tanya did her best to understand but was no closer to getting the man what she *thought* he needed than she was twenty minutes ago. Seeing the library’s Circulation Supervisor Loretta Ramsey walk up to the Circulation Desk, Tanya guided the man over there. Explaining the situation—a situation most in the library were already familiar with—Tanya handed the problem over to Loretta a little too readily.

“I’m sorry to do this Loretta, but I’m already working well into my lunch break,” Tanya said as a means to disengage. As she walked away, Tanya noted several non-English-speaking

moms gathered in the Children's section. It looked as if one of them was gesturing to a library card application she held in her hand. Tanya could only think to herself that these folks represented more communication problems in her future.

When Tanya returned after her lunch break, she found Loretta and inquired about the Asian man she had left in her hands.

"Oh, yeah, I got lucky," Loretta said. "After you left, the man's young daughter came over and started talking to her father in the same language, I think it was Japanese—anyway, she was able to translate for us, and I found that all the man wanted was to apply for a library card. It was so cute! When I thanked the little girl for being such a big help she said—"

Loretta paused, and at this point, put on a fake accent and repeated what the Asian man's daughter had said,

"She said: 'Is no problem, not to worry about it,'" Loretta giggled. Tanya didn't look amused.

"It makes me feel like such an idiot when I can't help these people! I just can't understand them and vice versa. Ugh! And the problem seems to be worsening," Tanya complained to Loretta.

"Maybe they should start requiring library school students to learn a second language rather than worry about cataloging and metadata," Loretta said only half-jokingly.

"Yeah. The old neighborhood has certainly changed from when I started here," Tanya said. "I noticed all the taquerias and ethnic food spots sprouting up as I drove to work today. It used to be nothing but Japanese restaurants. But now there are just as many Mexican, Chinese, Somali, and Middle Eastern languages spoken around here—sometimes I feel like I'm in a foreign country when I come to work." That jogged her memory about the Census website she

had looked over earlier, and she returned to her desk to see if she could make sense of any of the voluminous data she had noted.

Over the next two hours off the desk, Tanya had found—and tried to interpret—data from the last three Census reports. Additionally, she charted some of the demographic projections and estimates, hoping she might be able to put her finger on where her community had been, and where it would likely be going—at least according to the Census data. Her initial thoughts were that the library’s Japanese community had started to dwindle some ten years ago, and year after year had declined. At the same time, the Spanish-speaking population around the library had risen. Although she wasn’t exactly sure from her perfunctory research, Tanya had also noted a trend that seemed to show rising populations of Chinese and Middle Eastern families for the next few years. “Well, that’s alarming,” Tanya thought to herself.

She knew that the Williamson Park Public Library staff was predominantly made up of Caucasian women. Williamson Park was far from diverse. It could only claim one Japanese library clerk—named Cathleen Himoda—and one Spanish speaker—the Assistant Library Director Bob Lopez. The fact that Bob was also close to retirement age caused Tanya even more consternation.

At that moment, Loretta Ramsey walked into the staff room and sighed.

“Whew, that was a busy hour!”

“How many of your patrons were non-English speaking?” Tanya asked.

“About half,” Loretta replied.

Tanya called Loretta over to her desk and showed her the fruits of her research labor over the last two hours, pulling up her searching discoveries on the Census tables and data.

“This didn’t happen overnight, Loretta. It’s been happening for a while. There is no reason the administration could not—or *should* not—have been on top of this. We could have been better positioned.”

"Tanya, I think we need to talk about this at the next meeting, don't you?" said Loretta. "If more and more of our patrons don't speak English, and we don't speak their languages, it's going to be impossible to communicate with them, let alone serve their needs—at least in a timely manner."

"I agree, let's bring it up with Joyce at the next staff meeting," Tanya said.

To her credit, Tanya secured a brief moment with Library Director Joyce Hogue before the meeting to ask her to put the topic on the agenda.

“Just wanted to ask that the subject of ‘communication’ be added to the agenda on Friday,” she told Joyce hesitantly, who was in her typical rush out of the building on her way to a meeting.

“Communication? What do you mean?” Joyce asked, clearly distracted.

“Well, Joyce, several of us have been amazed by the number of immigrants and non-English speaking patrons frequenting the library lately. It’s getting really difficult to communicate with them.”

“Oh really? I guess I hadn’t noticed,” was Joyce’s blank reply. “Maybe it’s time to do another community assessment. Those are so expensive though,” she murmured, looking at her watch instead of Tanya.

“I did a little research online, Joyce, and the library seems to have missed an opportunity to position itself better to react to the changing demographic,” Tanya offered as calmly as she could muster.

“Well,” Joyce said, “community analysis is an expensive undertaking, and the community changes so quickly that once a library has done the analysis, the findings become irrelevant almost immediately. I think it’s more important to focus on the actual users who come into the library. Make 20% of them happy, and you’ll solve 80% of your issues. I remember that from my Management class. It’s called the Pareto Rule. 20% of your collection accounts for 80% of your circulation. 20% of the users account for 80% of your problems—stuff like that. I’ll have to look that up again and refresh my memory. Anyway, yeah, OK, I’ll put that issue on the agenda for the meeting and we can talk more about it together,” Joyce said. “Right now, I’m due over at a City Hall meeting so I better run.”

As Friday arrived, all the Williamson Park staff were assembled in the staff room awaiting the start of the regular staff meeting. They knew these meetings rarely went longer than 30 minutes before Joyce was called away so they were anxious to get going to talk about everything on their agenda. After taking care of regular agenda items regarding City Hall and Library Board issues, Joyce turned to Tanya's request.

"So, Tanya tells me that several of the staff have concerns over our ability—or should I say *inability*—to serve our growing immigrant population. If any of the rest of you want to share your thoughts on this, please do so—but please make your comments brief; we have to open the library soon,” Joyce said tiredly.

"Well, since I am the one who asked to put this topic on the agenda," Tanya floundered. "I'll start. Many of us have talked about this while in the staff room, and as I told Joyce, we're just becoming alarmed that over the last few years, well—I think there have been so many new immigrants into our community that it’s becoming problematic to communicate with them properly.”

She then relayed her recent experience with the Asian man who needed a library card application and his daughter who rescued the staff from an awkward moment. "I'm sure you've all had a similar experience. It's typical here now."

"Well, it isn't only immigrants," Cathleen Himoda said. "There a large number of African Americans and second-generation Hispanics living in our library's community now," Cathleen continued. As she looked around the staff room and the staff gathered there, she pointed out the obvious. "Just look, I'm the only Asian woman, Bob is the only Hispanic, and there are no black staff members at all," Himoda said. "No wonder we're having issues. I'm thinking we could use an online translating software application or something to help."

"That might be a good idea to lighten the load, Cathleen, because guess who everyone comes looking for when a Hispanic person asks for anything," Bob Lopez said, pausing.

"Yep! Me," he finished rhetorically. And not all of those Hispanic patrons only speak Spanish—some DO speak English and therefore don't even need my help. I think it's just because some of you are uncomfortable talking to non-white patrons. Or maybe we've lost our ability to conduct proper reference interviews?"

"But isn't the ability to communicate their problem rather than yours?" asked Ramsey.

"Not really. It's my problem too. It eats up my time away from the desk doing selecting, or collection maintenance. It seems like whenever I sit down to weed books, someone needs my help to communicate with a Spanish speaker. I can't get anything done because you're all giving me problems you don't want to handle," said Lopez tiredly.

"It's not like I can only help brown skin patrons because my own skin is brown; I help white patrons, so I should expect you to do the same with those with brown skin—or any other color skin." Loretta felt this meeting was beginning to go down a slippery slope.

"It's just human nature to be uncomfortable like that. You've been so helpful, Bob, and we all appreciate that" Loretta said.

"Maybe a translation tool would be helpful too," said Tanya. "But there are other things we can do; we have a collection of mostly bestsellers in English. I think we need to make changes there to meet the community demand. Our collection certainly doesn't reflect the needs of the current users in our community, right?"

Having been caught off guard a bit by the onslaught of anger and frustration, Joyce interjected something she immediately wished she could take back.

"Okay, so what do you want me to do? I can't fire half the staff and replace them with blacks, Hispanics, and Asians! And I don't have the money to replace half the collection with foreign-language materials," she said. And look, if we purchase more Spanish books tomorrow, who's to say that we will still need them next year? What if *that* community moves out and another one moves in? Wouldn't it be best to just focus on meeting the needs of the long-time users?"

"I'm not saying that either," Tanya demurred—sensing that she had set off a time bomb here.

Joyce's phone rang and she immediately saw it was City Hall. "Look, it's opening time. We'll have to talk about this more later everyone. I've got to run. In the meantime, if anyone has any more suggestions, give them to Tanya so she can relay them to me." Director Hogue grabbed her purse and left the room.

"Well, that didn't go well!" Tanya told Loretta.

"I know! Talk about a knee-jerk reaction," Loretta said,

“Where do we go from here?” Tanya asked. “Maybe the Library Board needs to be brought into this?”

“Well, that’s a thought. I’ve got to get to the Reference Desk. Looks like we’re open now and there’s a new group of users pouring in the front door.” With that, Loretta quickly zipped away. Tanya headed to her desk to gather more Census data and devise a plan to take to the Library Board. But would that be going around Joyce’s back? Tanya suddenly had a lapse of courage. But where would the library go from here? If she didn’t do it, though, who would? This was certainly a dilemma she hadn’t anticipated putting herself in the middle of as she was driving to work days earlier. Tanya suddenly noted that the library’s public phone line was ringing. “Loretta must be caught up in something,” she thought as she jumped to answer the Reference helpline.

“Williamson Park Public Library...may I help you?” Tanya asked.

“Bueno? Hablas Espanol?” came a soft voice on the other end of the line.

Tanya took a deep breath, let out a large sigh, and thought to herself, “We gotta do something about this. It’s just getting worse.”