CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR PROMOTION.
NOW HOW WILL YOU DEAL WITH STEVE?

On the whole, Ethel Shea reflected, the first week had gone quite well. Just last Friday afternoon she had been one of four assistant librarians in the technical services department of the Calhoun Public Library. Now she sat at the corner desk as head of the department, and her three former co-assistants and the six clerks reported to her. Soon she would be interviewing applicants for her old job.

Shea recalled her fear and apprehension when the chief librarian (now her immediate supervisor) had offered her the promotion. Certainly she wanted the job, but would the other three assistants accept her? Would there be resentments? Could she assume the managerial role and still maintain the congenial but guarded camaraderie that passes for friendship among professional rivals? In particular, would she be able to handle Steve Cannon?

All four assistants had expressed their wishes to be considered for the position of head of technical services when the former head announced his retirement. Steve Cannon, the senior assistant with five years in his job, felt that he was the most deserving and appeared to be the most anxious to be chosen. Ethel Shea was next in line with three and a half years in the job. Then came Juliet Flood with three years and Jonas Kirsch with just over two. All four were in their late twenties or early thirties, but Steve was the oldest. All four had worked only in the technical services department. The ads in Library Journal and on the library’s web page had attracted several candidates, but none more promising than Shea. Flood and Kirsh were never serious contenders. Cannon was Shea’s only apparent competitor for the position.

She surmised that Cannon was not selected because, although he was unquestionably a person of superior abilities, his temper was too volatile and easily triggered. He was one of those people whose quick anger allowed him to tyrannize others. It forced co-workers to concede on almost any issue to achieve a superficial harmony. To get along with Steve, one had to go along with him. From what Shea and the others had observed, this dictum applied not only to his co-workers but to the former department
head as well. The two of them were like water and oil, and the communication between them had been maintained at only a minimum level during the five years they had worked together. Incredible as it seemed, everyone (including his previous immediate supervisor) appeared to fear Cannon’s presence, afraid that a look or word would disturb the precarious peace.

Shea’s brief reverie caused her to forget, momentarily, her new position. Soon, however, she turned to speculating as to what she would do when the head of the reference department called and asked her to send someone from technical services to help out at the reference desk because there was a rush of patrons. Library policy dictated that when the reference desk was busy, professionals from the “behind the scenes” departments would be dispatched to help out. The departments took turns providing the assistance.

Soon enough the telephone rang and the head of reference asked Shea to send help to the reference desk. Despite her fear and dread of what was coming, Shea said, “Someone will be right over.” Shea pictured the flush of anger on Steve’s face if she asked him to go. She imagined the exasperation and scorn in his tone as he said, “I don’t go on reference, remember?” How much easier it would be to ask Flood or Kirsch. But was that fair? How many times in the past had the four of them chatted among themselves about how much they disliked disrupting their own work to assist at the reference desk? Predictably, Cannon had vowed he would never go. Typically the previous head of technical services had never asked him to because he couldn’t bear a scene. He always asked one of the others, and one of three always obliged, if sometimes begrudgingly.

Shea wondered why Cannon’s stubbornness had been tolerated for so long. She had often hoped he would resign, get fired or be transferred. The Calhoun staff was not unionized. Cannon could have been fired without too much fanfare. She really knew the answer: He was kept on because he was good at his work and because the previous head lacked the courage to confront Steve about his behavior. In the obligatory annual appraisal interviews, the previous head merely praised Cannon’s work performance and let it go at that. Beyond that, since it would have reflected unfavorably on him as a manager, the former head had attempted to conceal his difficulties with Cannon. In this endeavor, he may have been successful with people outside the department, but not with his own staff who had little respect for him because they felt he abrogated his responsibilities regarding Cannon.
Shea vowed that she would not be reduced to unfair compromises concerning Cannon. She summoned him to her desk and with improvised casualness, asked him to go to the reference department. The effect was instantaneous. He behaved precisely as she had anticipated – with a flash of indignation. “Why does he always have to be so disagreeable?” she thought. Restraining a savage urge to smash her fist into his face, she quietly repeated her request. With the fire of battle in his eye, Cannon repeated that he was not going, turned and marched back to his desk.

To Shea the room seemed to fill with threatening, accusing eyes, a multitude of shadowy voices shouting, “You’re no more effective than your predecessor!” She felt extremely awkward and very much at a loss as to what to do under the circumstances.

*Adapted from A. J. Anderson*