MAE GETS A NEW JOB

Voris University (VU) occupies three campuses at Hackley, an industrial city in the land of the buttes and the sagebrush plains. The uptown campus, comprising some 90 acres, is in the heart of the city (population: 55,000). Six miles to the south lie the 325-acre Greendale campus and the 220-acre University Medical Center.

VU is both a land-grant institution and a comprehensive major research university. It is organized into 16 colleges, schools, and divisions; these comprise 89 academic departments. The departments offer a total of 157 programs that lead to degrees at the bachelor's, master's, or doctoral level.

Academic-year enrollment in all campuses adds up to about 24,000 students. Full-time faculty number roughly 1,700, with more than half holding doctorates. The university also employs some 5,000 staffers. At present, VU has an annual budget in excess of $200 million. As part of the state-supported system of higher education, the university is governed by the state Board of Regents; it also maintains a law advisory board.

Voris University has a unified library system whose director, Elsbeth Bajalovic, 35, reports to the provost and holds the rank of professor. The system consists of the three major library buildings plus several working collections, which are housed in the academic departments that have demonstrated a need for them. There are six assistant directors: four at the uptown campus (administration, public services, collection development, and technical services), one at the Greendale campus (whose job title is Director of the Greendale Campus Library and Assistant Director of the University Libraries), and one at the Medical Center (called Director of the Medical Center Library and Assistant Director of the University Libraries). All six report to Bajalovic and hold faculty rank. The directors at the Greendale campus (i.e., the graduate school) and the Medical Center both have their own assistant directors.

Two years ago, just out of library school, Mae Noel-Pardon joined the uptown campus library staff as a reference librarian. Having devoted her elective coursework to medical librarianship, she hoped to someday become the director of a university medical library. She made it known when she accepted her position that she would appreciate being considered for a job at the Medical Center library whenever one became available.
Little did she suspect that, at the age of 30, she would find herself sitting in Bajalovic's office, hearing the director ask, "How would you like to be acting director of the Medical Center Library?"

Amazed, Mae blurted out, "I'd love it!"

Bajalovic grinned broadly. "Splendid!" she said, with an air of resolution. "Now let me tell you something about the job."

Mae pulled her chair closer to the director’s desk.

“I assume you’ve heard that Faye Weir, who’s been our Medical Center library director for the past three years, has suffered a nervous breakdown and will be on leave for at least six months,” Bajalovic said. Weir had done a fine job at the Medical Center, and the staff (with the exception of the assistant director) had accepted her well. Nevertheless, Weir had requested a transfer to a smaller departmental library. A decision was still pending.

Mae expressed sympathy for the other librarian, saying she had heard about the situation through the grapevine. Bajalovic said she and the assistant director for public services believed Mae to be an unusually capable person. At her last appraisal, they had noted how she blended many attractive personal qualities with intelligence, energy, and determination, and they had identified her as someone to be considered for early promotion. The young appointee swelled with pride. "I've been very happy here," she remarked with a smile.

The director resumed the briefing. Her assistants enjoyed considerable freedom of action, she said, and she didn’t exercise close supervision over them. It was her policy to let each person run his or her department; she encouraged individual initiative in making decisions. Bajalovic would be available for consultation, but other than that Mae would be free to administer the library as she saw fit. The director pointed out that the budget for the Medical Center library is appropriated from the Medical Center, and that its library director reports not only to her but also to the dean of the medical school, who in turn reports directly to the president. By personal choice, the dean stays out of the selection of library personnel. As the person in charge, then, Mae would be responsible for all library activities—
supervising fiscal matters, making policy decisions, selecting and organizing materials, providing services, directing the 18-person staff and student assistants, and so forth.

Bajalovic observed amiably that she had been doing most of the talking and invited Mae to ask questions or make comments.

"When do I start?" the younger woman asked.

"In one week—Monday, the 19th."

“That’s fine. What else do I need to know?” asked Mae.

“Rather than attempt today to cover everything I think the acting director should know about, I’d prefer it if you’d put together a list of questions during your first week or two, and then we’ll discuss them,” said Bajalovic. Mae thought this a strange way to operate, but said she understood.

One question occurred to her right away. "Would it be bold of me to ask," she said hesitantly, "why, if the Medical Center library is virtually an autonomous unit—am I right in assuming the staff there does its own selection of materials, its own cataloging, everything?"

"Yes," said the director.

"Well then, wouldn't it be better if it were a completely autonomous library? Many medical school libraries are affiliated only with their medical schools. As I see it, the library has physical and operational autonomy, but not administrative autonomy."

There was no immediate reply from the director. "You don't waste any time making suggestions, do you?" said she, at length, musingly.

"It's the eternal centralization-versus-decentralization question. I'll tell you what—look into the pros and cons of the idea. I'll consider them. I must admit I have very little to do with the medical library, and it might not be a bad idea. Perhaps some form of coordinated decentralization is the answer, but even so
we'd have to sell it to the administration. Send me a memo in the form of a detailed recommendation. Be sure to include ideas on how to sell it. This is all very preliminary, of course."

Mae nodded and remarked that she'd work on it over the next week. "By the way," Bajalovic added suddenly, "you won't be able to have any overlap time with Faye. She left last Friday. The assistant is in charge this week. I'll call him and tell him about your appointment."

"Fine," said Mae. "In fact—this may sound strange, but in a way I think it's a good idea not to have any overlap time with one's predecessor. He or she can transmit all kinds of prejudices about staff members to the successor, and sometimes these can be self-fulfilling prophecies."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," said Bajalovic with interest.

"Well, if I'm told beforehand that so-and-so is not too bright, and that I shouldn't expect too much from him or her, I might approach that person differently than I would if I hadn't been told anything. What I mean is, I couldn't avoid preconceptions. I might find myself looking for signs to confirm somebody else's notion, which in some mysterious way might end up stranding the person at his or her present level."

“Hmm. Go on,” said Bajalovic.

Buoyed by the director's interest, Mae said, "I believe everybody is a good employee until they prove differently to me—not to some other person. If I make the assumption that they're top-notch, I'll transmit that confidence to them and they'll live up to my expectations. But if I'm warned about them beforehand, I can't approach them completely without prejudice."

"I see," remarked the director thoughtfully. "Is there any evidence to support your claim?"

"I think this is what Douglas McGregor is saying in his book The Human Side of Enterprise. You see, it can work the other way too. The predecessor might have his or her favorites, and I could then be conditioned to expect more from them—the so-called halo effect. People react differently with different people. There's no reason to suppose that if I have a bad relationship with someone, another person will too."
"Yes, but don't you think that a new person should be warned about a potential problem? If she’s forewarned, she might take special pains to try to make a relationship work. She might give extra attention to the person and his or her special needs."

"Maybe," said Mae.

"I think a person would be derelict in his or her duty not to forewarn someone about a problem," the director said mildly. "For instance, I’d feel negligent if I didn't tell you that you might have trouble with Craig Duff, who’s the assistant director at the Medical Center library.” After calmly inspecting her new assistant, Bajalovic went on, “Now, if you'd prefer me not to give you the info, I won't."

Mae looked her in the face and smiled guardedly. "You'll have to tell me now! Remember, what I said is just a theory!"

The director described Duff. Aged 57 and a tenured professional librarian at the associate professor level, he had worked at the Medical Center library for 29 years, 16 of them as assistant director. He did not expect or want promotion, and in all probability would not leave his present job until retirement. He was said to be "100 percent loyal" to the library and perfectly satisfied with his position. He had good relations with the faculty and students, but not the staff (none of whom were interested in taking over from Faye Weir).

There were two main problems with Duff, explained Bajalovic. First, he was dogmatic and autocratic, given to intimidating staff members—who all report through him to the Medical Center library director—and involving himself in the pettiest of details. If he disapproved of something, his subordinates suffered from the quickness and the depth of his fury. He would often verbally abuse them, inflicting severe tongue-lashings on them for their perceived shortcomings.

Second, said Bajalovic, he has not been responsive to instructions from any director—especially younger ones, and particularly women, whom he treated with a mixture of sexist attitudes and resigned acceptance.

Mae was puzzled and taken aback. "How come he's been kept on? And how come the staff stays?"
"I thought you'd ask that," Bajalovic said with a smile. "Well, he has tenure, of course." Her eyes had a faraway look as she added, "He's a complex, paradoxical man. He sets difficult goals for himself and his staff. He looks for perfection in everybody, and he gets upset when he doesn't see it.

"As far as the staff is concerned, some people will tolerate a lot of abuse before they do anything. I rarely see them, and when I do they never discuss him. Frankly, I don't go looking for problems. What I know comes from his supervisors. But I have heard good comments—excellent comments—about him from the faculty of the Medical School. I don't know if he's been reported to the Staff Association, which as you know only organizes social activities anyway. From my standpoint, things are going along nicely at that library."

"It sounds like I've got my work cut out for me!" Mae said stoutly. She was cheerful, but determined.

The director then explained why she had come directly to Mae about the job rather than talk to her immediate boss, the assistant director for public services. Bajalovic said she made it her practice to announce promotions, and since Mae would be reporting to her ("unless the library becomes a separate entity, of course!"), she wanted to talk with her face-to-face. They discussed a number of other matters, including the salary, which Mae found most satisfactory. Finally they parted, with the younger woman promising to present her preliminary thoughts on decentralization at the earliest opportunity. She would also keep the director informed on how things were going with Craig Duff, and would make a list of any questions she couldn’t manage to answer on her own.

During her first week on the new job, Mae met several faculty members and had a short chat with the dean of the medical school, who confirmed that he had nothing to do with the library other than helping to establish the budget. As far as he was concerned, the Medical Center library director reported to the director of university libraries, except when it came to fiscal matters.

She also familiarized herself with the library facilities, and made a point of getting acquainted with each member of the staff. A few of them, including Duff, had previously talked to her on the phone in the course of helping her answer reference questions. No one complained to her about Duff, and she decided not to probe.
She did observe, however, that he conducted himself pretty much as described. He was a hard-driving taskmaster and thoroughly autocratic. But with her, he was cordial and businesslike. He did not seem to resent her, at least not that she could detect. Maybe the reports about him were exaggerated, or perhaps her philosophy of expecting the best from people was working.

Her feeling of well-being was soon rudely shattered. One day, during her second week, she was talking with him in her office about the upcoming national conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries. Perhaps the head of the cataloging department should attend, she mused, since a representative of the Library of Congress would be there to outline some new cataloging policies.

Duff regarded her with astonishment. "I have always attended those conferences," he said sharply. "If I find out anything the staff should know, I tell them."

Mae had been ready to smile, but kept her expression blank. "I didn't know that you always went," she said. "I thought it might be a good idea if the person who is directly involved—"

"I can't adjust my style to every new person who comes in here, you know," he blurted out, in a dictatorial, almost savage tone. "The dean only allocates enough money in the budget to send one person to that conference, and it's always been me. The director of this library has had his—her, I suppose I should say—way paid to the ALA annual convention, and I've had mine paid to this one. There isn't enough money to send anyone else to conferences. You'll find that out. And even if there were, frankly, I don't think the staff should go." As he spoke, he edged closer to the door.

"I'd like to speak to you more about this," said Mae with as casual an attitude as she could muster.

His reply was unconciliatory. "I have work to do," he said. "I don't think there's anything more to say. I'm not going to change my mind." As if throwing down the gauntlet, he added, "I can be unpleasant, I warn you." With that he turned on his heel and strode away.

Mae got up and went over to the window. A custodian was hosing down the sidewalk. She envied him his uncomplicated existence. She wondered what she should do now—whether to chase after Duff and order him to come back or wait and see him later, after she had regained her composure.
He's clearly a Theory X manager, she said to herself; think of McGregor. Then her thoughts reverted to Elsbeth Bajalovic. Would Bajalovic support her if she took firm action with Duff? And what would that action be, anyway? How does one go about terminating a tenured staff member? If Duff, with his stern authoritarianism, was Theory X, was the casual, laissez-faire Bajalovic Theory Y?

Her mind was an arena of perplexing questions. Why was he behaving so obnoxiously? Were women bosses elsewhere in the university having trouble with men subordinates? Had anyone investigated this and compiled a list of recommendations? Did Duff have psychological problems? How do you tell a subordinate he or she might need to see a psychiatrist? Maybe I could give him some books to read, she thought. Is there anything to bibliotherapy? How about an encounter group? Would that do any good? Can I force him to attend? Where would the money come from to pay for it? How about taking a Management By Objectives approach? She stood and pondered as the sun descended. She must do something . . . but what?

*Adapted from a case written by A.J. Anderson, Professor Emeritus, Simmons College GSLIS*