Gerri stood at the circulation desk reading a book that had recently been donated for the library's book sale. Meanwhile, a line of patrons was growing in front of her checkout terminal. Patrons waited—some patiently, some not so patiently—to check out their books while Gerri turned the pages of her novel, seemingly unaware of her audience.

At the reference desk 25 feet away, Rhoda saw what was happening. She walked over to the Circulation Desk and asked Gerri if she needed any help. "Oops," cried Gerri, when she looked up and saw how many people she had detained. "I'm sorry!"

After one particularly disgruntled patron was served, he walked over to Rhoda and said, referring to Gerri, "She's a stereotypical librarian." Surprised by the remark, Rhoda could only guess what the man had meant.

Employees at the Hope Public Library (HPL) loved their jobs and their community. Not that either one was pleasant all the time. The jobs were difficult, demanding, and fast-paced, and the pay was lower than at any public library within miles. The local population was low on the socio-economic scale, which meant that the library had to contend with plenty of social problems. But the community at large was fine and upstanding, and all acknowledged the importance of the library’s role. The staff’s commitment to public service made the Hope Public Library a popular destination in the community.

Most of the employees at HPL worked together like a well-oiled machine. As a group, they were conscientious and aware. Each person looked out for the others, pitching in when extra help was needed. The manager, Mandy, had been a HPL reference librarian for years before recently taking on the position of boss. She was kind and sympathetic, but she was not a very effective agent of change. In fact, that was why her coworkers had asked her to take the job; they hoped to avoid the changes that would inevitably come if someone new were brought in from the outside.

Over the years, the library’s culture had taken on one remarkable aspect. It was considered taboo to say anything negative about a coworker. Somehow this unwritten rule had expanded to include a coworker’s
performance as well. But eyes can convey messages that make words unnecessary. Undercurrents often developed among staffers if someone consistently failed to meet the demands of the job.

During Rhoda's tenure at the library, she came to realize that everyone faced challenges when they worked with Gerri. Although answering the phone was one of Gerri’s duties, she refused to do so if even one person was waiting at the circulation desk. If a patron could not find a book on the shelves, Gerri would announce she was leaving her post to go help with the search. One could never be sure when she might return to the desk to resume her tasks there. If anyone spoke to her directly about her activities or possible improvements in her work, she would shriek and refuse to discuss it any further. She could not or would not fix a paper jam in the photocopier. She could not or would not do any computer troubleshooting. She would not keep up with postings in the library log, where news, memos, and procedure changes were posted. When she had an opportunity for job enrichment—such as training sessions on how to use new library resources—she took advantage of the time away from work, but never used the techniques she had been taught. Seldom did she exercise independent judgment; instead she would call for a coworker or supervisor when a decision needed to be made. She was forgetful, often leaving work unfinished or mishandling it so badly that someone else would have to make it right. Often she seemed to be simply a conduit (or an obstacle), existing only to reroute work to her colleagues.

One thing Gerri loved to do, though, was to manage the gift books. Books were donated every day, sometimes by the boxful. Gerri regularly combed through the donated volumes, setting some aside for the library’s collection, and then took the leftovers out to the lobby for the library’s ongoing book sale. She was never happier than when she was wearing her surgical mask and latex gloves to dig through donations, looking for diamonds in the rough. While this sort of collection development would normally be part of a librarian's job, the Hope staffers generally agreed that Gerri was the person to do it. She was the most widely read of all the library's employees, she knew the collection (and its holes) very well, and this particular task required very little interpersonal contact.

The staffers also suspected Gerri was a hypochondriac. She knew about every disease and said she had had most of them. In addition, she was legally blind. At age 62, she was trim and good-looking, but her moans and sighs made her sound like an old woman. She didn't get much sympathy from her put-upon coworkers; the days Gerri called in sick felt like holidays to them.
Given her health concerns, Gerri seemed ripe for retirement. But she had only worked for Hope for a couple of years and had no retirement savings. She regularly announced to anyone who would listen that she would be working for the rest of her life, since she had no money and no family.

Some of the longtimers at Hope said Gerri’s issues were beginning to remind them of a supervisor who had retired a few years before. She had developed dementia in her seventies, yet still came to work every day; at the library, she pushed book carts into bathrooms, disappeared into the stacks, and caused disruption in all sections. Her family, her church group, and the local chapter of the NAACP had been eager to see her stay at Hope. After some months of this behavior, however, all the stakeholders agreed that the workplace was not where she should be spending her days, and she retired.

As for Gerri, her supervisor and Mandy both expressed boundless sympathy and patience, but Gerri’s coworkers were getting fed up with having to do her work as well as their own.

Can this situation improve? How can changes be made in a long-standing organizational culture? If you were one of Gerri’s coworkers, what would you do?

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