ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS:
“MUST HAVE” PERSONAL COMPETENCY FOR LIBRARIANS

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INTRODUCTION

In providing library and information services for their users, librarians are encountered by different types of personalities of users. Librarians quite often have to face “uncomfortable” communication exchanges with their users, as there is a tendency among librarians in “allowing” themselves to be steered up by their users for the sake of giving satisfying library and information services for the users. In some extreme cases, librarians/information professionals feel ‘abused” by their users, again in some cases, for the sake of “user-satisfaction oriented” library and information services. The story from “the other side of fence”, that is from the library users, could be somewhat different; some users feel that librarians do not assist and help them as they expected the librarians should be. From users’ perspectives, librarians are expected as people who know everything, who can instantly understand what the users need, and they also expect that librarians should be friendly, helpful, knowledgeable, and empathetic. The users are easily disappointed if the librarians cannot meet their expectation, and the “potential danger” is that users do not want to ask librarians’ assistance again or stop using library and information services provided by libraries. In many cases this situation arises simply because of the “unsmooth” communication process between librarians and users.

It has been long understood and accepted that good and effective communication skills is fundamental personal competency for those who work in in libraries and information centers. There are many aspects of communication skills for good and effective in communication process. Being assertive is one significant aspect of communication skills which should be mastered by librarians so that they can confidently and professionally provide their services to users in respectful-based environment. It is also strongly believed that “assertiveness is equally important in the process of communication between librarians and their superiors, peers and subordinates.
Assertiveness for librarians was comprehensively discussed by Janette Caputo\(^1\) in her book “The Assertive Librarian” published in 1984. Since then, this issue has become one of interesting human interaction issues in librarianship. Most if not all competency standards for various professions include communication skills as important personal competencies that should be demonstrated consistently by professionals. Good communication skills is “more crucial” to be adopted by those professionals who work in service industries, including librarians and information professionals. “Communication skills” is also one of the “key competencies” in “Indonesian National Work Competency Standards” (*Standar Kompetensi Kerja Nasional Indonesia*) Librarians. The standards was prepared by the National Library of Indonesia, the Indonesian Librarian Association and Indonesian library practitioners, was regulated by the Decree of Minister of Manpower and Transmigration in 2012. The definition and scope of communication skills in Indonesian National Work Competency Standards for librarians should be elaborated and the concept of “assertiveness” should be included in it.

This brief paper will revisit the importance of assertive communication skills for librarians wherever they are, including Indonesia. Assertive communication skills should become one of personal competencies and it should be regarded as equally important as professional competencies.

**LIBRARIANS AND THEIR COMPETENCIES**

Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science (ODLIS) \(^2\) defines [librarian](#) as follows:

“A professionally trained person responsible for the care of a library and its contents, including the selection, processing, and organization of materials and the delivery of information, instruction, and loan services to meet the needs of its users”

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Indonesian Law number 43 Year 2007 regarding Libraries defines “a librarian” as a person who has the competencies acquired through education and/or training librarianship and have tasks and responsibilities to carry out the library management and services.”

Special Libraries Association (SLA) of American Library Association in the “Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century” issued in 2003 and revised recently in 2014 explains that information professionals including librarians, are:

- “individuals who use information strategically in their work to help their organizations and/or clients meet key goals.
- Information professionals accomplish this through various means, including gathering, developing, deploying, and managing information resources and services.
- Information professionals harness a variety of existing and emerging information tools, such as collaborative technologies and social media, to accomplish goals.
- Information professionals include, but are not limited to, librarians, knowledge managers, chief information officers, information analysts, taxonomists, web developers, information brokers, and consultants.”

SLA furthermore states that information professionals (including librarians) embrace two core values as defined below:

- Information professionals contribute to the knowledge base of the profession by sharing best practices and experiences, and continue to learn about information products, services, and management practices throughout the life of their career.

- Information professionals commit to professional excellence and ethics, and to the values and competencies of the profession.

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Additionally, information professionals are also expected to perform certain values such as: accountability, competency, confidentiality, dependability, ethical behavior, fairness, honesty, integrity, perseverance, responsibility, trustworthiness.

Another definition of information professionals (including librarians) which is worth mentioning is as explained by Barbara B. Moran and Gary Marchionini in Information Professionals 2050: Educational Possibilities and Pathways (2012)⁴ as follows:

- Information professionals are partners in generating and collecting information; they are part of the research, data mining, or design team. Placing value on accurately-represented and well-organized information serves information production teams well.
- Information professionals elicit, ingest, organize, and evaluate information. They do so using distributed databases and by directing data streams. Because they value universal access, they create powerful and adaptable indexes, ontologies, and because they value stewardship, they worry about cost-effective but sustainable data structures.
- Information professionals share information openly and freely. Because they value universal access and self-directed learning, they advocate open access publishing and easy-to-use access systems.
- Information professionals are participants in using and reusing information to solve problems, make decisions, learn, and play. Educating the public to find and use information, assess its accuracy and provenance, and joining small or massive teams to aggregate, synthesize, annotate, or summarize are all roles that information professionals play. Because they value collaboration and learning, they are willing to go beyond simply delivering information to helping people apply it.
- Information professionals have long served as stewards of knowledge and this is even more important today for the diverse forms and volumes of digital information. Valuing

access and stewardship, they know they go hand in hand and that substantial context must be included if information is to be useful in the future.

The definition and descriptions on librarians and information professionals above clearly show that librarians and information professionals should have and should perform professional as well as personal competencies consistently and continuously. They are required to have both personal and professional competencies in order to carry out their tasks and responsibilities.

SLA’s definition of professional and personal competencies is as follows:

“Professional Competencies relate to the practitioner's knowledge of information resources, access, technology and management, and the ability to use this knowledge as a basis for providing the highest quality information services. Three major professional competencies are: creating and maintaining collaborative relationships; managing information resources and information services; 3. understanding and applying information tools and technologies.

Personal Competencies represent a set of attitudes, skills and values that enable practitioners to work effectively and contribute positively to their organizations, clients and profession. These competencies range from being strong communicators, to demonstrating the value-add of their contributions, to remaining flexible and positive in an ever-changing environment.”

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

Being strong communicators require assertive and proactive communication skills. The RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) Counselling Service defines assertive communication as “communication style that is respectful of others but clear and firm in intent.” Assertive communication means honest, but appropriate communication. Assertiveness is often correlated with good self esteem and confidence.
Max Eggert and Phil Hailstone explained that **assertiveness** is the state of “enjoying our rights, expressing our feelings, asking for what we want and stating our views **WITH** integrity, honesty, directness, and respect for others.”

RMIT Counselling Service defines **aggressive**, another communication style as the opposite to **assertive** as follows:

“**Aggressive** is communication style which is intimidating, forceful, and does not consider the needs, rights or feelings of others. A person who uses aggressive communication style can feel powerful and can seem effective, as others may fear the person and they may do what the person wants as a result”.

**Being aggressive** is definitely inappropriate communication style to be performed by librarians and information professionals. In some cases, however, this type of communication style is demonstrated by library users towards librarians and information professionals.

Another communication style is **being passive**, which means that the communicator is submissive, avoids conflict at all costs, puts the communicator’s needs last, which means giving in to unreasonable demands from others. Passive communication tends to avoid negative criticism, and tends to focus overly on pleasing others at the cost of one’s own needs and rights.

According to Eggert and Hailstone (2011), a passive person is also a non-assertive person ----

- a person who is reluctant to express own opinions, and particularly, feelings;
- a person often feels used by others; keeps quiet when others take advantage;
- a person who refrains from complaining when services or products are not up to standard;
- a person who finds it difficult to refuse the requests of others for time or resources

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• a person who frequently makes compromises in the interests of harmony;
• a person who is submissive in the presence of aggressive behavior; and prefers to keep own views private.”

To contrast the above two communication styles Eggert and Hailstones (2011) also suggest “assertive communication style” as suggested by by RMIT Counselling Service.

Eggert and Hailstones (2011) describe assertiveness as the state of “enjoying our rights, expressing our feelings, asking for what we want and stating our views WITH integrity, honesty, directness, and respect for others.”

This style of communication should be adopted by librarians and information professionals.

The assertive librarians and information professionals are those who are:

• able to express desires and feelings to others;
• able to converse and work well with people at all levels;
• able to appreciate the views of others and accept any that appear more reasonable than their own;
• able to disagree with someone yet retain their friendship and respect;
• aware of the needs and desires of others; are able to make concessions to others without feelings of inadequacy;
• able to express a concern or a need with minimum embarrassment to both parties;
• able to control feelings and emotions even in difficult or emotionally charged situations;
• able to refuse a request without feeling guilty or obliged;
• able to ask for what he or she wants and can insist on legal entitlements without becoming emotional.

CONCLUSION

The expectation and in some cases “the demands” of users to get excellent library and information services from librarians and the information professionals is increasing nowadays.
Assertive communication is regarded as the “most healthy and effective” communication pattern and having this type of communication skills would “make life easier” for librarians wherever they are, and whatever type of libraries or information centers they work for. Performing assertive communication would reduce unnecessary emotional bursts when dealing with different types of library users as well as with decision makers, peers, IT department, and other stakeholders such as vendors and publishers.

Librarians and information professionals will need to change their mindsets in order to have and consistently perform assertive communication skills. The process of understanding, then applying the assertive communication skills can be relatively tiring and need to be exercised and practiced over and over again, before the librarians can embed the skills naturally within their inter-personal skills.

REFERENCES:


