

New Styles of Leadership

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American Copy Editors Society

2005 National Conference

Hollywood, California

Introduction

Newspapers are facing challenges in a way that we couldn't imagine a decade ago. A soft economy, corporate imperatives to maintain profits and boost shareholder value, declining circulation, layoffs and restructuring of news staffs, introduction of new products to serve young readers and immigrant communities, technological change including the impact of Blogs and the competition for revenue and reader time from the Internet start-ups, and the need for newsrooms to respond competitively to these challenges.

In spite of these challenges, the new developments and the uncertainties about the collective futures of our newspapers, the role of the copy desk remains grounded in its historical role. It is the gatekeeper, the protector of the newspaper's values and core obligations of balance, fairness, accuracy, objectivity and completeness. Technology has given the copy desk new tasks, new responsibilities and new specialties, such as packaging and page design.

To this extent, the copy desk has a broader impact on the way the newspaper presents itself to readers every day. As a consequence, the responsibilities of those who lead have grown. As the organization has become complex, the demands of effective leadership and management have become more demanding.

Two key studies, a 2001 ASNE survey and a 2000 study by the Readership Institute at Northwestern University, identified numerous deficits in newsroom leadership. Among the shortcomings that were identified were lack of coaching and development, poor hiring practices and the absence of regular, effective performance evaluations.

The ASNE study found the majority of newsroom employees identified three characteristics they valued most in an immediate supervisor: regular recognition, coaching and clear goals. Employees gave their supervisors the lowest score possible for coaching, providing constructive criticism and assisting in goal development.

A 1995 study of newspaper copy editors presented at an Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication conference found that feelings of personal accomplishment were higher when copy editors thought their bosses calmly dealt with uncertainty, were persuasive rather than dictatorial, had strong convictions, clearly defined roles and job expectations, actively exercised good leadership, resolved conflicts, had cordial relationships with their bosses and allowed for initiative, decision and action among employees.

What is a leader?

We are familiar with the traditional definitions of leaders. Leaders provide a guiding vision for our newspapers. They can effectively move the newspaper toward that vision through behavior that is consistent, that reflects candor, that demonstrates competence and integrity, that expresses a passion for the mission and influences the staff to follow, and that evokes the core values of journalism.

The people who run copy desks are part of the newsroom leadership. But because of the different nature of the copy desk, their roles embrace some special leadership and management responsibilities that can be said to be peculiar to the copy desk.

Definitions of some leadership skills special to copy desks:

- 1 Getting people to work together across internal boundaries.
- 2 Collaboration among functions.
- 3 Tailoring the role of the desk to serve the needs and expectations of other newsroom operations.
- 4 Peer relationships.
- 5 Developing a culture that supports the newspaper's purpose.
- 6 Capitalizing on what is unique about the copy desk.
- 7 Upholding the newspaper's standards through rigorous editing.
- 8 Effectively managing conflicts with other news desks and other mid-level editors.

Power as a consequence of rank and role as a leader

Leaders on the copy desk possess kinds of power that can enhance his or her ability to be effective, not only in directing the work of the desk but in representing the copy desk to the rest of the newsroom.

- 1 **Legitimate Power:** Based on the position as head of the copy desk. Normally, the higher the position, the higher the legitimate power tends to be. The executive editor has the most legitimate power, for example. A leader with legitimate power influences others because it is recognized that, by virtue of position in the organization, the leader has the right to expect that his or her suggestions or instructions will be followed. Legitimate power has another name: Authority.

- 2 **Expert power:** Based on the leader's possession of expertise, skill, knowledge and others' respect for these proficiencies. The leader has power to assist others. Possession of a specific, important skill that has value gives the editor a power that goes beyond his authority or rank or legitimate power.
- 3 **Reward power:** Based on the leader's ability to provide rewards for those under his/her command. It is important to establish a strong link between performance and reward. This can lead to greater power to influence better work. Is this a limited power on the copy desk?
- 4 **Referent power:** Based on the leader's personal traits. A leader with strong referent power generally is liked and admired by others because of his/her personality. This enables the leader to influence behavior in the work group.
- 5 **Information power:** Based on what the leader knows, and what kind of access the leader has to information that is perceived by others to be valuable. The editor is in the know, in both a formal and informal sense. Information allows the editor to influence subordinates because they need the information the leader possesses. How can the dynamics of information be a powerful tool for the editor?
- 6 **Connection power:** Based on the leader's connections with influential or important people. For the copy desk leader, these connections inside the newsroom are more important than any connections outside the newsroom. Why? Copy desk leader's connection power increases to the degree that he or she is close to the senior editors in the newsroom, or even the publisher.

Skills of successful leaders

Communication skills

- 1 Communication is a key part of development: No news is not good news. A manager's misplaced time and attention will not be viewed as a neutral act by employees.
- 2 How you say something is as important as what you say.
- 3 Managers write memos to convey information to their employees, yet people often forget or misinterpret written statements; true leaders bring memos to life.
- 4 Soft skills play a key part in effective communication; negotiate solutions rather than dictate.
- 5 Translate corporate goals into working visions by understanding corporate vision and modifying it for your department and employees. Failure to do so, may lead to malicious compliance or confusion.

Developing and coaching

- 1 Effective managers must take on the role of strategic advisers and skills coaches.
- 2 Help employees find and enact own ideas; don't just dictate their own.
- 3 Allow employees to reinvent the best way to do their jobs.
- 4 The Readership Institute study recommends that newsrooms offer at least 35 to 80 hours a year in training. How do you do this with tight budgets? Job rotations, mentoring, team projects, brown bags.
- 5 Schedule meetings with staffer to identify top personal priorities, determine which fit most closely with the organization's goals and pick one or two to work on and revise over time.

Strategic planning

- 1 Leaders are true visionaries who are able to dream and, most importantly, translate that dream to others in the organization and be able to enact it, measure it, revise it.
- 2 Being able to anticipate change means controlling your own destiny and that of your staff.
- 3 Respond to problems through analysis and the benefits of experience, and suggest a solution as part of presenting the problem.
- 4 Expand knowledge outside the newsroom.

Managing horizontally and vertically

- 1 Studies show employees feel more secure in the jobs if their boss gets along with their boss and other managers.
- 2 Foster a culture of inclusion and accountability.
- 3 Good managers see success in their ability to influence others rather than boss.
- 4 Value team success over personal success.
- 5 Encourage ideas to bubble up from anyone on the desk.

Resolving conflicts

- 1 Confront conflict head-on.
- 2 Focus on solutions, not blame.
- 3 Manage conflict so it is limited to disagreements about goals, ideas or methods. Keep personalities and personal styles out of the discussion.
- 4 Define problems in terms of needs, not solutions.
- 5 Don't take conflict among managers to staff; don't take conflict with employees to other employees.

Clear performance expectations

- 1 Review process
- 2 Clear objectives
- 3 Open-ended, not a list of functions
- 4 Must be objective, factual: describe behavior, not personal qualities
- 5 Measurable

Soul of a leader

- 1 Paradoxical skills reflect a balance of cognitive and emotional skills required to balance cultural side of business with the technical.
- 2 Intuitive and artful as well as rational; work with people directly while delegating; show concern for employees but take disciplinary action when needed; participate at times but stand back at others.
- 3 Manage themselves through own training and feedback through 360s or 180s.
- 4 Myers-Briggs identifies four key leadership personality indicators: true leaders tend to be ingenious innovators who always see new possibilities; they aim to understand rather than judge people; and they embrace new challenges and often are bored by routine. They are prone to diving too deeply into any project and may fail to finish or follow-through on projects in their eagerness to embrace the

- next challenge.
- 5 See themselves as agents of change and leaders, not followers.
 - 6 Risk takers who are able to stand against the status quo in the larger interest of the organization (studies have shown seven out of 10 people won't speak up if they think they will contradict their boss).
 - 7 Personalities are not malleable, but attitudes, behaviors and management approaches are flexible.
 - 8 Lifelong learners who talk about, rather than try to hide, their mistakes and view them as learning experiences. They seek their own development.
 - 9 Know all employees are different with own set of drives; understand "filters."

Conclusion

Beyond leading their employees to reach higher goals, managers must lead their companies to reach new heights. Today's managers cannot be passive, technocrats who simply maintain the goals of the organization; they must be visionaries dedicated to change. Part of that includes change from within. Too often newspapers promote good journalists into management positions and, as such, they tend to focus on the technical aspects of the job rather than coaching, communication and strategic planning. It's more comfortable for us to rewrite the headline or redesign the page ourselves, but to do so stunts the growth of employees, which in turn, limits the ability of your newspaper to grow and successfully face increasing competition.

George Eliot: "It's never too late to be what you might have been."

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