

# Managing Newsroom Employees

A guide to solving  
common personnel  
problems

By Sharon L. Peters, *PhD.*



## PREFACE

Listen to any editor in America and you'll hear many of the same complaints.

- *"We can communicate with the world, but we can't seem to communicate with each other."*
- *"Sometimes it feels like I'm running a kindergarten, not a newsroom. Why can't my employees act like adults?"*
- *"I've talked and talked, and that (reporter, photographer, editor, artist) still does the same things wrong. It's making me crazy"*
- *"I've got a couple star performers. I wish I could clone them and have a newsroom full of people like them."*
- *"Performance reviews are a joke. No one likes doing them and they don't accomplish anything."*

Any of this sound familiar? Perhaps you've heard a few of these things come out of your own mouth.

You might not know it from the ubiquity of these complaints, but these are all resolvable problems. Internal communication can be improved. Toxic boss-subordinate relations can be fixed. Stars can be made through coaching and rewards. Performance reviews can be turned into positive, organization-shaping experiences. Really.

You won't find paint-by-the-numbers management advice here. While all personnel management shares some commonalities, newsrooms *are* different from other work environments and the people who fill them are unlike those in most other offices. (Just how different these people are, you'll discover in the first chapter.) Newsrooms are filled with more than their share of eccentrics.

Internal communications shortcomings are real, not imagined. A wider range of personal behavior is tolerated than in many offices. Newsrooms house a higher proportion of creative people than most workplaces

Sharon L. Peters applies her 23 years of newsroom experience, along with her extensive research and understanding of organization behavior, to the unique circumstances of newsroom management. In clear, step-by-step language she shows how to get the best out of your newsroom staff.

Little of what Peters suggests is difficult, but it does take persistence and commitment from the top. It's worth it; it will make your life and the lives of your managers easier and your product better.

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# Can We Talk?

It is a frequent refrain in newsrooms: We may be in the business of communication, but we do a lousy job of it with each other.

Reporters complain that editors communicate with them exclusively through e-mail. Middle managers complain of reporters who present completed stories without a hint they were in the works and of brainstorming sessions where staffers sit in mute disengagement. Top editors complain they are the last to know about problems that might profoundly impact the enterprise. And everyone complains they know nothing about what anyone else in the room is doing.

These are not figments of anyone's imagination. This is, in fact, common in most newsrooms. Furthermore, this is predictable, given a key characteristic of most people who go into newspaper work.

Most newsroom folks are introverts. This has been documented by the Center for Applications of Psychological Type's data bank, which found that 54 percent of workers who classified themselves as reporters or editors scored as introverts on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. And it has been documented by my own research at more than three dozen newspapers, where without exception, 60 to 65 percent of newsroom personnel have scored as introverts.



## **IT'S NOT A DISABILITY**

Introvert is a label drenched in negativism. For the record, introverts are not sociopaths, nor socially awkward. They do not hate people, nor are they inveterate reclusives. Introversion is not a disability; it is merely an inherent characteristic shared by millions.

Introverts are, however, predisposed to certain behaviors that can make open communication a challenge.

They prefer written to verbal communication. So they'll write a note or send an e-mail rather than have a face-to-face.

They avoid sharing thoughts extemporaneously, preferring to work an idea through in their heads before articulating their thinking. Thus, they dislike talking about a story's thesis before it is written and they avoid talking about ideas before they've reached final form.

They favor one-on-one discussions to conversing with several people at once, thus the clam-up phenomenon when several of them are in a room together. They generally prefer to work alone rather than with others.

All of which, of course, describes most reporters and editors.

Since the vast majority of the general population—70 percent—is extroverted, workplaces with populations in which introverts are the majority are rare. So the presumption that communication is worse in most newsrooms than in other offices is quite true. And no amount of restructuring, network-forming or team emphasis will change this very much, because the cause is not the system (except in rare cases of highly dysfunctional cultures or structures) but a fundamental trait of most of the people who work there.

The solution is not to shoot all the introverts. Introverts have singular qualities important in the news business. They are great listeners—much better than extroverts are, who tend to want to talk as much as listen during interviews. Introverts are excellent at distilling the Vapors; they listen silently while extroverts fill the air with

conversation and ideas, and they process this, forming cogent thinking from all the clatter. They find writing—communing silently for interminable periods with a non-responsive computer—far easier than most extroverts do.

Overcoming internal communication difficulties is possible. It requires some revised practices as well as significant cultural shifts.

## **BRAINSTORMING MEETINGS**

Usually introverts sit silently while the extroverts bounce half-formed ideas off one another. When the meeting ends, decisions have been made without much input from the introverts. To change this, tell participants well in advance what topics will be discussed. This allows introverts time to begin forming notions and they're more likely to share them during the meeting. Additionally, make it clear that decisions won't be made during the meeting. Give everyone overnight to process what has been said and present additional information—in person or by e-mail—the next day. This allows introverts to do what they do best—cut to the chase—and gives the organization the benefit of their thinking.

## **ROUTINE COMMUNICATION**

Most people (even many introverts) believe that if they haven't been spoken to, they haven't been communicated with. So notes or e-mail are not seen as adequate communication. Since newsrooms have nurtured a conspiracy of silence, change entails not only modifying individual behavior but also modifying newsroom reverence for this behavior.

Top editors must get the ball rolling by cutting their use of written communication. When they have a question, concern or announcement, they should set a time to talk face-to-face—at least some of the time.

Middle managers must do the same. The argument that there isn't enough time won't do. Many newsrooms find that when managers spend more time talking with their people, they spend much less time trying to resolve problems late in the game. Nonetheless, getting supervisors to change is tough. They are suspicious of anything that looks as if it may require more hours in the office, and most prefer to communicate with notes and e-mail.

There also is the confounding issue of the reporters and other non-supervisory types. Most say they want more face-to-face communication with their bosses, and while that's true, most don't want intrusion into their routines. Thus while they prefer working alone and silently, their supervisors' need to know what they are doing is equally important. Tension and conflict over these two disparate needs can be intense

Here's a simple procedure to help: Make it understood that each supervisor will have with each staff member two scheduled 10-minute talks every day—early in the day to discuss that day's work and later to discuss progress. These discussions should be at roughly the same time each day and everyone understands that issues unrelated to that day's work will be brought up. (Naturally, when news happens, unscheduled discussions will take place.) When introverts grow accustomed to this practice, they lose a lot of the ambient edginess that grows from the fear they will be constantly interrupted, and they tend to become more communicative.

## **TEAM STRUCTURES**

Top editors often assume—incorrectly—that if teams are formed everyone will join hands and march cheerfully toward perfect communication. The real deal is that forming teams can sometimes improve information sharing somewhat—simply because verbalizing in front of eight people is easier for introverts than verbalizing in front of 24. But unrealistic expectations about the joys of teams can make some introverts even less communicative. There must

be a relentlessly demonstrated respect for introverts' work and communication preferences. When that happens, they will inevitably give more to the team.

# Toxic Relationships

There is probably no newsroom supervisor in America who has not had a work relationship with a subordinate that is unpleasant, unproductive or just plain ugly.

And chances are equally good that:

- not one of these relationships has ever improved because of actions initiated by the subordinate, and
- the longer the problem was allowed to ferment, the more miserably murky and utterly irreparable it seemed.

I don't want to oversimplify this. The roots of the conflicts, miscues and heat in work relationships, as we all know, can be complicated and hard to get to the bottom of. But most times they are not nearly as impenetrable and intractable as managers make them—through avoidance, or well-intentioned but largely ineffective over-analysis, or through letting their own emotions and egos cloud the matter.

If you, the manager, can get past some of the common stumbling blocks, you probably can effect significant improvement with greater speed than you might think possible.

First, you need to get your head in the right place to avoid the two mistakes managers consistently make when in the throes of a toxic or unfruitful work relationship. Employee problems are rarely resolved when you make these mistakes.



## **IT'S NOT PERSONAL**

Mistake one is that you take it personally. If you are like most managers, when someone on your staff hasn't responded to your coaching, or when he seems to ignore you or disrespect you, or when he has refused to do what you ask, or when he has done any of the millions of other things employees do to make editors feel utterly worthless, you take it personally.

You think the reporter doesn't like you or doesn't trust you or doesn't respect you—that whatever negative behaviors or vibes that guy is sending are intended as a stiletto to your heart. Your heart. You personally. Not you "the boss," or you "the person who represents authority," or you "the person who is the steward of company policies that may be unpopular," but you, personally. That is rarely the case. It is rarely personal. It happens sometimes, but rarely.

So don't make that assumption. Don't allow yourself to see yourself as the victim or the hated person. If you get caught up—even if just in your own head—in defending your worth or your intentions or your character, you are creating an emotional volatility that will make it difficult to discuss the problem rationally and reach a solution.

You must remove your own insecurities, defensiveness and patterned responses from the fray. Remind yourself that whatever is happening is probably happening because of what you represent, not because of you as a human being. Keep emotion out of it. Instead, focus on the employee's actions and behaviors that make it a problem situation.

## **YOU'RE NOT A PSYCHOLOGIST**

Don't attribute motives to others' bad behaviors. This is the second common mistake managers make.

You probably should tape this rule to your computer screen or have it tattooed on your forearm, because the attribution habit is one of the most counterproductive things supervisors do.

Here's why. First, it doesn't matter why the problem employee is doing what he or she is doing. It may have to do with something that happened when he was 5 years old, or when he first joined the newspaper business or when he had a bad divorce. It doesn't matter to you; it can't matter to you.

Yet all too often I see managers spending hours months, years twirling the thing over and over and over in their minds, trying to understand why a staffer acts as he does. "Maybe if I can understand this," the supervisor reasons, "I can fix it." That's honorable, but you're wasting precious time trying to come up with a plausible explanation rather than simply pointing out the unacceptable behavior and allowing the employee to fix it

Moreover, you're not trained to explore and identify psychological motivation. You may come up with an excellent explanation that has nothing to do with the truth. So don't put your mind through that exercise. And don't put the staffer through this, either. It is insulting for you to sit down and say, "Look, I know that this happened to you and that's probably contributing to the situation we've got." If I'm someone who works for you, I really do not want you making assumptions of that sort. Analysis is not your function in my life

## **GET INFORMATION YOU NEED**

That said, there may be information that you need to have about why the person is doing what he is doing. Possibly you're doing something that is prompting the behavior or worsening a predisposition toward that behavior. But you're not going to get that information by contemplating in isolation. So instead of engaging in these well-meaning but meaningless intellectual explorations, you must simply sit down with the person, identify the problem, say it has to be corrected—and why—and offer your suggestions for improving it. And then ask, "Is there anything I am doing to contribute to it that I need to modify?" That's as much as you need to know about the

other person's bad behavior or bad-performance motivations

If you can avoid these two common manager pitfalls—taking it personally and trying to understand whys and wherefores that are irrelevant—you can probably keep the temperature within an acceptable range and tackle the problem. in a timely, straightforward manner.

# Corrective Actions

**P**roblems between supervisors and subordinates often seem to the supervisor hideously complicated, like a dream sequence in which nothing is as it appears.

There may, indeed, be a series of confounding tendrils branching out in a confusing tangle that make problem identification and resolution seem virtually impossible. But there is almost always a single root problem—the basis from which all else flows. If you can identify the base problem and get the employee to address that, chances are quite good that the tangential issues will dissolve as well.

The number of base problems is not infinite. Workplace research finds that fully 92 percent of the wearing, long-term problems between supervisors and employees fall into two categories. Just two.

## PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

The first category is performance issues. The person is simply not doing the job she ought to be doing. She is not, let's assume, woefully incompetent, but in one or several realms she's operating below what she's capable of, below what you regard as the standard. It has become a pattern that affects people up and down the line.

What, exactly is she doing?

She's underreporting or overwriting.

Consistently. Editing her work is an exercise in highest-order patience.

Or he's not productive enough. Everyone else has to work harder to make up for his pokiness, and he is totally oblivious to everyone else contributing far more than he is.

Or she never comes up with her own story ideas. You have to assign her everything, she ridicules all your ideas, and you're tired of filling in her gaps.



Or he is a deadline buster. He wreaks havoc on copy flow and creates enormous tension for everyone up and down the line.

Or she is guilty of one of dozens of other sloppy, haphazard or self-absorbed habits.

I once hired a fashion writer—a spirited writer and pretty good reporter—who, I soon discovered, consistently turned in the dirtiest copy I had ever seen. She'd been a reporter for 12 years before she came to me, so presumably she had heard from many editors that this was a problem. Still there were 15 misspellings in every story she turned in, sources' names were spelled two or three different ways, math never added up, and sometimes sentences just tapered off without actually finishing the thought. Even when we got spellchecker on our computers, she somehow couldn't bring herself to push that one button and clean up that part of the mess.

I would talk to her almost every night about that day's abomination. I made copious references in her performance reviews. I would hold stories until she cleaned them up. I even refused to give her a raise. It never got much better. Made me crazy. Eventually it tainted my overall regard for her. For weeks at a time I would forget that she had great story ideas, wrote terrific ledes and had wonderful sources. My perception of her was overwhelmed by my contempt for her pigpen approach to copy. There were some days I couldn't bring myself to say good morning to her.

## **A DIFFERENT APPROACH**

OK, here's the deal.

You can't just keep criticizing every story when it comes in. It didn't work for me with the fashion writer. It's not going to work for you. You are already in a state of agitation over the most recent rebuke to what you've asked, so you're probably not giving unemotional, constructive feedback. Believe it or not a person can hear over the course of several months that 20 individual stories have been underreported and yet never see underreporting as a personal pattern. The reporter sees each story as an example of one that he did not give his best to. This inability of most of us to identify and admit to our own negative patterns is a well-documented psycho-sociological phenomenon, so you have to take steps to work around that.

You've got to talk about the pattern first thing in the morning, before the first story has been turned in. Give as many specifics as you can. It doesn't matter that you think you've had this conversation with the person before, you've got to do it again. Use different language and a firm but not condescending or exasperated tone. This time you're not criticizing after the fact, you're communicating what you want and don't want in the story she will be turning in today.

Be very specific about your standards and expectations. And be specific about why past performance has not met your standards and expectations. Offer suggestions about how she can improve and insist she come up with some improvement strategies herself.

The next morning you have a similar session, again focusing on the story that she will be doing that day. And the next morning you do the same thing.

Finally, you have a set time to meet every week, without fail, to discuss the progress that has been made and the areas that need attention.

### **THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS**

If you leave out a single step, this isn't going to work. You'll get one day of improved performance and then she will revert to business as usual. And it's usually the last step that managers leave out. They don't go back regularly to talk about the progress and the times there was no progress. There's no reinforcement.

Employees involved in a performance improvement plan need to know they will be monitored, that there will be regular discussions about how they're doing, that there will be regular feedback. In the absence of these regular follow-up meetings, they assume—reasonably enough—one of two things: either they've gotten better, or that your complaint is really no big thing, that it's not all that important to you. And there's no real motivation on their part to do much beyond what they have always done. Then the performance problem continues. You get more frustrated. It begins to be apparent to the employee and others that your relationship is sour. The reporter starts treating you differently because you are treating her differently, and the whole thing becomes a festering mess. If you don't initiate a straight-talk performance improvement plan, you're going to wallow in this unhappy rut for as long as you and this employee share office space.

### **BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS**

The second category is behavior problems. You have an employee whom you believe to be too needy, wanting more feedback, more reassurance and more time than you feel necessary. Or conversely, you have someone who never wants to talk to you. She is uncommunicative and disengaged, and you're always in the dark about what she is doing.

Or maybe the person is a gossip who spends way too.

much of his time stirring the pot, not doing his work and keeping others from doing their work, and you're spending too much of your time putting out the wildfires he has set.

Or it's an explosive personality who screams or throws stuff or dissolves into tears on a regular basis.

Or it's the sullen type who refuses to cooperate on team projects, sneers at anyone who asks questions during the editing process, demeans her co-workers and hurls insults at her sources.

### **SETTING STANDARDS**

We all accept that newsrooms will never be confused with charm schools. But even in newsrooms there should be behavior standards and limits.

Interestingly, the people who breach behavior norms are not generally poor performers. Indeed, often they are pretty good at what they do, although they would be better if they applied this misplaced energy to their work.

But it is not fundamentally performance that is the issue, it is these aggravating behaviors that are childish, silly, annoying, disturbing or disruptive.

Managers are much less likely to address behavior issues than performance issues. It is difficult to tell an adult to behave like one. So you cope and hope it will go away or that you'll grow more accustomed to it. But the behavior goes on, it becomes disruptive to not only you but to the rest of the staff, and finally you explode.

We need to try to avoid that.

It is common for a boss and an employee to have disparate expectations about behavior. We didn't all have the same childhood experiences; We didn't all have the same professional experiences. So we have different notions about what is appropriate and acceptable. While it is unnerving to have to address someone else's behavior, you must, because it soon sours the relationship.

If you have an employee whom you believe is too boisterous, too profane, too demanding, too quiet, too

volatile or too anything else, it is a disservice to leave those behaviors un-addressed, for they have the potential of being as career-threatening as performance issues.

## **BE SPECIFIC**

As with performance issues, you need to name the behavior, give specific examples of when it occurred, and explain why it is counterproductive. Saying "your attitude isn't right," or "you don't seem to respect me" or "you're too emotional" is not appropriate. What you must do is be specific about the actions you find objectionable.

Here is a sample scenario. You've got a reporter you might think of as having a "bad attitude," a chronic complainer who is never happy with the editing his stories get. When you sit down to talk, you address specific behavior in detail. Your approach should be something like this.

"Whenever you have an issue with the editing on your stories, you complain to your fellow reporters for as many as two hours. Yesterday, for example, you went on for more than 90 minutes. And you say totally inappropriate things about the copy editors. Yesterday, for example, you labeled Janelle an illiterate with a tin ear.

"This cannot continue. It is disruptive. It keeps you and much of the staff from tending to work. It is demoralizing for the copy editors to hear second hand what you have said. It creates an us-and-them feeling that is counter to everything we are working toward. And it does nothing to correct whatever issue you are raising, since you never approach anyone involved in editing with your concerns.

"I want to know when you have concerns about editing. And I can assure you that Janelle and the copy chief do as well. So in the future, please discuss your complaints immediately with me, and, when the copy editors come in, with the appropriate person there as well. I am certain you can do it in a polite and civil way, and I

expect you to do so. This is the only effective way to raise issues with your colleagues and come to some mutual understanding about editing issues."

### **WHEN TO BE FLEXIBLE**

When the problem employee's behavior is negatively affecting or endangering co-workers, or when it is demoralizing or demeaning to others, you should be demanding about the standards you expect and firm about instant compliance. When, however, the behavior is merely irritating or annoying and standing in the way of the two of you having a productive work relationship, you can't expect total reversal on the employee's part. You must be willing to find a reasonable middle ground. Maybe the silent employee will never communicate as much as you might wish, but you don't have to marry him, you simply have to have enough information to do your job. If he is meeting that standard, you should be satisfied.

### **CONSEQUENCES**

Whether the issue is performance or behavior, there is an important corollary. There must be consequences if progress isn't made. You must be fair about it. You must talk openly and honestly with the employee. You must coach him. You must monitor progress and let him know where he stands. You must help him develop the skills and behaviors that will help him reach the goals you've set. You must express faith that he can and will do what you're asking.

And he needs to know, though probably not during the first days of this process, that if he doesn't come through, if progress isn't made, something bad will happen. He will be reassigned. Or worse.

This is where managers start getting discouraged. The newspaper industry, which so willingly eats everyone else's young, has been oddly unwilling to deal firmly with its own. That is beginning to change, as it should. The vast majority of performance and behavior problems are improved when the issues are properly raised and monitored by managers. But a few employees feel a stronger need to cling to their patterns than to modify them. Supervisors should feel no compunction about taking the position that if unacceptable patterns are going to be maintained, it will be in a location other than this newsroom.

# Performance Reviews

“An unnatural act forced on non-consenting adults.”

This is how one executive editor characterized the performance review process

And, indeed, there does seem to be in the newspaper business an inordinately high level of negativism, drama and reluctance attached to the very notion of performance evaluation. Managers dislike giving reviews, employees dislike receiving them and top editors and publishers mostly steer clear of the whole mess, evidently worried that they might make a bad situation even worse. Which possibly explains why the newspaper business, as a whole, can claim among the most ineffectual performance evaluation forms, processes, documentation and discussions in white-collar America. While many newspapers have in recent years overhauled their newsroom performance review forms, few have given managers the necessary training to make the most of them, or sent the message that reviews are important and can't just be blown off. So managers—who may already feel uncomfortable passing judgment on others and who have no constructive-criticism or conflict resolution skills—either inflate everyone's performance so as not to incite ugliness, or they avoid the whole process as long as possible then make it as brief and neutral as possible. The entire system loses respect because everyone.



knows it is a dishonest kiss-off carried out only to appease the human resources people.

At the same time, there is a concurrent and universal wail in newsrooms about decreasing productivity, slipping standards, insufficient communication between managers and their employees, lack of attention to personnel development, inattention to the newspaper's strategic goals and a lack of documentation on problem employees.

### **FOCUS, DIRECTION, MOTIVATION**

What other industries have mastered—and what newspapers would do well to learn—is that a good performance review form and system can help address those problems. It is not a panacea, even in the best of circumstances, but it can, if properly administered, sharpen group and individual focus and direction, improve communication between managers and their employees, serve as a motivational tool, strengthen skills, and provide the necessary documentation to advance or terminate employees.

Moreover, the performance review could well be the only time in the course of a year that a reporter and an editor sit down for one hour of uninterrupted discussion about journalism and related matters. This alone makes such an exercise—however lacking or stressful it might be—worth the effort.

Doing performance reviews right is not really that much more difficult or complicated than doing them in a half-hearted way. Whatever time and energy are required for redesigning forms, training, documenting and the like is more than compensated by the hours that will no longer be spent rewriting the same reporter's ledes every day, or dealing with the consequences of habitual and unchecked behavior, or srambling to dredge up something approaching sufficient paperwork when disciplinary action is required.

## **Rules for better reviews**

Here are four rules of thumb managers should keep in mind when writing and conducting performance evaluations.

1. Behaviors and actions. What you are evaluating is behaviors and actions—behavior's and actions to continue and behaviors' and actions to change. You are not addressing attitude or mood or anything along those lines. You've got to stick to describable actions and behaviors, as those are the only things employees can and should take action to change.
2. Feedback must be specific. Precise examples of the good, the bad and the ugly must be given. This is not merely to bolster your position, but to give the employee concrete examples of what success looks like and what failure looks like.
3. Set the tone. When you sit down with the employee to discuss the review, the atmosphere must be conducive to worthwhile dialog. No ringing phones, no interruptions, no furtive glances at the clock.
4. Dialogue, not monologue. The employee must be allowed to have his or her say about why the problems exist or why there are gaps between his or her self-perception and your appraisal. It is human to want to be able to have one's own say. The performance process should not come across as a visit to the Land of Oz, where, once the Wizard speaks, everything else is irrelevant.

## 10 WAYS TO IMPROVE

Here are 10 tips for improving any newsroom's performance evaluation process.

1. **Get specific.** The best review forms are job-specific, meaning that reporters, photographers and copy editors each get a different form. While there are some performance categories that are applied to every person in the newsroom—such as communication or meeting deadlines—the bulk of the performance categories focus on matters that are specific to particular jobs, such as lede-writing for reporters and performance-coaching for managers.
2. **Set annual goals.** Forms should be modified every year to reflect new newsroom or newspaperwide goals or address additional requirements. Employees should be notified at the first of every year what new categories have been added to the forms. This is the one sure means of putting everyone in the newsroom on notice that they are expected to respond to the year's initiatives.
3. **Narratives, not numbers.** The forms should not use a number or letter grading system, but rely on expansive narrative for each performance category. Lots of specifics should be included. Using letter or number grading systems on newsroom employees is silly and counterproductive for two reasons. First, they encourage grade inflation and provide nothing that would give the employee insights into how to improve. Second, no one over the age of 19 likes to get a report card, and no one over the age of 19 should have to get one. The notion of using letters and numbers instead of narrative for performance reviews came into vogue during the early years of the industrial revolution, when many men who had fine technical

skills but little in the way of writing skills were promoted into management positions. For them, a grading system was the only way to address performance. Presumably, deficient writing skill is not a problem among newsroom managers.

**4. Get beyond the paper.** The review process must go beyond the form and involve a minimum of one hour of discourse between the manager and the employee. The form should be presented to the employee at least an hour before the discussion. The discussion should not be merely a reiteration (or defense) of what was written on the form, but should center mostly on improvement strategies.

**5. Do it on time.** Reviews should be administered on time, no excuses. Anything less communicates that the review process is a low priority for management.

**6. Train your managers.** Managers must receive sufficient training, coaching and encouragement to write about and speak about employee performance in a direct, constructive, motivating way. Newspapers have historically been lax about providing training for managers, and that is particularly true of interpersonal-skills training. Few people are born with the ability always to find the best way to raise and address problems or reinforce good performance, and most newsroom managers recognize they are not among the perfect few. Insecurity about their skill is one of the biggest reasons why managers complain about, blow off or minimize performance reviews.

**7. Be direct.** Reviews should be honest and blunt. This does not mean demeaning or brutal. Language and tone should be even and straightforward and the manager should be candid. When the review is over, the employee should know exactly where he or she stands, have a strong sense of problem areas, but also confidence that it is possible to move ahead and address them.

8. **Involve the top boss.** Reviews should be reviewed by a manager's boss. The newspapers that have had the performance reviews and signaling that reviews are important are those in which the managing editor or assistant managing editor reads every review before it is administered. Reviews found lacking are returned for modification. This practice can be an effective way to coach managers who are timid about confrontation or passing judgment. It is a powerful statement when those at the highest levels become personally involved.

9. **Evaluate the evaluators.** Managers should be evaluated for their adherence to performance evaluation during their own reviews. Their performance in this area should be given equal weight to their performance in accuracy or deadlines.

10. **Make time.** Managers should allocate a fixed time each week to work on performance reviews. Nothing signals more strongly or that this is serious business than when a managing editor requires every manager be removed from the business of editing stories and answering phones for, say, two hours a week to do nothing but work on performance reviews. Yes, there are many things for managers to do, and, yes, they are already stretched for time, but reviews are so important to the future of the enterprise that they cannot be conducted in a catch-as-catch-can manner.

## **NO. 10 IS TOUGHEST**

It's No. 10 that almost always stymies top editors. When confronted with this one, they usually say that it's fine to have a set amount of time every week devoted to performance review preparation and administration, but only if there's no breaking news, or internal crisis or strategic planning meeting.

Which, of course, means the whole review process reverts to haphazard thoughts generated on the fly and administered in the 15 minutes between other duties. So another year passes. No honesty, no coaching, no goals definition, no constructive feedback.

Organizations in any industry in which top leaders are unwilling to sacrifice some existing patterns and priorities never manage to develop and maintain a meaningful performance review system. And very few organizations in which there is not a solid, respected performance review system ever manage to overcome the problems of diminishing standards, commitment and performance.

# Creating star performers

**E**ditors make the complaint all the time: Newsrooms are in a sorry state because newspaper work is no longer attracting the best and the brightest.

Whether the industry is attracting fewer top performers than in the years right after Watergate is debatable. Moreover, it is irrelevant. Recruiting the best and brightest is not by itself a sure-fire route to improving newsrooms.

Management expert Robert E. Kelley conducted extensive research on top performers and their relationship to the quantum leaps made by some organizations. His studies show that these huge leaps are executed not by the employees with the highest IQs, not the ones who got the best grades in college, not the ones with the most charisma or self-confidence or off-the-charts ambition, but by employees who present nine professional characteristics or strategies.

Kelley, a Carnegie Mellon University professor who spent a decade scrutinizing top performers at dozens of companies, such as AT&T and 3M, details the characteristics that separate average workers from what he terms "stars" in *How To Be a Star at Work*, (Random House, 1998). They are fairly simple, common-sense performance-boosters. Yet few employees instinctively sense their importance, and fewer still live by them.



## **NO SUPPORT IN NEWSROOMS**

This is especially true in newsrooms. The nine strategies are not much in evidence in the newsroom culture. They are not demanded, coached, facilitated, embraced or rewarded. When an extraordinary few do exhibit these strategies, managers generally pay little attention to how to nurture and replicate similar behavior in others.

Perhaps this is because the popular perception is that star performance occurs only through a serendipitous confluence of extraordinary intellectual capacity, uncommon charisma and smiling fate. Kelley himself had similar notions when he began his research. However, he found that the common thread among top performers was their determined devotion to (in order of importance):

- initiative,
- networking,
- self-management,
- perspective,
- followership,
- leadership,
- teamwork,
- organizational savvy,
- show and tell.

Let's take a look at each of these characteristics or strategies.

### **INITIATIVE**

Stars demonstrate an almost visceral drive to take initiative-dealing with things that are not part of their job descriptions or that no one expects them to attempt. They push the envelope, looking for and seizing opportunities, often volunteering for drudgework because it will be a skill-building experience. They are not merely technically proficient at their jobs or focused simply on devising ways to become more

productive at what they do. They demonstrate more expansive thinking, taking on things—often at some personal risk—that benefit the company or department.

They get involved not only with high-profile projects, but also small, day-to-day efforts that have impact over time. Cynical average performers often regard them as kiss-ups, a predictable peevish envy.

"By reflection," Kelley says, "stars often end up benefiting themselves, but the emphasis is always on addressing or solving something that benefits the department or company."

Newsrooms are not exactly hotbeds of initiative. By Kelley's definition, the young reporter who takes it upon herself to learn the complexities of computer-assisted reporting is not showing initiative, she is merely taking steps to do her job better. But the young reporter who learns computer-assisted reporting and uses those skills not only to write stories, but to suggest several new beats based on trends she sees, is showing initiative. Yet most newsroom managers would be thrilled if a reporter took even the first action.

Whatever the definition, newsrooms and initiative are often strangers. The justifications are many. Reporting and editing require such a high level of creativity that there is little leftover psychic energy to devote to more global issues. Risk-taking must be controlled in newsrooms, where a mistake appears in vivid black and white the next day. The waves of firings from and technological demands of the modern newsroom have journalists so strapped for time that the most they can do is finish their tasks before leaving work for the day.

The very best will show initiative, even in the face of all these obstacles (or excuses, depending on point of view). Why won't the rest? They have received no signal that such activities are expected or even welcome. They don't get rewarded when they do take a small step in the direction of initiative. And it is much safer to stick to what they know they can do well.

Top management must take responsibility for much of that. Kelley says that in organizations in which small initiatives aren't valued and celebrated, big ones never get a chance to happen. Moreover, he says, top management must develop the guts to accept failure. A low tolerance for failure, Kelley says, "chills initiative and risk-taking."

### **NETWORKING**

Everyone who has a job also has some knowledge deficit. That is a simple truth in this age of information glut and interdisciplinary work requirements. Star performers have identified their own deficits and how to improve them. They have a carefully constructed resource network of people whose skills and talents they have observed and assessed. So stars can get better information faster than average performers, who have no such network and who must tap unknown sources and sort through mounds of worthless information before reaching the nugget they seek.

Information gathering is any newsroom's stock in trade, yet most reporters' and editors' networks—internal and external—are woefully lacking. The external sources tapped for information and stories are usually the people who have taken phone calls promptly and offered snappy (if not insightful) answers in the past. News staffers rarely take time to assess their sourcing deficiencies and seek out new contacts for future use.

Internally the situation may be even worse. Although some of the walls between departments are falling for top management, few of the rank-and-file have any sense at all of who in the organization knows what. There's a lot of daily wheel reinventing, expertise left untapped and information never discovered simply because no one is taking the time to figure out what others in the organization might know.

## **SELF-MANAGEMENT**

This is not merely a matter of properly organizing one's daily schedule, keeping an eye on time or getting through the daily to-do list. Star self-managers understand the difference among what is important and urgent, what seems urgent but is unimportant and what is important but not urgent. They concentrate their energies on contributing to what Kelley calls "the critical path:" the most direct value-added route that can be plotted from the work of an employee to the consumer.

Kelley says no single personality trait and no brand of organizing skills establishes one as a star of self-management. Nor is there evidence that clean-desk workers or Daytimer obsessors have greater success than those who appear to be less organized. Stars have their own styles and ways of doing things, but they constantly monitor others, borrowing from their ways of doing things. And they manage their own careers and career paths, taking charge of their daily work routines and futures.

## **PERSPECTIVE**

Stars can see the big picture. They realize they are playing to many constituencies with many perspectives. They can create solutions that satisfy everyone. It's not just technical proficiency that allows them to devise formulas that meet everyone's needs. They have the judgment to assess who needs what. They also attend to the realities of corporate hierarchy that require that some people be more pleased than others are.

As Kelley says, some people never develop this sort of global perspective. "For too many people, 10 years worth of experience is merely the first year's experience repeated 10 times; there is no learning ... no leap to the perspective ability that defines expertise.

"Stars develop perspective by seeking out learning experiences, often even off-track opportunities. They are

involved in a range of activities and social networks that have nothing to do with what they do for a living. At the same time, they develop a deep, comprehensive understanding of their field. The combination of their in-office efforts and personal pursuits provides them with the range and confidence that gives wing to perception, strategic thinking and expert judgment.

The culture of work—years of being in a single discipline—leaves little room for exploring perspectives in other disciplines, Kelly says, and this leads to an active resistance to different points of view.

Newsrooms can be petri dishes for myopia, nourishing the kind of “self-imposed vacuums” that Kelly says make gaining perspective impossible. In at least three obvious ways, conventional newsroom practices stymie the process of gathering information and mind-expanding experience that is necessary for perspective.

- **Walls.** To protect the integrity of the news product, newsrooms have built many walls and filters against undue pressure from other departments and the outside world. However well-intentioned, this fosters an us-vs.-them mentality that allows newsroom personnel to regard their own knowledge, beliefs and perspectives as superior to those of any others. There is little motivation to seek other points of view.
- **‘Objectivity’.** While they have a unique license to seek information widely, many journalists pursue only what is relevant for the next day’s story. Moreover, some of them do not analyze or distill the information that they gather. They seem to regard information as an export-only commodity—something to be collected and shipped off with as little internal processing as possible. They seek to taint the information as little as possible before it reaches readers.

A noble intent with ignoble consequences. The glum lament among top editors that staffs demonstrate little critical thinking is in part a result of this determination to present “clean” information to readers.

- **Specialization.** The beat structure, which encourages specialization, can backfire. Specialists of any ilk can get caught up in work for its own sake. Expertise soon turns into tunnel vision and they become more and more fascinated by less and less. It is easy in any newsroom to identify reporters with this affliction. They write about every incremental shift of a particular issue, but rarely offer big-picture reporting or seek out new stories with more global perspective.

## **FOLLOWERSHIP**

Being a good follower does not mean toeing the line or lumbering sheep-like through someone else's game plan or sticking tightly to the job description. What it does mean is working cooperatively with a company leader to zero in on an identified target, exercising critical judgment and setting personal goals that mesh with organizational goals. A solid follower actively participates in the destiny of the enterprise and contributes to, rather than competes with, co-workers. Even leaders-the good ones-are in the followership role more often than in the leadership role, and the best of them become adept at gliding effortlessly between both. Most newsrooms demonstrate a strong degree of followership when responding to breaking news and, to a somewhat lesser degree, with major projects or major directives from top management. In these cases, staffers do what it takes, while challenging and assessing and figuring out how to improve on the fundamental plan. But the routine, day-to-day work performed by most news staffers does not reach that level. Average performers,

Kelley says, "complete the assignment but don't add a thing to the process."

## **LEADERSHIP**

Kelley makes the distinction between upper-case *Leadership* and lower-case *leadership*. Ego and the need for control, he says, often drive the former. The latter is power bestowed upon non-supervisory star employees by their peers because of their expertise, reputation, influence and ability to persuade.

Stars lead themselves well with focus on commitment. They lead others well not only because they possess technical proficiency, but also a keen understanding of human relationships and the complexities of building and maintaining interest for a project. They have higher standards for themselves than others; they constantly assess their own shortcomings, then seek training to correct them. They worry about the ethics of their work, and are often seen as the conscience of the company.

Average workers, in contrast, are less insightful, growth-obsessed or proactive, Kelley says. They often get stuck in ruts, avoiding new training or responsibilities and rejecting extra assignments that might improve their skills. They use the clock, job description or "I-love-my-job-as-it-is" excuse. After a prolonged period of polite resistance of this sort, an employee has limited value. Even the most gracious and enthusiastic employees can become the "the most incompetent and most lacking in useful job skills," Kelley says, observing that "highly committed and motivated incompetence is still incompetent."

Most newsrooms can claim star leaders, but too many employees are allowed to settle into their specialties and routines, because everyone understands that they have little interest in boosting their reach or their effect. While most organizations can manage if a fraction of their employees are merely worker-bees, in this era of increased competition the issue becomes how big a fraction and what specific limitations are acceptable.

## **TEAM WORK**

The team concept—overused, misused and ineptly managed—has become the bane of almost every worker's life, Kelley acknowledges. Most employees are spending too much time as team players. Many teams are a waste of time. Most people are not enthusiastic about the teams they're on. And many employees are forced to partner with co-workers who have few teamwork skills.

That said, there are times when teamwork is the fastest, most efficient and most creative way to tackle a project or problem. Star performers understand that they can round out their flat sides and shine twice as brightly on teams as they can alone.

In newsrooms, the formalized team approach to covering news has been proliferating. Whether this is a useful approach or a fad remains to be seen. But whatever the newsroom structure, temporary teams are a proven way of tapping into broader expertise, perspectives and creativity. When management takes the necessary steps to eliminate some of the barriers to effective teams—including walking the talk, providing teamwork skills training and establishing teams only when there are department-wide or company-wide implications—teams will have an easier go of it.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL SAVVY**

Stars grasp the fundamental and behind-the-scenes things that matter: dress codes, workplace rules, cultural etiquette, company taboos, institutional personality and the underground power chart. This allows a star to manage competing workplace interests, resolve conflicts and achieve goals quickly and effectively.

Contrary to popular belief, Kelley says, it is not charisma alone that enables certain employees to win support and navigate treacherous company shoals, but rather an acute sense of what works, what doesn't, who matters and who doesn't.

Most stars understand this and attach themselves to a mentor to learn the more difficult-to-access information, such as the company's mores and language, and then use this information to build relationships and create a personal niche.

Newsrooms historically have canonized the nose-to-the-grindstone loner who keeps to his business and doesn't involve himself in company politics. While there is value in not being distracted by office gossip, there is a substantial difference between ignoring the irrelevant clatter and ignoring the relevant politics, personalities and precepts.

Everyone would like to think that the path to getting a good story into the paper is flat and unobstructed, but the reality is there are editor biases and preferences, sacred cows, institutional tradition, personal and professional eccentricities and a host of other landmines on the route to publication. The staffers who are most successful at getting the stories, assignments or promotions they want are the ones who have amassed the best information about the system and players.

### **SHOW AND TELL**

Anyone who wants to be a major company player must be comfortable with taking center stage from time to time—articulating a viewpoint, persuading listeners and actively deflecting criticism. Kelley is not referring here to massive presentations before arena-sized audiences, but before a small team, a group of colleagues or an assortment of upper managers. Kelly maintains that no matter how spectacularly competent an employee is, if she cannot open her mouth and demonstrate mental prowess, she is regarded as communication-impaired with limited potential.

Most newsroom employees abhor verbalizing their thinking. Their fear of public speaking extends even as far, in many cases, as sharing their opinions or pushing their ideas in departmental brainstorming sessions.

Indeed, some journalists have rejected off-site training opportunities because the newspaper requires training recipients to give presentations on the experience, a prospect too hideous for some to contemplate.

Journalists generally would prefer to put their ideas on paper or serve as ghostwriters for others, rather than talk through their ideas before groups of more than a few people.

But even newsrooms, which confer extraordinary cultural support on the practically mute, notice and appreciate those who can compellingly speak their views. As any manager who has presided over a deadly quiet brainstorming meeting will attest, the silent majority come across as being uninvolved, disinterested and incapable of creative thought. The wisest managers and staffers are the ones who realize written communication is not suited to all situations and have mastered the skill of talking. Their numbers, in newsrooms, remain small.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Sharon Peters spent 23 years in the newspaper business as a reporter, assigning editor and managing editor before earning a doctorate in organization development and starting her own consulting business. This is her second monograph for the Media Management Center. Her first, *In Their Prime: Motivating Senior Reporters*, published in 1997, examined the commonalities among aging reporters who are still at the top of their game. Peters lives in Silverthorne, Colorado



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