

# **Inside Newsroom Teams**

**An editor's guide to the promise and  
problems**

Includes a directory of team-based newsrooms

By Gary Graham and Tracy Thompson, *PhD*

# Acknowledgements

## **Dispatches from Team Newsroom by Gary Graham**

This report is the result of research assisted by NMC and 2 ½ years of firsthand experience in a team-based newsroom at *The Wichita Eagle*. Several editors at *The Wichita Eagle* shared their observations and permitted access to staff memos collected over the past two years.

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## **Insight for Managers by Tracy Thompson**

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# In Brief

Discussions about newsroom strategy increasingly turn into discussions about newsroom structure. Experiments in team structures have furthered the debate, prompting editors to ask, can teams actually improve content?

Professor Tracy Thompson from the University of Washington-Tacoma and Gary Graham, former assistant managing editor of *The Wichita Eagle*, offer insights into the promise, and the problems, of team-based structures.

Thompson's research into team dynamics and organizational change yields five mandates for managers introducing team structures into their newsrooms. Thompson encourages managers to be active in setting up teams and offers concrete advice on establishing a context for change, translating management goals into team-level performance missions and reinforcing new roles. Having implemented teams at *The Wichita Eagle*, Graham offers the story of one newsroom's structural transformation, including his insights into how managers can ease the transition-and the questions they must answer before they begin.

As a resource for managers considering structural change, this volume also includes a directory of team-based newsrooms complete with contact information.

# Why Teams, Why Now

By Michael P. Smith

Romanticized journalism paints a picture of the solitary reporter scouring public records, knocking on doors and turning words into daggers to fell the powerful and the corrupt. The Shoe-Leather Legend may be incongruous in an era of instantaneous communication, computer-assisted reporting and electronic access to documents, but it still lives in the hearts of journalists. In so many ways, the Shoe-Leather Legend is the antithesis of team player. The traditions, myths and legends—the lore and lure of journalism—just don't fit modern business models and imported production techniques.

But even in the days of the solitary reporter, ad hoc teams rallied to do the "big story"—those stories that release adrenaline and raise Pulitzer hopes. When the "big story" was too tough for one reporter to handle, they suddenly found the ability to work together with total cooperation and self-sacrifice. These teams illustrated the textbook blueprint of effective teams: They had a clear and elevating goal, interdependence among the team members, a clear leader, specified roles, operating principles and rewards. After the "big story" was over and the teams had been disbanded, editors wondered if the flexibility and creativity teams brought to a crisis situation might also invigorate the day-to-day operation. Can teams actually improve content, they wondered? Can teams change the culture? Why not teams, why not now?

Those questions have become so prevalent in newsrooms that the backlash has already begun. A recent editors' workshop was titled: "If I'd Wanted to Be a Team Leader, I'd Have Majored in Sports." Many newsroom bulletin boards still display the Presstime magazine cover cartoon by Jack Ohman, who depicted a new team-based organizational chart complete with "Complicated Pie-Chart Laden Bureaucracy

Explanation Stories That No One Reads" team next to "God Forbid Disaster Should Happen But If It Does Let's Win a Pulitzer" team. "Teams" has entered the newsroom lexicon, even if it may be a dirty word at many newspapers.

Even so, any look at newsroom strategy requires a serious consideration of teams. Newspapers that have performed a market-based, outside-in analysis have discovered what Professor Paul Wang's research demonstrated: Consumers do not look at the newspaper as a series of non-integrated departments. The outsider does not understand that most reporters do not write their own headlines or take the photos that accompany a story. They do not read the newspaper as if it were a series of disconnected bits of information and images touched by numerous people in a production-line process. They see it as a whole.

Taken by itself, this outside-in perspective may not be convincing, but the point is well-made; the marketplace expects that the functions of the newspaper work together in a way that benefits the reader. This idea alone has convinced many editors to reconfigure the newsroom. Others have been convinced by fast-paced transformation in our society.

In response to pressures from today's rapidly changing business environment, organizations have turned to team-based work structures as a way to maximize flexibility, creativity, and productivity. If there is a promise implied in teams, it is that there will be a synergistic effect—the productivity of a work group will be greater and better than the productivity of a set of individuals. Editors like the idea that teams eliminate layers of decision-making between readers and the final product. Journalists get turned on by the possibility of having greater control over their work. When these teams work well, they are creative, fun and productive. They resemble the textbook examples. When they fail, they replicate the silos and fiefdoms of old.

This report is not an argument for or against teams in the newsroom. Rather it is an explanation of both the potential and the pitfalls of teams from an academic and real-world perspective. This book attempts to bring the academic knowledge into play with the practical experience of working editors and tries to meld it into a new perspective on the issues faced by editorial managers.

A key to the successful newspaper of the future may be a mix of romance and reality—a structure and a culture that honors the traditions, myths and legends while meeting the demands of the consumer and the future.

# Insight for Managers

By Tracy A. Thompson, PhD

Newspapers across the country have embraced the team concept. If implemented effectively, a team-based structure can energize employees, improve operating efficiency, enhance quality, and encourage learning and innovation in the newsroom. But if done poorly, adopting the team model can sap morale, decrease productivity and squelch the creative potential of one of the newspaper's most important resources, the reporter.

Although the books and resources on the "dos and don'ts" of implementing teams could fill several shelves in a library, several themes emerge, lessons that can help newspaper managers implement teams into their newsrooms. A deeper reading of these prescriptions reveals their true purpose: ultimately they serve to overcome the resistance, either conscious or unconscious, that inevitably accompanies major organizational change. Although some sources of resistance come from the individual (e.g., a fear of change) or from the idiosyncratic history of the setting (e.g., a history of negative labor negotiations), other sources can be traced to the nature of the business or industry in question.

Implementing teams in the newspaper organization, particularly in the newsroom, can be challenging for a variety of reasons: the culture and traditions of journalism, the nature of news and information as a product, the policies and procedures of the organization beyond the newsroom, the existing relationships and habits in the newsroom and the attitudes and dispositions of reporters.

Managers need to overcome these obstacles if they are to transform their newsroom. After summarizing the definition of a team below, five of the most basic lessons about implementing teams are described and applied to the newspaper organization. In each case, the special challenges arising in the newsroom setting are discussed and, where appropriate, solutions are given.

### **What Is a Team?**

Fundamental to any change effort is a clear understanding of what teams are. Although they use slightly different words, most books on teams agree on three common traits of teams: A team is a group of people who are interdependent, who are charged with a specific performance objective and who share responsibility for outcomes. These three elements represent the fundamental building blocks for the design and implementation of teams, and from them, five basic mandates regarding team implementation follow.

#### Mandate # 1

#### **Management is responsible for setting the context and strategy for the team program.**

The responsibilities of senior management are unambiguous in the team literature. As leaders of the newsroom, senior managers are responsible for setting the vision, mission and strategy for the entire newsroom. This charge includes developing a clear understanding of how teams might contribute to the overall mission and strategy of the newsroom and creating clear performance mandates for each team.

The first potential stumbling block stems from misperceptions about what teams can and cannot do. Teams are not a strategy; instead they are best viewed as one way to implement a given strategy or outcome. The task of developing a clear, well-defined newsroom strategy should always come first. Assuming a strategy is in place, the next analytical task is to understand how exactly teams will help to better execute that strategy. Analyzing the work itself can help to define where teams can contribute and where they cannot.

Several questions that stem from the definition of a team above can help to answer this question:

- What is the outcome or output of a team?
- How do people share responsibility for that outcome?
- How exactly are reporters on a team interdependent?
- What types of tasks require interdependence and what tasks do not?
- Does better execution of newsroom strategy require shared responsibility for the outcomes?
- Does it require interdependence?

Remember that teams might not be the right method for accomplishing your goals—other methods such as skills training may be sufficient. Adopt teams only if they represent the best solution to your particular strategy or problem, not because other newspapers have done it.

Having decided that teams are indeed the right method for turning the vision and strategy of the newsroom into reality, managers then must confront another challenge that stems from the history of the news business. Because, in most cases, adopting a team-based structure accompanies a newspaper strategy focused on responding to readers' needs, management often encounters resistance rooted in the history and culture of journalism. To many, talking about a strategy and adopting methods transplanted from the business world threatens the “church and state” relationship between the newsroom and newspaper business functions. The balance between being profitable and doing good has come under increasing scrutiny as the rise of serious competition, the consolidation of the industry and the rising number of publicly held companies has put pressure on the newspaper organization to perform economically. Shifts in traditional news-editorial strategies and work structures are all too often associated with pursuing a business goal at the expense of a social goal, with the debate taking the form of giving readers what they want vs. what they need.

Communication is the main salve for this source of resistance. People are not likely to embrace change if they do not understand why change is necessary. Management plays an important role in shaping the context for change to occur. Defining the problems facing the organization, sharing data to explain the issues, building a sense of urgency and communicating how and why a particular method (e.g., teams) can solve the problems, creates a newsroom that is ripe for change.

Don't underestimate the importance of consistent and persistent communication. Messages need to be sent as many ways as possible—in person, in meetings, over e-mail, in memos, etc. The messages need to be repeated time and time again, not only at the beginning of change but throughout the whole process.

Another potential stumbling block to management's establishment of the context and strategy for a team-based structure is the perception of who has the right to decide. In this era of increasing employee empowerment, management's right to set the overall strategic direction can be viewed with great skepticism. Again, clear communication about the need for change and careful definition of the problems can help to overcome this. If senior management has effectively shaped the context of change, the problems and solutions have become "givens" and the only question that remains is how best to implement the solution (in this case teams). In addition, inviting involvement in discussions about how to solve the problems and how best to execute the team design is an excellent idea. Not only will the solutions be better, the discussion will invigorate the newsroom. Social psychology research sends a very clear message about the benefits of active group participation in decisions about change. Resistance to teams will be reduced by involvement not only because the substance of the change will reflect more of the preferences of those affected, but also because the process of the change is likely to be viewed more positively.

However, inviting involvement does not mean that everyone will agree or that everyone will have his way. Ultimately decisions have to be made, so make sure that everyone knows how final decisions will be made (e.g., democratically, made by management in consultation with a few employees, etc.). Communicating this up-front will help to set the right expectations and avoid misinterpretations down the road.

## Mandate # 2

### **Teams are responsible for translating management's mandate into their own performance mission, complete with measurable objectives.**

A clear performance objective, one that is internalized and used by the team to monitor and develop itself, can make all the difference. Management's task is to create and communicate a clear mandate for each team—a mandate that is inextricably linked to the overall newsroom strategy. But then management needs to step away and allow the team to own its mandate. The process of developing team members' own interpretation of the mandate, deciding how they want to achieve that mandate, and creating measures or indicators to be used for monitoring purposes will help the team to develop its own identity and culture.

Equally important is the creation and communication of measurement systems. Whether process- or outcome-oriented, individual- or group-level, qualitative or quantitative, a wide variety of measures can and should be developed and used to self-monitor, learn, adjust and improve. How else will teams know if they are progressing or meeting their own goals? To ensure agreement among all parties, teams should be able to justify to management how their goals and objectives match the overall strategic goal.

Measuring success in a newsroom is tough because "good" journalism can be hard to quantify and the newsroom culture often resists measurement efforts. Evaluating the news product is a daunting task, one that is likely to be hotly contested among journalists. In fact, some might argue that measuring journalistic quality is impossible. Mentioning measurement conjures up images of counting stories, a system that rewards quantity not quality.

The solution here is, once again, communication and involvement. Quality can be defined and measured. An editor knows a good story when she sees one, however, often the criteria reside inside her head rather than out in the open where it would be most useful. Frank discussions about what quality is and how it relates to both the team's mandate and the newsroom's strategy can lead to clearer expectations about team and individual performance. Adopting the following structured process (or some variant of it) can help teams to develop consensus on what quality is and to create ways of measuring it so that the team can monitor its own progress and performance.

First, collect a large number of articles and ask each team member, working alone, to sort those into two or three piles (for example: good stories, bad stories and those in-between). Ask each person to identify what traits or characteristics defined the good pile and what traits or characteristics defined the bad pile. In a group meeting, have team members share their ideas about the dimensions that made articles either good or bad. Even though it may be a difficult process (group training can come in handy here), team members will eventually be able to agree on a few features that signal good product from bad—these features become the basis of a measure.

Implementing the measurement system might include regularly evaluating the team's articles to arrive at judgments about how well the team is meeting its goals as well as information about how to modify its practices to improve. This is just one of many possible ways to start. Experiment on your own, but by all means management should encourage teams to talk about quality, what it means and how to capture it.

### Mandate # 3

#### **Management is responsible for providing training and development.**

In the words of one manager, "There is no such thing as too much training." Operating in a team environment under a revitalized newsroom strategy requires that reporters acquire specialized knowledge in order to operate in a very different context. Teams are not made overnight and good training and development ensures that teams will continue to evolve successfully. Team development training for both leaders and team members helps foster effective team relationships and behaviors. In addition, because the switch to teams also can be accompanied by a shift in the definition of quality, training and development can play an important role in improving reporting skills. Finally, engaging in continual training can play an important role in socializing and developing newcomers.

Perhaps the biggest barrier to training is budgetary constraints. Stagnant circulation, escalating paper costs and flat advertising revenues all can lead to diminished newsroom budgets. The all-too-often result is that training falls to the end of a long list of newsroom needs. But the key to success for any company is well-trained employees. Companies that make it

into *Fortune* magazine's annual list of "The World's Most Admired Companies" (October 27, 1997) all recognize the importance of spending lavishly on developing employees, with some companies such as Intel spending up to 6 % of total payroll on career development. Although it costs money and takes time, training and development are critical to the success of teams.

Training and development are critical to effective team functioning because they help reporters improve on new skills needed to engage in healthy team behavior. Teams heighten the interdependence and interaction among reporters, editors and possibly other functional staff such as photographers and artists. This is a fairly radical departure from the traditional sequential newsroom workflow (reporter editor > copy desk), one that requires reporters to share and give feedback on story ideas, make more decisions, deal with conflicts and differences of opinion, etc. But such extroverted behavior may not come naturally. As Sharon Peters' research shows, journalists, on the whole, are introverts by temperament—making team behavior more difficult. Even with team training, such personality traits are hard to change.

These psychological traits may further complicate the transition to a team-based structure. In the new structure, people may be asked to sever existing work-relationships and to develop new relationships with others. Kathleen Valley and Tracy Thompson's research shows that ingrained routines, that is, established patterns of interaction, represent an important source of inertia. Although it's important to understand the existing social structure when designing the new team structure, training and development can help individuals overcome these barriers and learn to work with new people.

#### Mandate # 4

##### **Management must align rewards to team and newsroom objectives.**

A shift to a team-based newsroom must be accompanied by matching changes in the compensation system. There is a simple, yet powerful, management maxim that says: "The behaviors and the outcomes rewarded are the behaviors and the outcomes that result." With that in mind, a good reward system must reflect management's goals for teams and be clearly communicated to employees so they know those expectations.

Any compensation system for a team-based newsroom should recognize that because teams depend on individuals working together, at least a portion of an individual's compensation must be based on team-or group-level performance. Identifying the relative degrees of individual responsibility and team-responsibility can be the basis for striking the appropriate balance between individual-and team-level rewards.

The problem is that most compensation systems are aimed at the individual. As the authors of *Designing Team-Based Organizations: New Forms for Knowledge Work* point out, aligning compensation in a team-based environment involves, minimizing or eliminating the use of indicators that reward competitive individual behavior. Consider creating new measures that evaluate how well a person contributes to the team or a measure of group performance itself. In addition to altering the individual merit system, team performance can also be enhanced by developing rewards at the group level, for example, a bonus pool that is distributed based on team performance.

Finally, these authors' research suggests that the main impact of reward systems comes from the processes by which team performance is defined, measured, reviewed and evaluated, not from the reward system itself. Since defining and reviewing performance are under the control of managers in the newsroom, managers can do much to foster team performance.

While going through the design process, it is also important to keep in mind the larger organizational system in which a newsroom fits. Innovating within a larger system can be difficult, but not impossible. It goes without saying that the new compensation system must be feasible within the larger organization's policies and limitations.

## Mandate # 5

### **Management should continually reinforce who is responsible for what.**

A final step to successfully implement teams is for senior management to communicate clearly who is responsible for what. Senior managers should create the strategic context for teams, ensure that each team understands how its job fits into the strategy, support extensive training and development and make sure the reward system reinforces team objectives. For their part, teams should develop their own work plan that includes the critical tasks and processes needed to get the work done as well as measures to assess their own progress. Teams should also identify their own goals and be able to explain to management how they match the overall strategic goals.

## Conclusions

Transforming the existing newsroom structure into a more flexible and dynamic team-based organization offers great promise. But it also creates great challenges, most of which stem from the entrenched cultural traditions and practices of journalism and of the newsroom operation. Each manager will face his or her own situation in a newsroom with its own history and tradition. The key is to understand how culture, history and human behavior are likely either to facilitate or impede the switch to teams and to use that information to help develop an approach that will make implementation successful.

# Dispatches from Team Newsroom

By Gary Graham

When *The Wichita Eagle* was founded in a rambunctious cattle town on the Kansas prairie in 1872, the newspaper employed only seven people and spent about \$26 an issue for paper and ink. For much of its 123 years of existence, the newsroom has been structured in a time-tested, traditional manner. In the beginning, the term "team" was used only in reference to the horses used by farmers and wagon drivers.

*The Eagle*, like many newspapers, has struggled with declining circulation in recent years, but those numbers appear to be leveling off at about 91,000 daily and 165,000 on Sunday. Wichita, with a population of 300,000, is a one-paper town and has been since 1980 when the afternoon *Beacon* and the morning *Eagle* combined. Competition consists mostly of three TV network affiliates, a weekly business journal and some suburban shoppers. *The Eagle*, a daily serving south central Kansas and owned by Knight-Ridder, has a newsroom staff of about 132—the largest news-gathering operation in the state.

The newsroom underwent a dramatic change on Jan. 30, 1995, when *The Eagle* implemented teams. The decision to go to teams was not taken lightly, nor was it made overnight. There were a number of reasons we went to teams. But first, a little context on what brought us to the decision.

The origin of teams can be traced to January 1994, when Sheri Dill, executive editor, invited the entire newsroom to participate in determining how we might improve the newspaper.

The process, which involved a series of staff meetings and committee work, resulted in three major goals:

- Make the newspaper interesting.
- Build on our three-county coverage effort. Extend it into all coverage areas.
- Prepare ourselves for full pagination in 1995.

As we began talking about how to make the paper interesting, we settled on several sub-goals:

- Flatten the newsroom hierarchy so that we could get faster decisions and quicker results.
- Change the top-down style of management to a broader decision-making process. We wanted reporters, who were closest to the stories and the community, to have more influence on the stories we would pursue.
- Break down the departmental walls, literally and figuratively. (We physically demolished five offices formerly occupied by department heads.)
- Encourage more risk-taking and create a culture more conducive to creativity and experimentation.
- Pursue stories in subject areas most on the minds of readers. (Our reader research signaled to us that we had been inadequately covering some topics that were important to readers.)

As we thoroughly examined the issue of content and the direction we wanted to take, we began to talk about how our newsroom was structured. A subcommittee of editors and reporters looked into newsroom structures at such papers as *The State*, in Columbia, South Carolina, *The Orange County Register* and *The Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, all of which had gone to some version of teams.

The task force learned that in all three of those newsrooms, initiating the team concept meant lifting the responsibility of producing specific sections from reporters and their editors and placing it on the shoulders of a small core of editors who determine how the sections are filled. That liberating step freed the reporting teams from the burden of churning out stories constantly to fill the business section, for example, and allowed them to identify and produce stories they felt were the best for the newspaper as a whole, not just a particular section

At the three papers studied by our task force, a separate team of editors managed the "real estate" (section covers and inside newshole) of the newspaper and shopped between the teams for stories that would go into each section. A team of senior managers continued to set broad, long-term newsroom goals and worked with the "real estate" editors and team leaders to devise plans to reach those goals.

The task force concluded that a major difference in those newsrooms and ours was that their reporters were seeking out the best stories they could find while our reporters were, for the most part, seeking out the best business story, or the best sports story or the best whatever kind of story that would fit in the particular section to which the reporters were assigned. The editors in Columbia, Orange County and Norfolk told us that there was rarely, if ever, a shortage of stories. More often, there were too many stories to fit in each day's paper.

In its final report, the newsroom's structure task force, whose members were reporters, copy editors and assigning editors, but no senior managers, offered its rationale for converting to teams:

*"The structure committee recommends that we convert our departmentalized, section oriented newsroom arrangement into a topics-oriented team system that would encourage bottom-up story creation, supply broad opportunities for individual development, require shared responsibility for the quality of the news product and—most importantly—provide an ever-improving news report that is responsive to the needs of our community."*

Susan Rife, then a reporter and a member of the structure committee, provided a postscript to the recommendation described above: "Keep it simple, stupid."

The decision to go to teams ultimately rested on the shoulders of Dill, new managing editor Janet Weaver, and Davis "Buzz" Merritt, who was on a one-year leave of absence to write a book on public journalism. Dill had kept publisher Reid Ashe informed throughout the year on the progress of the newsroom discussions. Ashe enthusiastically endorsed the team concept. The question of going to teams was not put to the newsroom for a vote, but the senior editors sensed that while there was certainly not unanimous support for teams, there was considerable support among the staff. Those who supported the team concept felt the change represented a unique opportunity to bring new life and focus to a strong but staid newsroom. Team supporters were encouraged by the collaborative and inclusive nature of a team structure. Most importantly, team advocates felt confident that we could produce a newspaper that was more responsive to the needs and interests of our readers.

Opponents of the teams were vocal, skeptical and unhappy. Many of the opponents were quite comfortable with the traditional structure and saw little advantage to eliminating a top-down structure with clear departmental boundaries.

We knew that both opponents and advocates of teams would share similar and significant concerns about the uncertainties and risks of change, not an uncommon or unreasonable reaction. Despite the fact that journalists devote most of their careers to documenting changes in society, culture and government, we are no more receptive to change than non-journalists.

*The Eagle* had proven itself capable of overcoming obstacles to change, pointedly demonstrated by the papers pioneering role in public journalism, a concept developed and championed by a small number of academics and journalists, including Merritt, *The Eagle's* editor. Merritt had initiated a series of discussions with the staff about new approaches to the job of covering public life in our community in 1991 and 1992. As with teams, some staffers

were curious and eager to work with Merritt on the early public journalism projects, but the theory and practical applications were just as challenging, complex and imposing as the team transition would prove to be later.

The three senior editors made the decision to go to teams and announced in the summer of 1994 that *The Eagle* was going to make the change. Weaver had just arrived in Wichita after being deputy managing editor at the *Virginian-Pilot*, thus she was the only person in the newsroom who had firsthand experience with teams. Her expertise on teams proved invaluable, as did her determination and commitment to making the new structure work. *The Eagle* could have gone to teams without Weaver, but we would have been at a severe handicap and would have needed a consultant or team trainer to spend extensive time in our newsroom.

Weaver led the newsroom through some team training prior to our start-up date, including group exercises adaptable to any industry. Some of her approaches, for example, involved problem-solving exercises that required collaboration with others. Weaver ordered reading materials for each staff member, including *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*, a book by John Katzenbach and Douglas Smith, and *Team Re-Construction: Building a High-Performance Work Group During Change*, a booklet by Price Pritchett & Ron Pound. Even with that exposure to basic team techniques, everyone agrees we should have had more training in team concepts before we scrapped the old structure. Team members would later tell us that we had thrown them into team settings without helping them learn how to lead, be a team player, arrive at group decisions and resolve conflicts. Once the decision had been made, the senior editors developed team names and descriptions. After the 14 teams and descriptions were announced, Dill and Weaver asked every staff member to identify one to three of their preferences. The editors' goal was to place staff members on teams that best fit their interests, their needs and their skills. The selection of team leaders was particularly important because these were new leadership positions that

#### **Basic questions for new teams**

Managing editor Janet Weaver asked teams to address several questions in the early stages of the transition to teams:

- How will you get to know your readers?
- How will you determine the kind of coverage they want and need about your team's topic?
- How do you plan to reflect the diversity of our community in your coverage?
- How will you divide your work? What beats or areas of responsibility will you have?
- How will you determine if your team is being successful in meeting its coverage goals? What are the yardsticks you'll use to measure success?
- How will you quantify it?

would have a great influence on the performance and success of the teams. Many staff members feared they would be assigned to unfamiliar subject areas and/or responsibilities that they didn't want. Each staff member had a one-on-one interview with the two editors in which the staffers stated their preference and made their case for a particular assignment. After the interviews, which took about two weeks to complete, Dill and Weaver posted a list of the final selections on October 7. Everyone on the staff received either their first or second choices.

Weaver wrote a blueprint for bringing up teams, a three-page document that contained a variety of suggestions, requirements and questions to be considered as teams prepared for the implementation date. Weaver asked each team to write a philosophy for how it would do journalism. The statement of purpose she sought was supposed to be succinct and reflect the big picture.

"Come up with your top five goals as a team," Weaver said. "These can be both short-term and long-range goals. They should be goals that you can measure, to determine whether you are succeeding. "Writing good stories would not be a measurable goal," she explained. "Developing more stories that tell readers what they can do to protect themselves from crime would be a measurable goal."

As this process began evolving, Weaver began having meetings of the 14 team leaders who formed the leadership team. A typical agenda for a weekly meeting read like this:

**Getting ready for the move to teams.**

- A. Floor plans (We knew desks and computers would have to be rearranged).
- B. New ways of preparing copy for publication.
- C. Where are we in the individual team-planning process?
- D. What do we need to be doing as a group?
- E. What does management expect to be done before teams come up?

The most controversial aspect of *The Eagle's* reorganization was the dismantling of the copy desk. Long before the transition took place, we had studied how we put out a newspaper and determined that the work falls into three basic categories: creating content (stories, pullout information, headlines, cutlines); organizing the content into sections; presenting the content, by bringing together photos and graphics with the stories and designing pages. We were asking the copy desk to perform two vital and complicated functions: creating content, by editing copy, writing headlines and cutlines and pulling out quotes and text for display; and presenting content, by designing and laying out pages. We decided it made sense to separate these functions so that more attention could be devoted to both tasks. It made particular sense to us because a conversion to pagination was coming at us like a train through a tunnel with no exit. We batted around a number of approaches to the copy desk and finally settled on assigning as many copy editors as we could to the teams. Our theory was that placing a copy editor with a team would result in better planning, editing and execution because the copy editor would be there at the content's origin. An added bonus to this approach was that many copy editors found they had time to report and write stories themselves. Some of our best stories in the early stages of teams came from copy editors who felt liberated from an intense copy editing role.

### Implementation

Monday, Jan. 30, 1995, was a remarkable day in the newsroom. After months of planning, we finally made the transition to teams. The day was marked with lots of confusion, unexpected glitches and improvising, a pattern that continued for several weeks. For those excited by the prospect of change, new direction and new routines, the transition period was an exhilarating time. In the first weeks of transition, one could exit the elevator at the third-floor newsroom and feel the excitement and enthusiasm almost immediately. For those who were uncomfortable with change, it was a frustrating, discouraging time of adapting to the new way of doing business at *The Eagle*.

As we entered the summer of 1995, there were signs that the honeymoon period that began with the introduction of teams was coming to an end. In the newsroom discussions during 1994, a common refrain from reporters was that they wanted more say in the kinds of stories editors wanted to pursue and they wanted the freedom to chase more stories that they thought were important. Clearly, our new structure was designed to eliminate some of the restrictions placed upon reporters by a traditional newsroom hierarchy. However, after several months it became apparent that some reporters were struggling with their new-found independence. Some reporters had become somewhat dependent on an agenda established and directed by a city editor or a business editor, for example. Reporters who were good at their craft but who needed frequent monitoring and prodding by their editors did not automatically transform into self-starters just because we had gone to teams.

We also began to hear from team leaders who realized that because our hierarchy had been considerably flattened, the opportunities for career advancement had declined. All of the team leaders were considered equals with no team leader role ranked, or even unofficially considered, more important than the others. One of the first departures in our year of transition was a former department head who had become a strong and reliable team leader. One of the reasons he cited

#### **Goal setting**

Managing Editor Janet Weaver's blueprint also contained a series of questions that she wanted teams to think about in setting their goals. Some of those questions included:

1. **Public Life.** What steps can you take to make government coverage relevant to average people? How can we break away from meeting/political coverage to do more public journalism? How can your team help other teams to explore public journalism?

2. **Learning.** How can we explore the ways people learn? What will it take to get into the classrooms and out of the board rooms?

3. **Kansas Roots.** What does Kansas look like - geographically, demographically, socially? What are the distinguishing characteristics of this state? How can we tap into those factors? And what are the implications for expanding community connections through this team?

for going to a much bigger newspaper was that he perceived that with only an editor and managing editor ranked above him, the chances for advancement were severely limited. The issue was particularly acute for mid-career editors. A vocal minority of staffers who had opposed teams from the outset continued to express frustration and disdain for the team structure. It is a sentiment still expressed from time to time in the newsroom. In the summer of 1996, Learning team leader Suzanne Perez Tobias conducted a newsroom survey to ask staffers to evaluate how the team system was working. Here are two typical responses:

*"I'm still struggling to understand how it has made us better. This doesn't mean I favor going back to the traditional newsroom. But the promise of teams (more stories, more different stories, more aggressive work by the staff, better morale, more internal peer pressure to do good work) all have failed to materialize. We struggle to fill the daily paper more than we ever have before and there's a general unwillingness of a people to take personal responsibility for the paper. It's easier to hide nowadays."*

*"It has given many people in the newsroom (like me) a much broader range of professional opportunities; it has allowed us all to challenge our conventional pigeon-holing thinking about beats and people, about our newsroom and personal goals. It has allowed those with ideas and motivation to explore brave new worlds. We have been able to provide new areas of coverage and new approaches for our readers."*

The dismantling of the copy desk continued to be one of the most-often criticized features of the team structure. One survey respondent put it succinctly: "With the elimination of the copy desk we have ended up with a lot of people doing things they are not trained to do." Many argued that the copy wasn't as clean as before and that heads weren't as good. The complaint was legitimate, but the senior editors felt we were showing signs of improvement. Our number of correctable errors was declining and we had improved our standing considerably in the annual Knight-Ridder study of typographical errors at each paper.

Compensation in a team-based newsroom was another issue that we began examining months after we had gone to teams. Our bonus system was expanded to include 14 team leaders instead of five department heads.

The publisher, Reid Ashe, who continued to be a strong supporter of the team system, encouraged Buzz Merritt to develop compensation and evaluation systems that reflected the new environment. The performance evaluation forms were revised to emphasize team skills, but a task force effort to revise the pay system eventually lost momentum and the issue remains unresolved.

## TRIAL BY FIRE

The first dramatic test of the team structure came on April 19, when the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history left a swath of death and destruction at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Wichita is about 45 miles from the Oklahoma border and just 180 miles from Oklahoma City. The enormity of this international story took on special significance for us because of Wichita's proximity to the scene. Within minutes of the explosion, Photo Editor Bo Rader had arranged for a helicopter to take a photographer, an artist and two reporters to Oklahoma. Four more reporters and another photographer were dispatched to drive to Oklahoma City about two hours later.

Our reporting team was made up of three reporters from the Crime & Safety team, two from Business & Money and one from Leisure. Our crew filed hard news from the scene each day, along with compelling photos and heart-breaking stories of grief and tragedy. Under a traditional structure, *The Eagle* would have thrown just as many people into the coverage but the fact that we were able to pull it off seamlessly with teams gave us the knowledge and confidence that our team structure made us just as capable and responsive as we had been in the traditional newsroom. "Oklahoma City was a good example of a big story treatment," Weaver said recently. "In the old days, it would have been a metro story and that's the team we would have chosen. We never would have used two reporters from the business team or a features reporter."

Another good example of the benefits of teams in *The Eagle* newsroom was a ground-breaking series on education, published in late 1996 and early 1997. The Learning team put together a package of stories comparing the quality of education in the city school system to the suburban schools by taking an exhaustive look at standardized test scores, grade point averages, class size, first-year performance in college, per capita spending and other quantifiable measures. The series came about because a county government reporter on the Public Life team felt certain that the considerable population migration from the city to the suburbs and surrounding communities over the past two decades was connected to public education. The community perception in recent years had been that the Wichita school system was not as good as those in the suburbs. Our reporting established that, in fact, the Wichita system was holding its own with the more affluent suburban school districts.

Because of the team structure and what we considered flexibility that we lacked in the old structure, Weaver was able to tell the Learning team to dig into the story. "The project changed the work habits of those reporters. One would take the lead on a story and tell others he needed their help on this or that," said Weaver. "Everyone pitched in because they all knew they would get their turn at directing a story. Our education reporters were going to each other for pure editing, long before it got to the copy editor or team leaders. Computer assisted training went on, too, thanks to Bill Bartel (the county government reporter)."

"Could we have done this kind of content under the old structure?" Weaver asks. "The content is not new. Newsrooms have talked about it for a long time. It's being getting closer to readers, and accessibility, both to us and the paper's news columns.

"We've all made those New Year's resolutions to change. But the old structure reinforces the old patterns because it reinforces the top-down structure. Editors and reporters don't think about the best way to tell the story in the old system. They are too worried about feeding the daily monster," Weaver said. "To reinforce new thinking, blow up the old procedures. Structure is the impediment to a new way of doing things."

Tom Koetting, the Relationships team leader and now an editor at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, said, "If a news organization honestly believes their organizational setup is getting them the best possible stories, then they should leave it alone. Teams are not an end in themselves; they are a means to an end.

"No two newsrooms are ever going to look alike. The team setup that works in Norfolk will not work here and the team setup here will not work in Columbia. Each setup must be adapted to the unique demands of the community and the newsroom personnel."

During and after the honeymoon, Weaver was under constant pressure from the newsroom to make adjustments in the structure to address the internal crisis of the week. Weaver, to her credit, resisted the temptation to tinker, believing that the continuous learning environment and the passage of time would resolve some of the issues. Reallocation of reporters and the elimination of one of the teams took place in late 1996 after a newsroom-wide examination of what changes ought to be made.

## LESSONS WORTH SHARING

*The Eagle's* team experience taught the newsroom several key lessons:

- Successful teams make communication a way of work, not just a concept to practice on an occasional basis.
- Know where you are going. One of *The Eagle's* most successful teams had a leader who was highly-regarded by her team members because she jumped into the trenches and helped share in all of the responsibilities. Her view, however, is that the team was successful because it had clearly defined its coverage mission and it brought focus to their efforts.
- Train and train again. Any cost involved will be minimal compared to the price you'll pay for insufficient training.
- Teams aren't the answer for everybody and every paper. Mark Silverman, editor of the *Detroit News*, in an e-mail response to questions about teams, said "Good newsroom management is good newsroom management, regardless of structure. I think some weak managers and weak operational approaches were transferred to team-based newsrooms and the Band-Aids didn't cure the underlying problems. That's true nationally, regardless of newspaper size." Silverman also said "lots of very creative

content and packaging approaches are emerging from newsrooms with rather traditional structures. Still at issue are structures that relieve mid-management stress and better nurture/foster development of staffers. If you know of some, please drop me a line."

Moving to teams, like most major changes, is chaotic and stressful. Tempers flare and anxiety levels increase as team members learn new routines and responsibilities. Measuring your success is difficult, but it is critical, and it can be accomplished if your team goals are clearly established. When the *Charlotte Observer* went to teams, editor Jennie Buckner explained to readers what the goals were:

*"To be more authoritative and urgent. To have deeper understanding of our region. To shine more brightly with excellence in writing and presentation. To surprise, delight and inspire more often."*

*The Observer* changed its traditional approach to newspapering, Buckner told readers. "We're pulling writers, photographers, designers, artists and editors together much earlier in the process. What are the readers' questions? How do we tell this story in the best way? Such communication didn't always happen in the past."

Fundamentally, teamwork and inclusiveness can and should work in today's newsrooms. Those techniques are critical to both team-based newsrooms and traditional structures. At *The Wichita Eagle*, teams have fostered an atmosphere of collaboration that often produces outstanding results for its readers.

## About the Authors

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Tracy Thompson is currently an assistant professor in the Business Administration Program at the University of Washington, Tacoma. She received her PhD in organization behavior from Northwestern University in 1994. Her research focuses on strategic management, organization change and corporate governance.

Thompson has been affiliated with NMC since 1990. Most recently, she's been investigating the processes and outcomes of moving to a team-based production model in the newsroom. In addition to her work in the newspaper industry, Thompson has also published research on the rise of institutional investor activism. Her work has appeared in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Corporate Governance* and the *Journal of Managerial Education*.