Managing Newsroom Employees: II

BY SHARON PETERS, Ph.D

How to be a better boss, motivate your staff and make change happen

Kellogg School of Management and Medill School of Journalism

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Preface

Today's newsroom managers must always look forward. They must be strategic, have goals, articulate them well, and be able to move their staff collectively in one direction. Change is a given. Newspapers are threatened by new media in more ways than one. Not only are they losing readers, they're also losing newsroom employees to dot-com raiders offering tempting stock options. They can't just keep doing the same old things in the same old way and succeed.

More than ever, they need to be good leaders and good bosses.

That's not an easy job, especially for those who cut their teeth as reporters or copy editors, in a mostly solitary occupation. They must learn a whole new set of skills. And often there's no one on hand to teach them.

When she becomes a manager, a journalist is expected to suddenly be a visionary, a psychologist and a problem-solver. She needs to know what makes people tick and how to get the best from them. She needs to have vision and then know how to bring it into being. She needs to learn how to lead and let others do. And she needs to deal with some very sticky personnel issues.

It's not always an easy or comfortable adjustment. And it requires knowledge and insights about people and organizations she may never have come across in her reporter or copy editor days.

This report addresses the topics middle managers ask about most. It gives them insights and advice about how to be a better boss and have a better staff. It helps them understand the idiosyncrasies of people who work in newsrooms, and how to motivate them and overcome their resistance to change.

Any manager who reads this book will quickly recognize many puzzling behaviors and frustrating problems he has encountered in his own newsroom. And he'll get practical pointers on how to deal with them.

This is the second monograph Sharon Peters has written for the Media Management Center on managing newsroom employees. The first was published in 1999 and if you don't have it, you'll want to get it. With 23 years as a journalist and a doctorate degree in organization development, she understands the management issues facing workplaces today — and especially those in the newsroom.

Motivating Employees

CHAPTER ONE

E'VE all had employees who never live up to their potential, or who make great strides and then inexplicably and without warning seem to check out, or who give every project half their all.

These behaviors are all rooted in motivation, the complex motor that powers an individual's performance.

Unfortunately, there is no magic fuel that will fire up all employees. No single answer. No fail-safe formula. What there is is a lot of data that suggest certain strategies work for some people under some circumstances, and a few will work for all people under most circumstances. There are also some pretty universal roadblocks — de-motivators for all except the most extraordinary people.

Managers obviously can have a huge impact on motivating (or de-motivating) the people who work for them. Understanding some of the basics can help supervisors on all levels energize problem individuals, and, in many cases, activate the entire staff.

Motivation, that often-heralded and often-ephemeral hustle, is something everyone recognizes but most find difficult to isolate or put into words.

The clinical definition is: the thing that energizes, channels and sustains behavior. So motivation plays into whether a person does or doesn't do something, how much focus and energy he will devote to what he does, and how long and enduringly he'll attend to it. A person's motivation can differ from hour to hour or year to year.

The first thing, then, is to realize that motivation isn't a constant. Even great performers can lapse into spotty or lax performance, and people who historically have done marginal work can be motivated into stunning performers.

Here's what you need to know.

Be supportive

Several studies have found that the supervisor who is considerate and supportive tends to have employees who are more motivated and productive.

Considerate and supportive does not in this context mean accepting of poor performance or being completely laissez faire, but rather being concerned about the staff's general well-being. Employees need to receive the organizational and environmental support necessary to do the job, including constructive feedback, proper equipment, training and authority to do the job as it should be done.

Indeed, unconditional support has been found to have a negative impact. And this, of course, makes sense. If a copy editor who writes crummy headlines gets frequent positive feedback from her supervisor, she develops no concept of what good quality is, and she is not driven to improve. There is also a damaging fan-out effect: Others who are strong performers overhear the feedback she gets and they ratchet back a few notches, assuming that extra

effort isn't called for or acknowledged.

So it is important to keep in mind that supportiveness should not be indiscriminate but rather must be a response to effort and accomplishment.

Ask for input

Another motivator is courting employees' input in decision-making. By now, every manager knows it is important to include employees when forming plans and setting strategies, if for no other reason than to ensure buy-in. The fact is, inviting involvement, especially from people who seem to have less than full-throttle engagement in their work, can ignite a much higher level of motivation. Instead of telling a person, "Do this story and these three sidebars," give him some ownership and pride of creativity by asking what he thinks the approach should be. Forcing input often convinces a person that he is capable, fosters new learning and takes him to a new plane of involvement and self-motivation.

Five basic motivators

What are some of the other motivators? Frederick Herzberg, acknowledged authority on job satisfaction, productivity and motivation, identified five more than 60 years ago. And they're the things that are still widely acknowledged as necessary for motivating employees. They are: achievement; recognition; challenging, varied or interesting work; responsibility and advancement.

1. Achievement. People like to conquer challenges. It's a self-esteem thing. If they have mostly tasks that do not give them feelings of achievement, they will not be motivated. So, two things: Employees must not be forced year after year to do the same tasks (with no new ones added) unless they are free to develop ways of doing those tasks more creatively or efficiently. And they must not continually be given tasks so far beyond their current capabilities that they have no way of mastering them.

2. Recognition. No one wants to slay dragons in obscurity. While the healthiest egos can be satisfied by personal feelings of accomplishment even in the face of no outside reinforcement, they can't persevere indefinitely. And these people are the exception. Most employees need others to acknowledge their successes — if not always, then at least from time to time. Acknowledgment can come in the form of two-sentence notes, highlights in the company newsletter or formalized awards. The importance of recognition cannot be overstated. Most contemporary managers say recognition is the single most potent motivator they use.

3. Challenging, varied and interesting work. There are two things to keep in mind: What was once challenging and interesting to an employee may no longer be so and what you yourself would find interesting, varied or chal-

lenging may not be the same for another person. So don't apply your own preferences to someone else's job. It is how that person sees the situation that is important. It doesn't matter if he has one of the most interesting, high-profile jobs in the organization — if he no longer sees it that way you must help him change the situation.

4. Responsibility. People don't want every minute of their worklife directed by someone else. They want to have some responsibility for their own successes, and, indeed, their own failures. That is how people learn and grow. So if your people don't have much in the way of independence, some rein-loosening may be in order. True, some people cannot be trusted with some tasks. If that is your assessment of a particular person, find some worthwhile, low-risk area where she can have full authority, even if she shows no interest in assuming responsibility. This is important because these tend to be the very same people who are only marginally motivated. We do not know which comes first, the lack of motivation or the lack of interest in taking responsibility. But one thing we do know: Increase a person's responsibility and you also increase her motivation level. A person doesn't learn to be dependable, competent and independent without practice. And sometimes managers must force that learning.

5. Advancement. Everyone wants to be rewarded for her efforts by moving ahead. But each person has her own definition of advancement and professional progress. For some it means a promotion to a higher rung on the ladder. For some it is moving into a higher-visibility job. For others it is keeping the existing job but re-framing it, or taking on additional responsibilities. Managers must set out to discover what each of their staff people defines as advancement — long term and short term — and determine how to help each achieve that goal. Having a sense of progression in one's worklife is extremely important.

Create new challenges

It is clear that in order to motivate, managers must be in a perpetual state of figuring out how to create situations and approaches that allow for more growth.

There is some evidence, for example, that rotating people from one job to another can result in greater motivation and productivity. And this strategy should be considered periodically. But there is a caveat. It is only a short-term fix if the employee is shifted to a new job that merely requires her to apply existing abilities in a new context. Such a move probably meets the organization's short-term needs — it puts someone with proven abilities into an existing gap, so it's a no-risk, fast fix. But it doesn't do much for the employee except provide her a change of environment. It is not pushing her or providing her with the opportunity to move ahead.

For maximum impact she should be moved to a new beat that stretches her — maybe one in which she will develop computer-assisted reporting skills, or one in which she not only writes but also supervisors others. Or she can stay in her existing beat but take on new responsibilities in the newsroom — perhaps head up a task force or develop a mentoring program in the newsroom.

But when you give an employee additional responsibilities, they must be significant ones, and you need to communicate the importance of the new tasks. Communicating the important-to-the-enterprise aspect is critical. Scores of researchers have found that people who are high in skill or ability but are not told the task is a very important one, perform at significantly lower levels. If, however, they are told upfront that they will be using professional skills that are valued and will help the organization, they perform at high levels.

This one little bit of information has pretty strong implications for managers. You can ask a person to head a newsroom committee on change and give her a few signals about what you want her to accomplish and send her on her way. Or you can tell her you are asking her to head up the committee because she has a proven history of thinking creatively and keeping things on track, and that both of those will be critical to developing new, desperately needed change for the newsroom. The latter approach is going to get you a whole lot more.

Wrong Diagnosis

One caution: Don't jump to the conclusion that when performance is bad, motivation is always to blame.

Good performance is indeed the result of strong motivation. But it is also the result of having the skills and ability to do the job.

Most managers assume that if people are not doing the job well, it's because they're insufficiently motivated, not because they're unable.

Newsroom managers tend to believe anyone with newsroom experience can shift gears and apply existing skills to any new approaches and tasks. And that simply is not the reality.

A fine reporter does not necessarily have the skills, without coaching or training, to be a good manager. And when such a move leads to a performance falloff, we assume the person is not motivated to be a manager. Sometimes she isn't. Other times, she may be highly motivated, but does not know how to deal with personnel issues, hasn't had a good role model, isn't a solid line editor — and has no reliable way of addressing all these shortfalls.

So in diagnosing problem performance, managers should not always assume it is a personal motivation issue.

There's a second, related matter. Sometimes even highly motivated people learning new skills may be thwarted by company constraints, and their performance can drop off.

Put a competent copy editor on new equipment, in which the bugs have not been worked out, and you can expect diminished performance as he learns the system. But if the system problems continue for weeks and no one seems interested in fixing them, the copy editor will become less motivated. He can't be blamed for that.

Other environmental hurdles common in newsrooms include:

- Diffusing workers' attention by requiring that they do too many things at once
- Too many conflicting directions from too many different people
- Insufficient administrative help, which means people must do too many menial tasks that take away from their real work.

So be certain to fully examine whether any of these factors may be affecting an individual's performance, and if so, find ways to fix the problem.

Feedback and goal-setting

There's another motivator: Knowledge of results. People almost always perform better when they know how their efforts played out. Conversely, working in a vacuum is not conducive to high motivation.

Newspaper people don't get a lot of information about the results of their labors. First of all, the newsroom culture is not one that promotes a lot of in-office feedback — supervisor to employee — although that is beginning to shift slightly in some newsrooms. And few newspaper folks get much positive reinforcement from the public. So, most people in the newsroom are doing work every day that seems to disappear into the ether.

Someone must define what good results are so employees will know when they're meeting expectations.

Plus, it's unclear anymore in the newspaper business what good results are. Is it bigger circulation numbers? Is it simply maintaining circulation in the face of widespread drops all over the country? Is it a positive public sentiment about the newspaper? Is it exposing wrongdoing, even when the public doesn't seem especially interested in knowing about this wrongdoing? Is it maintaining high standards?

Someone — and that means everyone on the management team — must define what good results are so employees will know when they're meeting expectations.

If a circulation increase is identified as a goal, the entire staff should receive circulation figures at least monthly. If street sales are the issue, the staff must be supplied with daily numbers. If reader reaction to various newspaper projects or initiatives is a goal, managers should save every piece of correspondence and take down every word of telephone feedback and share every bit of it with the staff. It's important for every employee to know that he as an individual and the organization as a whole are achieving the pre-established goals.

Indeed, goal-setting is a very strong motivator. Most of us slog around at work tending to whatever comes along but only dimly aware of priorities. Goals identify some targets, and the focus of attention becomes well-defined. It's also attached to that achievement thing Herzberg highlighted. If a person knows what the goal is, and it's a goal she can commit to, she is probably going to be quite determined to achieve it. And having succeeded, she will probably be motivated to tackle more goals. So it is always helpful to break down an employee's responsibilities into specific goals and time frames.

Personal satisfaction

A final consideration in the motivation equation is personal satisfaction — the level of psychic reward people get from the work they do. This can be a fairly strong motivator or an extremely strong de-motivator.

People spend a lot of their life at work, and they're compelled to find some positive justification for that beyond the paycheck. Police see themselves as protecting the community against those who would break the law and endanger others; doctors see themselves as alleviators of pain and suffering; soldiers see themselves as keepers of democracy. This is not something they think of every minute of every day, but rather during the dark times, when the hours have been too long or the problems unusually difficult. Newspaper people see themselves as the ones who protect society's access to information and shine light into dark corners. This is the basic justification for doing the work they do. But it is getting a little harder for them to maintain that posture in the face of shifting public sentiment. Survey after survey shows that newspaper people are not highly regarded, and not always trusted. And fewer people are clamoring to read the work that newspaper people do.

While the negatives are realities and it would be foolish to pretend they don't exist, few newspaper managers help their people justify their most basic motivation. They're not trumpeting the victories. They're not presenting staffers with some positives to cling to, some validation of the work they do. No professional is going to invest a huge piece of his soul and energy year after year into something few people appreciate. Any worker will invest a lot more of himself when convinced it has some important impact.

A lot of what newspapers do does have significant positive impact. But newspaper people don't talk much about those things, they don't celebrate them. That would be unseemly.

Perhaps it is time for a cultural shift in that regard. It is proper and necessary to herald a lot of the good stuff — internally if not externally.

When readers send in notes about how a reporter's story made a difference in their lives, those letters should be posted for everyone to see, as a reminder of why they got into this line of work. When a law gets passed largely because of stories the newspaper did, that should be announced and celebrated. When injustices are redressed because of relentless reporting, that information, too, should be disseminated among the staff.

The point is, there is not a lot of obvious support for journalists to keep doing what they're doing. And the passion in the gut requires some stoking from time to time. It's up to managers and leaders to develop ways to do that.

Internal Motivation

CHAPTER TWO

IT'S true what every manager believes: Some employees really are more motivated, more personally driven than others. The internal mechanism that spurs people is indeed more powerful, more responsive and more enduring in some people than in others.

Situational de-motivators that flatten some people merely slow down the inherently driven ones. And motivational techniques that fuel the normal person will supercharge the highly driven one.

The link between this internal mechanism and job performance has long been observed and studied. In fact, there was a time when most psychologists believed that the only motivation was that which came from within. They assumed every person was born with a certain level — high or low — that would remain stable over his or her entire lifetime. Accordingly, highly motivated people never would lose any drive and poorly motivated people would never develop more no matter what the circumstances.

The more widely held belief today is that situational, or environmental, factors influence motivation. This theory puts forth that all people can become highly motivated when the necessary factors — discussed in the previous chapter — are present. But it also accepts that some people have a lesser or greater level of inherent, personal motivation than some others.

Thus, to ensure the most highly motivated workforce possible, managers must not only work to create a highly motivating environment, but should also seek to hire those people who possess the higher-level quotient of motivation.

Hiring wisely

Unfortunately, there is no unfailing means of measuring a person's motivation level. A handful of tests claim to be able to assess how much motivation a person has (much like the tests that assess intelligence or measure certain skills). But although a couple of the best ones do a reasonably good job of differentiating poorly motivated people from highly motivated ones, there are some problems. First, it is possible to fake the results — anyone taking these tests can make assumptions about what the best answers are and answer accordingly. Second, if a highly motivated person is in a very de-motivating job situation, honest answers to the questions — because of the way they are asked — could give results that indicate this is a poorly motivated person.

Tests aside, things are known about highly motivated people. One is that they tend to have been raised in an environment that encouraged children to independently tackle challenges and do well with them. This, of course, is valuable insight only if you are thinking of hiring someone you have known from birth, because it would be quite difficult to ascertain whether these conditions were present in the childhood of a stranger sitting before you.

A somewhat easier pattern to ascertain is that of internal or external locus of control. Locus of control has to do with how a person perceives

the way life shakes down.

Master of his fate?

A person with internal locus of control believes that most of what happens in life is the result of his own doing. He believes he makes his own successes and failures. He accepts that sometimes bad things happen, through no real fault of his, but in most cases he can reverse or minimize the badness of the situation. He also acknowledges that sometimes good things fall out of the sky, but this, he believes, happens rarely, and when it does, he will devise ways to make the good situation even better. In short, these are people who believe they are masters of their own fate. They are in control of their own lives, and even situations they had no part in creating can be improved through their efforts.

There also are people who operate under external locus of control. This kind of person believes life is more or less a series of random-chance occurrences. Sometimes good things happen, sometimes bad things happen, and the best he can do is try to adapt to whatever befalls him. There is, in his mind, very little an individual can do to exert much control over his environment. A person can live well and try to make the right choices, but things will happen, often bad things, and virtually nothing can be done except to learn to dust himself off and brace for the next episode.

A person with internal locus of control believes that most of what happens in life is the result of his own doing.

As you might assume, people with internal locus of control are far more likely to have the extra layer of fortitude to be motivated (even under adverse conditions) and motivate-able (under any circumstances).

Locus firmly fixed

The locus-of-control tendency is formed in early childhood, so by the time a person enters the workforce, this predisposition is firmly fixed. Obviously, the wise manager will want to bring on as many people with internal locus of control as possible.

There is no test. But signals can be picked up and explored during the interview process. People who have stayed in unpleasant or untenable jobs or personal situations far too long may have done so because they felt they had no ability to change the situation (external locus of control), whereas those who seem to have quickly and forcefully overcome adversity (internal locus

of control) probably will continue to display that sort of drive and initiative.

People who present themselves as constantly misunderstood employees or hapless victims will forever take that tack in their worklives and probably never will find the internal resolution to push themselves beyond low-level motivation and performance. On the other hand, those who have figured out ways to meet their own needs — seeking scholarships when they couldn't afford to go to college or taking a second job to buy a car — have demonstrated that they rely on themselves to design their own lives. They are unlikely to wallow for long periods of time in an unfulfilling job situation. They will drive themselves to repair it or abandon it.

The importance of this locus-of-control factor cannot be overstated. My own research in 1998 into the differences between middle-aged reporters who were still highly motivated strong performers versus middle-aged reporters who were languishing in cruise control demonstrated this. The highly motivated older reporters shared several early-life experiences: Virtually all had endured significant setbacks or tragedies in childhood — experiences well beyond what could be considered relatively normal for children — and had not only survived them but emerged with the clear and resolute conviction that life is not easy or fair but that it is possible for people to prevail against even the worst odds or circumstances. Virtually all of them had also experienced huge professional disappointments, but had concluded that dwelling on those disappointments would be counterproductive. And virtually all had taken steps (which their bosses had not demanded or even requested) to improve their own skills and abilities — doing such things as taking foreign-language or computer courses on their own time, writing stories off their beats to prove proficiency when seeking an unlikely promotion, or demanding company-sponsored training.

These older reporters were, by and large, people who had no particular leg up in the brains department (most were average or below average as college students), but they refused to simply settle for whatever hand they were dealt. They not only consistently manipulated and made the most out of whatever befell them, they actively sought out opportunities and created their own chances for success. And people who are like this — who believe they can, through a little more effort or sheer force of will, improve their lot in life — will always exhibit stronger drive in the workplace.

Personal motivation can be a highly energizing force in a newsroom.

And counterfeit motivation — the stated desire to achieve something coupled with an unrealistic self-appraisal and unwillingness to take the necessary steps to reach goals — can be one of the most confounding and destructive forces in a newsroom.

Faux motivation

Solid (and psychologically healthy) performers inevitably have not only a

high level of motivation, but also an unblinking view of their own deficiencies, plans for improving them, and a solid understanding of the incremental steps that must be mastered to reach the final goal.

What we increasingly see in these days of irregular and indirect feedback is people who have a dream (a good thing) but no realistic sense of what they must do to achieve it (a bad thing) and thus no true drive to do much to get there (an even worse thing). These people are not truly motivated. They merely have extraordinarily high expectations, which do not correlate with either their existing skills and abilities or their level of personal focus or drive.

These people often become hostile and bitter because promotions elude them and the long-fantasized accolades are never bestowed. Or, worse for the organization, they are promoted because their stated need is so great, but once elevated don't tend to the necessary skill-building because greater competency was not what they sought. Title, position and presumed power were what they sought. It is only when they can accept taking the personal responsibility for earning promotions through improving their own competence that they can begin to be motivated by the right things.

Unfortunately, this kind of person is not always easily identified in the interview process. Managers can become so intrigued by people who seem driven to accomplishment that they don't explore what the person has done in the past to indicate personal responsibility for achieving success, nor do they explore the person's specific game plan for reaching the stated goal.

Understanding the differences between true and counterfeit motivation should allow managers to hire more people of the sort they really want.

Better Brainstorming

CHAPTER THREE

IT'S one of the most unnerving experiences of managerdom: You call a brainstorming session to tap the staff for ideas about stories, future projects or reorganization plans, and much of the assembled mass sits mute. Politely but thoroughly disengaged, they offer no suggestions and involve themselves in none of the discussions.

Every manager in every line of work has endured this, but it is especially prevalent in newsrooms.

Is it because reporters and their peers are so disdainful of authority they won't deign to participate in any command performance? Is it because they hate their bosses to such a degree they privately agree beforehand to sit close-mouthed and let the big cheeses squirm in the cold silence? Is it because they are so professionally selfish they don't wish to share even a snippet of their creative thinking? Or is it because the manager is doing everything so wrong that the creative spirit has been exterminated?

It could be any of those explanations.

But in most cases it is not.

The silent lambs are probably nothing more complicated or evil than a group of introverts who are sitting in that meeting doing what introverts do best: listening, processing and keeping their mouths shut.

The characteristic of introversion — colored by stereotype and widely misunderstood — bears some explanation.

Introvert or extravert

According to prevailing theory, a person is either an introvert or an extravert.

Extraverts are spontaneously verbal. They are great conversationalists and natural brainstormers, because they tend to share just about every thought that goes through their heads, even when those thoughts aren't fully formed. Indeed, extraverts have difficulty taking a thought to fruition when they are not permitted to talk it through.

Introverts are far less spontaneously verbal. They need time to process their thoughts, and dislike talking about them until they have had time to think them all the way through and carry them to the logical conclusion. Moreover, they are much more comfortable writing their ideas than verbalizing them.

So this is the fundamental difference: Introverts think to talk, extraverts talk to think.

Therefore, extraverts will generally dominate brainstorming sessions, while introverts sit quietly. And in most settings, it is perfectly fine when that happens, because there are a sufficient number of extraverts (65 percent to 75 percent of the population, by most estimates) to keep the ideas coming and the thoughts rolling.

Newsrooms, however, do not mirror the general population. There are twice

as many introverts as extraverts in most newsrooms. This fact has been borne out by a variety of personality-profile statistics, which have shown over the years that writers of all genres — novelists, magazine writers, book editors and newspaper reporters — are three times more likely to be introverts.

So newsroom brainstorming sessions, populated as they are by a preponderance of introverts, have a tendency to be rather quiet, lackluster affairs. The three extraverts in the room carry the ball until they're exhausted, while the

> Introverts think to talk, extraverts talk to think.

introverts sit passively by, appearing for all the world to be incapable of cogent thought.

In truth, introverts are rarely mentally idle during all this. They are taking everything in, processing it and beginning to draw some conclusions or develop some insightful synopses of what has transpired. And given time, they eventually would share. But the session inevitably ends without their having completed their processing and, therefore, having spoken of it. Their thinking is lost to the group forever.

Happily, there are methods to ensure that introverts make a fuller contribution.

Giving introverts time

First, managers must not assume that introversion is a disability — even when attempting to put together full-bodied discourse and idea-sharing. If everyone in the room were an extravert, it would be like a tree full of magpies — a lot of competing noise with no apparent theme or direction. Introverts are acute observers, skilled at distilling the disjointed, disparate dialogue into a cohesive theory or game plan. The challenge is learning to take full advantage of that skill by making sure the introverts can have their say on their own terms. To this end, managers should initiate some simple practices:

- **Don't force verbal participation in meetings.** A lot of managers call randomly on people, and this is a practice that drives the introvert further into a cone of silence. The threat of being required to offer instant input usually results in one of two things. The introverts manufacture excuses to skip the meeting altogether, or they focus all their energy on being able to speak on demand, which disrupts the far more valuable internal processing they are capable of, and robs you of the best they can offer.
- **Distribute a well-defined agenda well ahead of the meeting when possible.** This allows introverts to begin thinking about the topics before the discussion. When they have time to process some ideas to their conclusion,

some introverts, feeling more prepared, will offer their thoughts during the meeting. Also, know this: With time, as introverts become more comfortable with the process and with the group, many of them will become more verbal. For although an introvert is an introvert, there can be massive differences in the verbalizing they exhibit, depending on upbringing, the group's norms, and their comfort level with the situation at hand.

■ **Create avenues for introverts to share their thinking after the meeting.** Schedule a post-meeting meeting 24 hours later to allow for any middle-of-the-night thoughts to be placed before the group. Or conclude the meeting by asking everyone to go away and think over what has transpired, and then to share any additional thoughts they might have in writing the following day. By not deciding everything on the spot during that first meeting, you have given introverts the time they need to help turn marginal ideas into good ones and good ones into great ones.

■ **Consider bringing in someone to administer a work-style inventory** — the kind that measures introversion and extraversion. And have that person offer a one-hour training session on the differences, sharing everyone's results. This will provide everyone with a lot of insight about themselves and others, and can help all parties appreciate the differences.

■ **And don't abolish brainstorming sessions.** Keep them, even if they are more ragged and painful than you might like. Introverts have a tendency to spend too much time inside themselves. It is important for them to attend such meetings to hear the fresh ideas and thinking floating about the room.

A Case in Point

This introversion-extraversion dimension shows up in many odd ways in newsrooms. None is more obvious, perhaps, than the behavior of reporters when they return from an interview.

When an extravert gets back to the office and is ready to start writing, he often wants to talk about most of the key points in the interview. And he'll descend upon any willing (or unwilling) pair of ears. Sometimes this recitation of "she said, I said" can go on for awhile. And sometimes it is exasperating beyond words. But the fact is most extraverts need that verbalizing. This is how they process what happened, how they separate the wheat from the chaff, how they figure out what the story is. They don't manage to do that processing very well in their heads. And for most extraverted reporters this kind of recitation is the shortest route to ensuring that the best possible version of the story gets written. Smart editors allow them that.

Introverts, on the other hand, generally do not want to speak a word about the story until it is written. When they come back from an assignment and the editor says, "How did it go? What's the budgetline? What do we have?" introverts can get pretty snippy. The fact is, they probably don't know yet what they have; they're still processing. And they won't really be convinced of what they know until most of it is on paper or in the computer. So it's best to give them the 10 or 15 minutes more they need to sort it out, and, if deadlines allow, not pressure them to commit prematurely.

And it is important for extraverts to have regular brainstorming sessions as well. They need an outlet for their natural tendency to share all they have encountered or considered. They also need to learn from introverts the value of giving a thought time to simmer so it can be turned into a better version of itself.

Change

CHAPTER FOUR

SINCE the days of Gutenberg (or not long after), editors have been demanding it and staffs have been resisting it.

Change.

To hear most editors and managers tell it, employees meet change directives with all the energy and enthusiasm of a condemned prisoner trudging toward the firing squad.

And the reality is, most people would rather maintain the status quo — no matter how troubled and vulnerable that might be — than detour onto a new, unmarked path with incalculable perils. Still, that predisposition is not nearly as strong or resolute as a lot of newsroom behavior would seem to suggest.

The vast majority of change aversion in organizations, as it turns out, is not rooted in individuals' personal and innate loathing for reshuffling and reform, but rather is fostered by the behavior of superiors who unwittingly induce staffs to react badly.

There are five basic reasons why employees don't/won't change, and they can be neutralized if you understand they are often a reaction to a manager's action.

Why employees avoid change

1. They believe they will lose more than they gain if the proposed change occurs. And, truthfully, they may be right. They need some help, then, to resolve to walk this path. Managers need to understand and communicate one of life's basic truths: Every change involves some gains and some losses. There are no exceptions. If, for example, a reporter decides to take on a bigger, higher-profile beat, the gains are new challenges, professional growth and greater visibility. The loss is leaving behind the comfort and security of well-developed sources and a job she can handle well with a minimum of stress. Or if a reporter decides to make the leap into editing, the gains are salary increase, more prestige perhaps, and career advancement. The downsides are longer work weeks, no more reporting and writing, and the stress that occurs when one is suddenly the boss of people who had always been friends and peers.

So even change that is chosen involves some loss. When change isn't chosen, but rather mandated, as it normally is in news organizations, employees tend to focus more on the losses. So the entire newsroom anguishes over what's lost without paying any attention at all to probable gains — and they wind up despising the very notion of the change that has been ordered.

This very human reaction can be minimized in this way: First, you as the leader, manager or messenger should acknowledge upfront that there are losses. This steals a lot of heat from their steam, reduces the amount of time they spend carping among themselves about the hideous fallout of this particular change, and reduces the resentment that inevitably builds. Second, enumerate the gains. No false promises, no Pollyanna spins, just real-world

positive consequences of this action. Resistance is effectively diffused. Not eliminated entirely, of course, but significantly reduced.

2. They don't know how to change. Many times when a person seems resistant to doing things differently, we assume he is just being lazy or difficult or cranky. Sometimes that is exactly what's going on. But many times it is a skills or ability thing. He really doesn't know how to go about doing things differently. It takes a different set of skills to think out a story as a multi-part package, rather than a linear piece, before beginning the reporting. It takes a different mindset to become an engaged community member rather than a dispassionate journalist. It takes a different set of abilities to be an involved team member instead of a lone-ranger reporter or editor. And not everyone is able to develop new skills or mindsets overnight; not everyone can figure out just where to start and exactly how to apply all this new thinking to his own ways of doing things.

So it is very important for managers to teach each employee how to apply the new directives to what he does every day. Not everyone will get it or respond instantly. So managers must develop new instructions, new language and new forms of constructive criticism to help those employees make the leap.

3. It's not safe to change. Or at least that's what they have come to believe. Their experience is that when they or others have tried to do things differently, there have been unpleasant consequences. Editors invariably say, "I encourage change. I appreciate it when people try things differently." And they no doubt do — within their own definition of acceptable parameters for experimentation. But employees may have far different definitions and parameters. And probably when staff members have proposed something that really pushes the edges, the idea has been met with immediate rejection, or eye-rolling among the brass, or derisive comments in managers' meetings, or utter silence. This does not exactly foster great confidence that change is a happy thing.

There is no denying that every editor's chief responsibility is to make sure something really stupid doesn't get into the newspaper. This, coupled with the pressure of deadlines, drives most editors to make extremely hasty (generally too hasty) decisions about novel approaches and the like, so new ideas are squashed at warp speed. This prompts employees to conclude — quite logically — that the only prized way, the only safe way, is the existing way of doing things. The staff develops an underlying suspicion that change of all sorts is pretty high-risk.

The only way to begin reversing this perception is to reward innovation in very vocal and public ways, discussing missteps not as monstrous mistakes but

as lessons learned. Most important, the editor should give every new idea a full hearing, attempt to find ways to modify unworkable suggestions into workable ones and, when ideas must be rejected, give all the reasons why. With enough knowledge about what you're unwilling to accept, the staff develops an understanding of acceptable parameters for initiating and innovating.

4. Change isn't really wanted (or at least required) at the top. And the staff knows this because there are no consequences for those who don't change, and no rewards for those who do. If you are constantly asking the staff to innovate — to do things differently — yet you choose a lead story that is a 60-inch piece on gender discrimination with one source, an anecdotal lede and a presentation that looks like something from the 1980s, you have countermanded your own directive. Top editors constantly negate their own messages by accepting the unacceptable. Every top editor and department head must be very aware of mixed signals.

You've got to be willing to reject stories (or packages or internal practices) until they meet the standards set by whatever change directive you are preaching. Without that there's no real motivation for anyone to do what you've asked.

5. The middle-management team is culturally opposed to change. And that is glaringly obvious to even the most thickheaded person on the staff. Yes, mid-managers may be saying all the right things. Yes, they may all seem to be onboard, and they may even think they're onboard. But when the managing editor strides into the features department at 4 o'clock and says, "Let's trash the section front for tomorrow and do this breaking story," is the reaction among the mid-managers "Great idea"? Or does the change evoke a stream of invectives about manpower and overtime and how people at the top just don't understand? Any middle manager may be justified in making those arguments, but if that sort of reaction is regular and automatic, the staff assumes — rightly — that the middle managers are more interested in convenience, comfort, and sticking to the plan than in shifting gears to do the right thing by readers. Employees look for reasons (and behavior to model) to justify sticking to the old ways of doing things, and it's highly possible middle managers are giving them some.

Middle managers must commit to responding to change directives in exactly the way they want their own staffs to respond to the ones they issue.

So clearly, the speed and efficiency with which change is adopted (or not) by a staff is in huge measure the result of management behavior. If management consistently fosters change rather than sending mixed messages, and if the staff has received the instruction, training and reinforcement they need to

do it, you're removing a lot of the roadblocks.

There are some additional things that can ease and speed change:

■ **Honor the past.** When you tell people to do things differently, their interpretation is that they've been doing it wrong. And people will do almost anything to avoid believing they've spent 12 years in idiotic pursuit — including clutching ever more tightly to the past way of doing things.

So managers asking for significant change must put the old and the new into context. "We've been doing this or that a certain way for a lot of years, and that's the way we should have been doing it all those years. But now society is changing, the market is changing, and we've got to change as well." Two or three sentences can remove a lot of the personal angst everyone is bound to feel.

■ **Get input and buy-in from the staff before making the final announcement.** Most managers understand that staffs are much more inclined to support new things they feel they've played a role in forming. But most of the big fundamental changes originate from the top, present-

When you tell people to do things differently,
their interpretation is that they've been doing it wrong.

ed without warning, like a gut-punch from nowhere. At least, that's how it feels to a staff conditioned by the top echelon to expect that any announcement from on high will be stunning: "We're killing the Sunday magazine next month." "We're restructuring the newsroom next week." "We're adding two new sections next quarter." It leaves people feeling knocked about and breathless, as if they've been blindfolded, strapped into a carnival ride and forced to endure a wretched ride. While it is imminently true that the whole staff can't be brought into every decision, it is just as true that more consensus-building would significantly decrease the degree to which staffs react to any change with fear and loathing.

■ **Set achievable targets.** Sometimes the proposed change is so huge and overwhelming that the staff, unable to figure out how take the first bite, turns its back on the whole thing. That is a pretty rational reaction under the circumstances. But if you break the goal into incremental, achievable pieces and give everyone the means to reach them, you'll get far more support — both instant and enduring.

■ **Don't hinder progress by changing the change directive.** Once you establish a New World Order of any sort — there will be no jumps from the front page, or no story over 25 inches, or zero tolerance for ethical breaches — top leadership and middle management alike must stick with the mandate, even when they prefer to make a little exception here and there. If one person on any level is allowed to make exceptions to the rule, the staff wants to take its own shot at making exceptions to the rule. And things start backsliding.

So obviously countermanding directives should never occur. But the reality is that sometimes top leaders do wish to make exceptions to the rules they set. And because they're the top decision-makers, they have the authority to do so. When they exercise that right, they must be very clear and very public about one thing. They must say, "I am choosing to make an exception to the rule. This does not mean that the rule is changing, it merely means that today, this one time, we are making an exception." Almost no leader wants to make this kind of statement and almost no leader does, but the moment any rule is broken the staff spends the next several weeks wondering whether the previously announced change has been changed again, and they use this as an excuse not to change.

■ **Give a lot of incremental praise as people start moving in the right direction**. Chances are it will be weeks or even months before people are doing it perfectly, before you can honestly say, "Now that's the way we ought to be doing it." But if you wait until they're doing it perfectly, they probably never will. And here's why: When you tell someone to move in another direction, and she begins inching there, it is usually with a little trepidation that maybe she has misinterpreted the goal and misjudged the way of getting there. At some point, if she has heard nothing positive about her progress, she'll retreat back to the old ways of doing things. It's not the right place to be, and she knows it, but it's a safe place to be. So you must constantly reassure people they're on the right track. Otherwise you experience the frustration that so many editors complain of — that the staff sort of began to get it, and then inexplicably resumed doing things in the old ways.

Amazing Insights for Editors

CHAPTER FIVE

HERE are perplexing realties in every newsroom, patterns of behavior that seem to defy rational thought. How can a whip-smart copy editor become so unspeakably dense, refusing to hear when confronted with criticism about her own work? Why would a hard-working reporter lapse into a sloth-like lassitude when the newsroom adopts the team approach to work? What makes a staff turn venomous over minor policy changes?

Social psychologists have done a great deal of research into how individuals behave in group settings. And they have identified many circumstances when individuals can be all but guaranteed to behave in peculiar ways. The following are a handful that seem to burst forth with some regularity at most workplaces, and which may have particular resonance in newsrooms:

1. Make sure teamwork works. Collective effort — teamwork — can increase a person's productivity or, with just as great frequency, decrease it. It all depends on the way the team is set up and expectations are laid out. Research in the 1970s, reconfirmed repeatedly throughout the 1980s and '90s, found that when a person sees his work as simply part of a pool, he is tempted to free-ride on the group effort. When a person believes his output as part of the group is being monitored individually, he works much harder. So in establishing work teams, it is crucial to make sure that each person has a clearly identified task, that the process is monitored and that it is clear from the outset that the group's achievement depends on the sum of the individual efforts.

2. Employees overstate their own case. We all have a curious tendency to overestimate the extent to which others think and act as we do. On matters of opinion, for example, we imagine we have support for our positions by overestimating the extent to which others agree with us. And when we behave badly or fail at a task, we reassure ourselves by thinking such lapses are common.

This tendency is called false consensus. It presents itself dozens of times a day in every newsroom on the country: in the disgruntled employee who tells her boss everyone else is equally dissatisfied; in the employee who believes she has written a spectacular story, hears otherwise from her boss, and retorts that all her co-workers believe her story is brilliant; and in the employee who is chastised for missing deadline and tells his boss deadline-busting is not such an odious breach, for everyone else in the room does it with great regularity.

False consensus in isolation, and on a case-by-case basis, is not a hideously terrible thing. It often can help a person regain composure after an unpleasant incident and move ahead with some level of equanimity. It can have a damaging impact, however, in a couple of circumstances.

One is when managers fail to understand the predictability of employees

making all-encompassing statements. Then they become caught up in trying to disprove the employee's claim that everybody is miserable, instead of focusing on the matter at hand, which is that this employee is miserable (and exploring the reasons).

The second is when an employee uses imagined group support as an excuse for continued bad behavior. When the behavior is unacceptable and chronic, and the employee offers the explanation that everybody else does it or believes it or thinks it, the employee develops a deep belief in this bit of self-delusion and sees no reason to modify behavior. At this point, the manager should offer a fact-based reality check: "You say everyone else misses deadline and you won't change your ways? Here's what the record shows. Five stories were logged in late in the past eight days. Four times the late story was yours. This is unacceptable and in obvious conflict with the rules and norms around here."

3. Cultural differences may blur the message. People are generally better able to hear, process and respond to a message, constructive criticism or directive that comes from someone who is from their own group. Research throughout the 1990s found that females generally accept information better from females, males from males, blacks from blacks, younger people from younger people, older people from older people, and so on. There are, of course, exceptions to this tendency, but various researchers have found that communication efforts among like people are 61 percent to 72 percent more successful than communication among those who do not share commonalities.

There are distinct variations in language use, tone and presentation styles from gender to gender, culture to culture and age cohort to age cohort, and most people tend to listen more carefully and respond more positively to information provided by people whose communication style is most like their own. This is not to say that every important message must be delivered by a coalition of varying ages, races and cultures. Rather, it emphasizes the need of all top leaders to have lieutenants of varying backgrounds and demographics who can translate their messages in ways that will reach the largest possible segment of the workforce.

4. Workers hate to give up anything. American workers become thoroughly irrational when a freedom or benefit they have come to believe is a standard and irrefutable part of their cosmos is threatened or taken away. When a freedom such as weekends off, no weekly story quota, open-ended lunch hours or flex-time schedules is in jeopardy of disappearing, the attachment to that freedom almost always escalates well beyond its real value. And grudges can be held for years when such freedoms are removed, as any editor who has ever stepped innocently into that particular territory can attest.

Sometimes economic or other considerations do, in fact, require removing long-standing liberties.

When it is necessary to make cutbacks of any sort, people will respond much better if they are given a choice — even when both choices are unpleasant. So if, for example, a hiring freeze means weekend and night schedules are understaffed, an announcement that all reporters must now take a turn in the rotation will no doubt lead to a revolt of the highest order. If however, employees are given a couple of options, the reaction and ultimate solution will probably be more accepted. There will, no doubt, be staffers who are disappointed or agitated, but they will, by and large, be peer-pressured into a calmer mien by colleagues who remind them that the alternative was far worse.

5. Fully disclose pros and cons. Intelligent, well-informed people are more easily persuaded to adopt a point of view or ruling if they are presented with both the upsides and the downsides of a specific course of action. The most effective way of ensuring that a directive is positively received is to acknowledge all the important opposing arguments, present any available data that disputes those arguments, and then give the rationale for taking the chosen route. There are a couple of reasons why this is much more effective then simply saying, "This is the way it will be and here are all the wonderful benefits

They will spend the next 12 weeks dredging up, exploring and discussing among themselves all the really odious downsides of this particular decision.

that we/you will reap from it."

First, only an idiot believes any decision or course of action is completely positive. All decisions have some downsides. And, in an odd way, you're showing them you respect them by acknowledging that they're not stupid enough to believe this is a cure-all panacea.

Second, intelligent people (and, it could be argued, reporters in particular) have an abiding need to find the pea beneath the mattress. And they will spend the next 12 weeks dredging up, exploring and discussing among themselves all the really odious downsides of this particular decision.

But if you've done the work for them, they will find no real sport in that activity. And while they may not thoroughly embrace the plan, they probably

will settle quickly into just a few specific objections to it rather than developing a generalized contempt for the idea. The former is always much easier for them — and the organization — to get beyond.

6. Don't label people "average." We all think we are better than average. The mathematical impossibility of this notwithstanding, there are very few people who don't regard themselves as better than the Average Joe. Research over the past 20 years has shown: Businesspeople see themselves as more ethical than the average businessperson (Brenner and Molander, 1979); 86 percent of people in Australia rate themselves as above-average in job performance (Heady and Wearing, 1987); most drivers, including those who have been hospitalized for accidents, believe they are safer and more skilled than the average driver (Svenson, 1986); and most Americans think they are more intelligent than their peers (Wylie, 1979) and better looking (Public Opinion, 1984).

The reality of our utter inability to see ourselves as merely ordinary can geyser forth with potency during performance reviews. Most employees become defensive when they receive an "average" or "C" rating for some category in their review. It simply doesn't jibe with one of the most heartfelt and immutable notions they have developed about themselves. Now, most people, except for the chronically neurotic, can accept specific criticisms, such as "your leads are convoluted," as long as this isn't accompanied by the follow-up "and you, therefore, get an average grade," or, worse, "below average." It is the blanket assessment of average-ness that inflames.

Once the word is spoken or written, the very valid criticism takes a back seat to the employee's inalienable right to defend herself against the "average" label. It's counterproductive, demeaning and unnecessarily inflammatory to have performance review systems that label people with the one word none of us is prepared to accept.

Managers should insist on retooling performance-review forms that focus on giving grades into ones that emphasize the critical elements of the performance shortfall without labeling. The resistance by most people to accepting such labels is far stronger than the manager's determination to convince the employee of its veracity, and battles often get fought on the wrong battlegrounds.

7. We hear what we want to. We all relish and retain information that confirms what we believe about ourselves. Studies at the University of Texas in the 1970s, later replicated in a variety of settings, discovered that without exception people elicit and recall feedback that confirms their own beliefs about themselves. They have much less interest and recall when things do not confirm what they already believe.

Thus, it is almost guaranteed that an employee hearing feedback that doesn't

jibe with his own self-image discounts that in favor of whatever in the message does coincide with how he sees himself. This is why we have the frustrating phenomenon experienced by anyone who has ever been a manager: "I told her, but she didn't seem to get the message."

Information that conflicts with an employee's self-image must, as a matter of course, be issued again and again. It's not that the employee is being stubborn or recalcitrant. It is, quite simply, that she honestly does not hear it, and what little of it she does hear isn't processed quickly or fully. The only way around that is to re-issue the criticism, regularly and with specifics, with whatever language is required, until it is heard.

8. Why we may disregard facts. A related phenomenon is this: People are far more likely to search for information that can confirm their beliefs — not only about themselves but about anything in their universe — than information that refutes those beliefs. So again we see that employees will find ways to confirm what they already believe. But there is an additional risk illuminated here that has broad newsroom implications. There is a very real tendency in all people — including reporters — to disregard facts that do not fall directly in line with their assumed premise or with their personal sense of rightness.

Most reporters are aware of the need to battle back their own personal biases when they are reporting and writing stories about which they have a clear and decided opinion or position. For example, when a pro-choice reporter covers and anti-abortion march, he would probably be quite careful to weigh his personal preferences against the tone, texture and facts he is presenting.

Few reporters, however, are aware of the very human predisposition for thoroughly disregarding facts, concepts and information that fall outside of what, on some level, they have decided is right. If, for example, an anti-abortion leader is involved in a late-night rumble, there may very well be a rush to judgment by that same reporter, who has made certain decisions about the character of the man. And information that indicates the gentleman was merely defending himself against a band of thugs who jumped him, and, in fact, was something of a hero because he protected two companions, could be ignored for days.

9. The road not taken may be OK, too. After making important decisions, people usually reduce dissonance by mentally upgrading the path chosen and denigrating the options passed over. Several experiments in cognitive dissonance since the 1950s have shown repeatedly that people have such a need to convince themselves of the correctness of their decision-making that they will go to enormous lengths to vilify, slander or revile the choice not chosen.

An obvious example is when a person, after an exhaustive investigation of various automobiles, finally decides on a car to purchase, and then seizes on

every possible reason to criticize the two or three cars he came closest to buying but didn't. It is behavior that is quite harmless, of course, when it applies to buying a car or deciding where to purchase a vacation home.

But it can be destructive in an organization. The No. 2 candidate, for example — the one who was not hired — suddenly becomes a pariah in the eyes of the editor who made the choice, even years down the road, when that rejected candidate has accumulated a wealth of experience and insight and would be an excellent addition to the staff. In worst-case scenarios, the person, investigative project or road not taken can become forever unacceptable, even in the face of new and profoundly compelling information.

10. Anecdotal evidence is not always the best. Most people rely more on anecdotes than on statistics and facts and other more routine (and less interesting) baseline information when making important decisions. Voluminous research shows that people will give more weight to descriptive information or first-hand assessments that are shared than to quantitative facts, details and records.

Thus, in making a hiring decision or contemplating a promotion, the tendency would be to rely more heavily on verbal evaluations that co-workers and bosses offer up than on such things as documented numbers of published corrections on said person's stories, notations of disciplinary actions and similar records. While it is entirely possible anecdotal information that contradicts written records may be more accurate and valuable, it is also possible that it is not. And managers would do well to remember this very human tendency when they make hiring decisions.

Best Bosses

CHAPTER SIX

ARDLY a newsroom editor exists who doesn't aspire to be more competent, more respected, more admired.

And hardly a newsroom editor exists who knows quite how to go about accomplishing that.

That's partly because newsrooms have not exactly been breeding grounds for great managers, with few close-to-ideal supervisors to emulate. And it's partly because few new managers receive immediate management training, so they can't be certain which qualities are most crucial to their long-term success. Is patience the greatest virtue? Does experience matter more than anything else? Can an optimistic outlook make up for other failings?

Fact is, a lot of characteristics are very important to some employees and not at all important to others.

But a handful of qualities seem to resonate with virtually all employees. These are the ones that show up time after time on list after list. When a large set of employees is asked what they want from their supervisor, they consistently and almost inevitably will include these five in their short list. And any manager who hasn't already mastered these would do well to give them a great deal of attention.

1

1. Honesty. As your employee, I want to know I can count on you to level with me, about my performance, my future, the future of the paper — about everything. Supervisor-to-subordinate honesty is broader in scope than simply not telling a huge, flat-out lie. It is being frank, candid and forthcoming about the big things and the little things.

Some managers practice truth-avoidance in many of their dealings with staff, believing they're protecting people by not presenting the cold, hard reality. And while the intent might be honorable, the consequence is almost always quite awful — especially in the newsroom. For whatever diligence reporters might apply to ferreting out the truth as it relates to their beats is tripled when they are on the scent of matters internal.

If you have been guilty of any form of dishonesty, including that of simple omission, they will find out. And it undermines your effectiveness. If I work for you and discover I can't trust you on one matter, I begin to be suspicious of anything you say. And I will find ways to work around you. I'll also waste a lot of time assessing and reassessing what you've told me, and developing my own reality, which may not be the real reality.

Obviously there are times when managers can be in a fairly awkward position. You may be privy to some confidential information that, for whatever strategic or personnel reasons, others have decided should not be disclosed just yet. And you have to ride with that. But those instances are pretty rare. The situations where lack of honesty creates trouble are far more fundamental: not being completely frank with an employee whose ambition far surpasses her

abilities; not being forthright (but instead, silently miffed) with a person who consistently comes in 30 minutes late or takes two-hour lunches; not being honest with the reporter who regularly turns in unacceptable work.

It is not all that tough to broach those kinds of issues head-on. Always use direct language, don't couch anything in vague phrases, don't make someone spend hours interpreting what you meant, speak candidly and straightforwardly. Never use demeaning language and never veer off-course from the matter at hand, which is professional behavior, not personal flaws.

There's a big difference between being blunt and being brutal. It is possible to give bad news and discuss unpleasantness in ways that allow employees to keep their dignity.

There are dozens of opportunities every day for managers to be honest, and in many cases they dance around the truth. When you are asked a direct question about something you're not at liberty to discuss, or about which you have insufficient information, be honest about your reasons for not answering. Or when you make a mistake, own up to it quickly and apologetically without implying that some other unnamed person was responsible.

Most managers figure out ways to avoid discussing or to rose-color unhappy situations or foul-ups. It's human nature to do that. But we know from hundreds of thousands of employees that this is a tendency managers must fight. In the long run, dishonesty may well be the most direct path to self-destruction for managers.

2

2. Consistency and fairness. Consistency, for managers, means a lot of things: treating every employee the same way, behaving in a predictable manner, being even-handed, not making arbitrary exceptions to what most presume are the rules.

Employees want to know that the boss will not show favoritism, that there will not be any sudden bursts of unpredictable behavior, and that the ship will be kept on a fairly even keel. For there are few things in life more jarring than working for someone who shows preferential treatment, breaches the standards and doesn't give support, criticism, assignments and rewards in a fair and equitable manner.

Consistency doesn't mean that you can never change anything, that you cannot take some action that will shake up the status quo. You can make whatever modifications you wish as long as you're changing the framework, rules or standards for everyone, not just a handful of people. You also should make it clear from the outset that there are now some well-articulated new ways of doing things (instead of merely gliding into a New World Order without preamble, announcement or explanation).

3. Ability to communicate the mission and vision. This is a management quality that rarely showed up on anyone's list 15 years ago, but today it generally is found among the top three, no matter which employees are being surveyed.

Things in most organizations today change with such speed that supervisors must be capable of communicating pertinent information, directives and missions regularly and clearly. Employees know this. Managers — at least most who populate newsrooms — seem not to. It is a peculiarity of the newspaper business that most middle managers think the best contribution they can make is to work long and hard, roll with the punches and be willing to pick up the slack wherever it droops. While those are all good qualities, what generally happens is that supervisors get caught in the undertow of breaking news, reporters missing deadlines, the latest publisher demands and the three dozen other things that happen daily at any newspaper. So they don't take time to develop their own visions, cogitate about those top leadership has presented, and communicate all of this to the people who work for them.

As a result, employees often operate in the dark. If they have a success they may not know why it is a success and how to repeat it. If they have a failure, they may have no clue at all why it didn't fit with the larger picture of success because they don't know what that larger picture is.

Every manager must be the conduit and translator of all things vague and amorphous so they can help those who work for them get their bearings and head in the right direction. Even reporters, who tend to have less attachment to defined hierarchical roles than employees in other lines of work, recognize the importance of this ability in their leaders. In a 1999 Media Management Center research project, reporters and other non-supervisors listed good communication skills as one of the most important qualities of the best middle managers, and they cited lack of such skills as a defining characteristic of the worst middle managers.

4. Good organization/planning. If you're going to presume, as my boss, to exert some control over my work life, you must do it in an orderly, sensible way. I don't want scattershot orders, I don't want the notes I leave you lost in the landfill you call your desk, and I don't want you changing my deadline four times or promising me you'll edit my story at 4, then putting it off until 7.

This would seem one of the most basic and simple things for managers to understand and master: If you can keep the trains running on time, and if you can keep your promises, set priorities and stick to them, you will be doing the right thing by the newspaper and by the people who work for you.

And yet, a stunningly large number of newspaper middle managers do not bother to develop this skill. They use the excuse "news happens and we can't

be so over-planned that we can't react instantly" for not doing what they don't want to do, which is to tend to story budgets, set and meet deadlines, establish priorities and monitor progress all along the way.

A well-organized manager is prized by the people who work for her — even in newsrooms, where some level of chaos is regarded as normal and acceptable.

> Managers develop the ultimately destructive habits of being inaccessible, or cutting off people when they're speaking, or drawing conclusions based on insufficient information.

Good planning/organization was listed by non-supervisors at metro newspapers as the most important quality of the best middle managers, in the Media Management Center study. (Mid-size and small newspapers also included it in their top 10). And lack of organization and planning was despised. Non-supervisors, middle managers and top editors alike listed disorganized/poor planner as the No. 1 characteristic of the worst middle managers they worked with.

5. Good listener. When people cloak themselves in the mantle of manager, they suddenly abandon an activity that served them well from infancy to adulthood — listening. It is one of the more perplexing patterns of organizational ascendancy that otherwise rational people believe this new role requires that they speak more and hear less. Part of it has to do with the need to show themselves as decisive and unafraid of issuing orders. And part of it has to do with impatience. Seeking information, giving people a full hearing, and keeping your mind fully on the matter being presented is rarely efficient.

The benefit of careful listening is always, in the long haul, worth the investment, but it is easy to lose sight of that at the moment. So managers develop the hideously off-putting and ultimately destructive habits of being inaccessible, or cutting off people when they're speaking, or drawing conclusions based on insufficient information. This puts them in the bad position of being out of touch a great deal of the time, which inevitably leads to poor decision-making. Just as bad, it sends the message that they believe their employees' thoughts and ideas are of little value.

Staffs are very sensitive to this, not only for the understandably selfish reason that everyone wants to be listened to, but also because they understand the damage that can be done when managers issue directives, assign stories and approaches, define strategies and set goals without benefit of two-way discussion.

Newsroom personnel are dissimilar from other workers in many of their

preferences. For example, reporters put a much higher premium on their bosses' technical skills than workers in most other lines of work, and they value a workhorse style much more than virtually all others. Newsroom employees also have much greater contempt for pliable supervisors than most other workers do, and have far less tolerance for supervisors who are promotion-oriented.

In the final analysis, the composite perfect boss is impossible to build. There are dozens of qualities that are important to one employee but would have no appeal to another.

What much of the research has found is that when supervisors display a full measure of these five qualities, employees usually are able to work well with them and respect them, even when said managers are lacking in some other rather significant qualities. So focusing on developing these five would seem to make solid sense.

Hiring for the 2000s

CHAPTER SEVEN

IME was when hiring the best person meant snagging the one most qualified to do the job at hand.

These days, the old definition of qualified — possessing specific training, skills and experience — is not the only hiring consideration, or even, in some cases, the chief one.

Smart managers are beginning to hire strategically. They choose the person who not only is a reasonably good fit for the existing vacancy, but more important, who seems likely to adapt well to unforeseen changes in the organization or industry, eager to learn new skills or take on added responsibilities, and able to spark innovation.

Organization-development specialists have been urging strategic hiring for nearly two decades, pointing out that building an employee base that can cope with these ambiguous times will occur only when managers do two things: revise recruiting procedures and alter employee career-planning strategies. When recruiting and hiring, experts say, supervisors should give less weight to technical abilities and more to such personal characteristics as flexibility, a balanced life and an optimistic outlook. And on the career-planning front, it boils down mostly to trying to grow leaders who are strong communicators, with the ability to quickly and effectively translate changing missions and goals to employees and a strong predisposition for involving staff in goal-setting and decision-making.

While it is never possible to predict with absolute certainty which people will bring the qualities of adaptability, flexibility and optimism to the workplace, there are certain behaviors and characteristics that are strong indicators. Thus, part of the hiring process should be establishing which candidates exhibit the following:

■ **High self-esteem and confidence.** You want the person whose identity isn't completely tied to what she does or how she is regarded by others, the person who feels pretty good about herself no matter what the context or circumstances. Self-esteem and confidence are important because they allow a person to sail comfortably through the new learning, lateral moves, temporary transfers or added responsibilities (without promotion or salary increase) that low-esteem (and, usually, title-obsessed) employees find unacceptable. People with low self-esteem secretly dwell on what they can't do very well. And this manifests itself in two very different ways. The person may refuse to take risks, work toward promotion or accept positive feedback unquestioningly. Or she may display highly controlling behavior in an effort to hide the fact that some other employee knows at least as much as — and probably more than — she does.

■ **Varied non-work interests.** People who do volunteer work or attend classes or take interesting vacations have demonstrated that they are not afraid to put themselves in new situations or tackle unfamiliar things. They've

proven they're not into building safe, impenetrable little nests. Conversely, researchers have found that the person who derives most of his satisfaction from the workplace may find the constant chaos that marks most organizations — certainly today's newsrooms — extremely disconcerting, because a professional misstep may rock the very foundation of his sense of identity. So people with a great deal of engagement and satisfaction with life outside the office are likely to be able to move with the flow, whereas those bereft of off-the-job satisfaction are inclined toward workplace rigidity in order to preserve satisfaction.

■ **Large measure of natural curiosity.** People who ask many questions and are curious about people and their surroundings will never meet change or change directives with sullen acquiescence. When the actively curious are asked to take a new job or do things differently, they will ask the questions they need answered to understand the rationale behind the request. They will analyze the answers to reach insights about the relative gains of doing the

Avoid the person with a very rigid career track in her head.

requested thing, and they'll seek enough information to be able to take the change directive to a higher level. They will contribute in another important way: They'll challenge current and proposed ways of doing things, an invaluable quality.

■ **Flexibility about career.** You want to hire someone with the ability to imagine herself in a variety of company roles in coming years. Avoid the person with a very rigid career track in her head. While goals are good and ambition laudable, immutable goals and a precise track and time frame for reaching them are unrealistic in today's world. The person with an inflexible notion of what she aims to be can be too fixated on the future to deal optimally with the present and, more important, will never be able to settle for detours or parallel planes. It's better to hire the person with a strong immediate goal, who wants very much to fill the vacancy and can give solid reasons for that, but also who acknowledges that other jobs in the organization interest her or would at some point in the future.

■ **Psychological hardiness.** There are people whose emotional make-up prepares them well to deal with life's — and work's — upheavals and stresses. In a longitudinal study from 1975 to 1982, researchers Suzanne Kobassa and Salvatore Maddi found there was a clear attitudinal difference between workers who had high stress and high illness, and those who were high stress/low illness. Specifically, high stress/low illness workers were much more committed

to the various parts of their lives (family, church, friends, volunteering), felt a greater sense of control over their lives, and experienced more positive feelings about challenge. The high stress/high illness employees were much more alienated, felt more powerless, and saw change as more a threat than a challenge. The researchers labeled the constellation of qualities in the high stress/low illness people as "psychological hardiness." They have an internal fortitude that allows them to take life's stresses in stride and to have faith they can influence things positively and alter situations others might find overwhelming.

■ **Proactive problem-solvers.** These are people who tend to their own mistakes and their own futures, who identify problems before they become debilitating to the organization, and who offer suggestions for minimizing the damage. Their opposites are dependent employees, a class of people who are absolute anathema to forward-thinking organizations. Dependency in an organization shows up in many forms, but it is always related to what people don't do: They don't make decisions, they don't initiate, and they don't take charge of their own career advancement. This sort of behavior — waiting for someone else to solve the problem, make the first move or decide the future — is extremely common in organizations, and according to some experts may be the most common characteristic among employees exasperated and angry about stalled careers and unfulfilled expectations. Dependent personalities should be avoided at all cost, for their disappointment almost always leads to bitterness, and their personal inertia almost always has a negative impact on their co-workers. In the worst case, they can poison the attitudes and behaviors of an entire department.

Sharing the Thrill

CHAPTER EIGHT

OU’RE revved. You’re psyched.

You’ve spent the past several days at API or Poynter or the Media Management Center. Or maybe you’ve been to the annual convention of features editors, or managing editors or sports editors or whatever it is you’re a part of. Now you’re ready to go back home and put the best of what you’ve heard to work.

You blast into your office Monday morning with notes and plans of how to make it a better department, a better newspaper.

You’re all but vibrating with enthusiasm as you stride into the newsroom, pull out your notes and present your thinking to the assembled masses.

And you’re met by a staff that will not make eye contact with you. You’re up there pulsating with good ideas and good intentions, and they’re exchanging glances with one another. You’re more committed, more focused, and more convinced that you can improve things than you’ve been in years, and they’re shifting in their seats.

It’s not exactly open resistance. It’s more like flatline passivity.

It’s daunting. It’s demoralizing. It extinguishes all those feelings of strength and potential you’ve managed to build during your days away, and it all but ensures there’s little chance you’ll manage to put any of these things into play.

The fact is, it was all but predestined that the folks back home would react this way.

The simple and obvious, but often overlooked fact is that the staff didn’t have the same experience the past four or five days that you did. You’re jazzed not only by the strength of the idea you’re taking back, but by the environment that allowed you more than 13 seconds to realize it was a good idea. You’ve been in an environment that gave you enough distance from your usual day-to-day activities that you could have a clear mind and discuss with your peers the upsides and downsides of the ideas floating about.

The staff, of course, is still in the same condition you were last week before you set off for this seminar: frazzled, frustrated and focused on the matters at hand. It doesn’t matter how much they respect you. It doesn’t matter how culturally disposed to change they are. You will get some resistance.

You’ll have a much easier go of it if you can remind yourself to keep this fact in mind: You were away and they were not. So it would be nothing short of a miracle if acceptance was immediate.

Don’t give up

When there isn’t instant acceptance, the editor/manager often loses enthusiasm and backs away. Indeed, all the research shows that the reason most good ideas don’t get implemented is because the idea-carrier doesn’t get sufficient early emotional or intellectual support. Everyone wants acceptance of his or her ideas. And when that doesn’t happen promptly, it is normal to back off a

little, lick your wounds, and maybe figure out how to reconstitute the idea or rally support for it. Days turn into weeks, 15 office crises occur, and suddenly the great idea doesn't seem so important anymore. It becomes a back-burner item. And, eventually, a forgotten item.

How do you keep this from happening? Two things:

It's not usually change per se that people hate. It's change that is forced, or presented for no good reason.

First, shed that expectation of instant support, no matter how obviously worthwhile your new idea may be. Accept that most staffs provide little or no support in these circumstances. So you can't take it personally. You must keep up your resolve.

Second, have a timetable — a relatively short timetable in your head — for implementation. Whenever you're in a situation that threatens to drag on indefinitely, you lose steam and thunder and passion. But if you know in your head that the implementation process will go on for two months max, even the darkest days of wheel-spinning and the intermittent waves of group contempt for whatever plan you're proposing are not as discouraging.

These two steps will help you keep your head in the right place.

Now, to get staff buy-in, it is important to understand and use certain rules of organizational behavior to your advantage.

Seek input

Without exception, the employee who feels she has had some say in the plan is far more motivated and committed than the worker who does not. It is not clear from the research whether this is because she was made privy early on to all the behind-the-scenes thinking, and so is better equipped to do what needs to be done to make the plan work, or if it is because she feels some ownership in the idea and therefore is more determined to do her part. It really doesn't matter much why she's now committed. The important thing is she is.

So when you go back with your grand idea, talk to your whole staff about it. Say you think it has potential in your department. Then ask them for their thinking about what it will take to make it work. Allow them to modify the idea somewhat to meet the needs of your department or your community. It's not usually change per se that people hate. It's change that is forced, or presented for no good reason or with a rigidity that makes them feel they have no

say. So tell them the goal and let them have some say over the ways and means of reaching it.

Be specific

Keep in mind that the more specific the idea or goal, the greater its chance of success. The reason is very practical. When employees can quickly process and grasp how to apply the matter on the table to their day-to-day work, they will tend to take fairly rapid steps to apply it.

Unfortunately, what very often happens when an editor goes off to a conference is that she returns with a grand sweeping vision of what should take place back home. And while big sweeping ideas of huge scope are wonderful things, they don't have much place in the lives of the worker bees. So you've got to break ideas into small, precise, manageable pieces that seem achievable, and that seem like something other than an impossible dream. And, if even one person doesn't get it, you've got to figure out how to use different words or different examples or break it into smaller increments to ensure that he does get it.

Now you're at the point where you're inviting the staff to have some say over the means to achieve some very specific goals.

They'll do this with much greater speed and far less resistance if you provide an explanation of four things:

The four P's

Purpose. Why are we doing this? You work with intelligent people who want to know the rationale. They need to intellectualize end results. They must be able to come to the conclusion that this thing you're pushing isn't just a desire to join in on the latest industry fad. They need to know what, in your mind, doing this thing will accomplish. Will it connect you more with readers? Will it streamline the operation? Will it improve the quality of stories that appear in the paper?

Picture. How does this thing fit in with the overall vision of your department or newspaper? Again, because they are smart folks, they need to see things not in isolation but in the large context of a universe. They need to grasp some logical way this matter connects with the larger issues they know the newspaper is confronting.

Plan. This is the how-we're-going-to-get-from-here-to-there discussion. Although they're the ones who are coming up with the means for reaching the end, they need to know certain things. For example, will this require more resources or a reallocation of resources? It's unfair to have them spend a month creating a plan that will instantly be shot down because it requires four more reporters. If more training or coaching is needed, will that be provided?

You need to share every eventuality with them as you present the overall scheme, so they will know the parameters within which everyone must work to create a plan.

Part. What part will each person have to play in this? Once the plan is entering its final form, you must talk with every single staffer to make sure he has a clear sense of how this New World Order will affect his work.

Very often we find that people aren't actively resisting a new way of doing things, they just haven't been able to translate exactly what it means to their day-to-day duties. They don't know how to apply the new frames to their old patterns and habits. You have to be the translator.

Clearly, this is all quite basic and simple. Many managers do all of these things quite regularly and purely intuitively. But a great deal of research seems to suggest that the degree of success a manager has in implementing a new idea correlates directly with the degree to which each of these principles is followed.

Good management is more important today than ever, given the rapidly changing landscape and a highly competitive job market exacerbated by fierce raids on newsroom personnel by new media.

Managers who comprehend this, and take steps to understand the rationale behind sometimes perplexing employee behavior, can be much more effective in getting the results they want and keeping good people. It is hoped these articles have provided some of the information and tools they need to accomplish that.

Sharon Peters

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MANAGING NEWSROOM EMPLOYEES: II