Leading v. Managing
Managers put out fires, true leaders light them

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Newsrooms across the country are facing new challenges from new forms of competition, technology changes and higher demands from an increasingly busy reader. While copy editors continue to uphold balance, fairness, accuracy, objectivity and completeness in stories, technology has given the copy desk new responsibilities. As a consequence, the responsibilities of those who lead have grown. As the organization has become complex, the demands of effective leadership and management have become more demanding. Yet journalists often are promoted for technical skills, so they tend to provide too much technical direction, not enough coaching.

Studies

• 2001 ASNE survey
Newsroom employees value three characteristics in their immediate supervisor: regular recognition, coaching and clear goals. Employees gave their supervisors the lowest score possible for coaching, providing constructive criticism and assisting in goal development.

• 2000 Readership Institute at Northwestern University study
Key deficits in newsroom leadership are lack of coaching and development, poor hiring practices and the absence of regular, effective performance evaluations.

• 1995 study of newspaper copy editors
Feelings of personal accomplishment were higher when copy editors thought their bosses calmly dealt with uncertainty, were persuasive rather than dictatorial, had strong convictions, clearly defined roles and job expectations, actively exercised good leadership, resolved conflicts, had cordial relationships with upper management and allowed for initiative, decision and action among employees.

Getting it right

How and what you say

No news is not good news. A manager's misplaced time and attention will not be viewed as a neutral act.

How you say something is as important as what you say.

People forget or misinterpret written statements; true leaders bring memos to life.

Negotiate solutions rather than dictate and translate corporate goals into working visions. (It is no longer enough to simply tell an employee to take on a new task, you need their buy-in; why employees fail to complete or provide surface results on a task is often a failing of a manager to give the task appropriate meaning related to the larger structure of the corporation.)

Developing and coaching

Allow employees to reinvent the best way to do their jobs by coaching, rather than dictating tasks.

The Readership Institute study recommends that newsrooms offer at least 35 to 80 hours a year in training. Try job rotations, mentoring, team projects, brown bags.

Schedule meeting with staffer to identify top personal priorities, determine which fit most closely with the organization's goals and pick one or two to work on and revise over time.

Strategic planning

Leaders are true visionaries who are able to dream and, most importantly, translate that dream to others in the organization and be able to enact it, measure it, revise it.

Being able to anticipate change before change happens means controlling your own destiny and that of your staff.

Respond to problems through analysis and suggest a solution as part of presenting the problem.

Expand knowledge outside the newsroom. (Newspapers too frequently promote within their own departments and journalists' careers rarely include experience in advertising or promotions, for example.)

Managing horizontally and vertically

Employees feel more secure in the jobs if his or her boss gets along with their boss and other managers.

Foster a culture of inclusion and accountability.

Good managers see success in their ability to influence others rather than boss.

Value team success over personal success.

Be the instigator of ideas, if not the creator.

Encourage ideas to bubble up from anyone on the desk.

Resolving conflicts

Confront conflict head-on.

Focus on solutions, goals, methods, not blame and personalities.

Define problems in terms of needs, not solutions.

Don't take conflict among managers to staff; don't take conflict with employees to other employees.

Clear performance expectations

Review process

Clear objectives

Open-ended, not a list of functions

Must be objective, factual: Describe behavior, not personal qualities

Measurable

Soul of a leader and manager

Paradoxical skills reflect a balance of cognitive and emotional skills required to balance cultural side of business with the technical.

Intuitive and artful as well as rational; work with people directly while delegating; show concern for employees but take disciplinary action when needed; participate at times but stand back at others.

Manage themselves through own training and feedback through 360s or 180s.

Myers-Briggs identifies four key leadership personality indicators: True leaders tend to be ingenious innovators who always see new possibilities; they aim to understand rather than judge people; and they embrace new challenges and often are bored by routine. They are prone to diving too deeply into any project and may fail to finish or follow-through on projects in their eagerness to embrace the next challenge.

See themselves as agents of change and leaders, not followers.

Risk takers who are able to stand against the status quo in the larger interest of the organization (studies have shown seven out of 10 people won't speak up if they think they will contradict their boss).

Personalities are not malleable, but attitudes, behaviors and management approaches are flexible.

Lifelong learners who talk about, rather than try to hide, their mistakes and view them as learning experiences. They seek their own development.

Know all employees are different with own set of drives; understand personal filters.

Don't just e-mail.