



Section 3

Creating a Positive Culture

All organizations have a culture—part climate, part custom, part values. The culture can inspire excellence or destroy initiative. It can encourage collaboration or reward confrontation. The culture is largely established and nurtured by an organization's leadership. In a newsroom, that means the news director.

When Lee Giles was first approached about becoming a news director, he wasn't sure he wanted the job. "The newsroom was a place of infighting and backbiting," he says. "People who were afraid of getting fired were inhibited from doing their jobs." Giles overcame his misgivings and went on to lead the WISH-TV newsroom in Indianapolis for 35 years. One of his first tasks,

however, was to change the newsroom culture.

"I wanted a team working together so it could be fun as well as work," Giles says. To get there, he became the newsroom's No. 1 cheerleader, dispensing frequent praise and showing enthusiasm for the work. He was also careful not to micromanage the staff. "Give people creative room to do the job," Giles says. "Don't be on their backs all the time."

Giles knew his station's culture well. He had worked there as a reporter, weekend anchor, producer, and on the assignment desk before moving up to news director. A news director coming into a new station, however, will need to assess the existing culture before

deciding whether changes need to be made. Former KSTP-TV news director Scott Libin warns, “It takes more than reading anonymous smear sites (Internet chat rooms gossiping about the journalism business) to understand a newsroom’s culture.” You need to talk to the people who work at the station.

Edgar Schein, a professor of management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an expert on organizational psychology and culture, says that, more than anything, culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions. Those assumptions guide decisions and actions in a group and may be so deeply imbedded, for better or worse, that they are taken for granted.

The role of the news director as a leader is to unearth any negative assumptions and replace them with constructive alternatives. For example, at some television stations, staffers assumed that photographers worked for reporters in gathering stories instead of *with* them. It fell to smart news directors to change those assumptions. With careful and consistent attention and reinforcement, they advocated “reporting in teams,” something that has today become a way of life at stations with strong connections to the National Press Photographers Association.

Observe your staff in light of these questions to gain insight into your newsroom’s

THE MANAGER’S ROLE IN A POSITIVE CULTURE

Model positive
behavior

Encourage open
communication

Reward
accomplishments

Be accessible and
consistent

Hold yourself
accountable

culture: Are staffers defensive and turf-conscious? Or do they pitch in and collaborate? “One symptom of a dysfunctional newsroom is when people admit they saw an error but figured somebody else would catch it,” Libin says. “In a healthy newsroom ... quality control is everybody’s job.”

When the Reader-ship Institute at Northwestern University’s Media Management Center conducted a formal assessment of newspaper cultures, it found that most have a defen-

sive culture, where employees protect their status and security either aggressively or passively. Staff members tend to be perfectionists, working long hours to meet narrow objectives, and confrontation often rules. According to the Institute, that’s not the most productive way to run a newsroom. The ideal culture, found in a minority of newsrooms, is constructive. “Constructive cultures encourage members to work to their full potential,” the assessment report stated, “resulting in high levels of motivation, satisfaction, [and] teamwork.”

Changing the Culture

To move a newsroom toward a more constructive culture, managers need to model positive behavior, encourage open communication and reward accomplishments. They need to be accessible, accountable and consistent.



“I’ve visited places where I love the newsroom culture—but nobody has explained to me how to create one, and more important—how to change a culture.”

NEWS DIRECTOR AT RTNDF BRAINSTORMING SESSION



“The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been.”

HENRY KISSINGER

The news director sets the tone for the newsroom every day. Something as simple as a cheerful “good morning” and a polite goodbye can help to create an atmosphere of respect and appreciation. If there’s open warfare in the newsroom, however, it will take more than a smile to begin to turn things around. “Identify cliques and try to penetrate them,” advises Fred Young, Hearst-Argyle Television senior vice president of news. “Figure out who’s for you and against you. Be a cheerleader at the same time as [being] a law enforcement officer.” Former news director Marci Burdick, senior vice president of broadcasting and cable for Schurz Communications, agrees. “It’s OK to say there’s a new sheriff in town and the rules have changed—and the rules have to be the same for everybody.”

Favoritism—real or imagined—is a newsroom negative. People who perceive they are being treated unfairly often become less productive. Scheduling issues, for example, can lead to resentment and outright hostility. “I’m a big believer than you can’t screw with people’s personal lives,” Burdick says. “Little things like days off really matter.”

A constructive newsroom culture also keeps everyone in the loop. Regular staff meetings, in addition to daily editorial meetings, are essential to make sure all employees understand the direction of the station and the goals of the newsroom. Weekly memos can reinforce the message. “Because newsrooms churn so much, it’s an ongoing effort,” says

Janet Evans, assistant news director at KRLD-AM in the Dallas-Fort Worth market.

At News 8 Austin, news director Kevin Benz works hard to keep communication flowing. “We initiate debates and invite everyone to participate,” he says. “The most important thing is to make clear that no matter who you are on the job, your voice is appreciated and respected because each individual has a different perspective.” Benz believes that when people feel free to discuss, argue and dissent, the story selection improves. To make that happen, he says, he’s had to teach the managers to be open-minded and really listen to what others have to say. “No shaken heads, no rolled eyes,” he says. “It doesn’t work if people think the boss is right all the time.”

Former news director Paul Dughi, now general manager of KNDO-TV and KNDU-TV in Yakima and Kennewick, WA, respectively, says he used the morning meeting to explain his values. “I would pick a story that gave me an opportunity to explain things philosophically,” he says. “Find one thing that people did well, and show-

case the behavior you’re trying to get other people to model.” At KSTP-TV in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Scott Libin began each morning meeting by celebrating a success from the day before. “Even the career cynics who were rolling their eyes initially felt it was cool to see their work held up,” he says.

Building this kind of positive and inclusive culture is a slow process in which every small step counts.

VALUES OF A CONSTRUCTIVE CULTURE

Quality

Creativity

Cooperation

Openness

Risk-taking

Learning and growth

The following principles will help along the way:

- **Share decision-making** Put some of the power in employees' hands. Encourage everyone to attend editorial meetings.
- **Meet the newsroom's needs** Ask every single person in the newsroom what they need to do their job. If you can't afford things right away, develop a priority list and make sure everyone knows when a need has been met.
- **Stay positive** Keep your expectations high and offer tough, constructive criticism, but don't do it in a mean-spirited manner. You want people to feel they are learning, not being attacked.
- **Encourage mentoring** Enlist your senior staff as newsroom mentors. New employees often look up to veterans and will listen more closely to what they say.
- **Keep the door open** Don't bury yourself in the bureaucracy of management. Make yourself visible, and encourage your employees to communicate with you throughout the day.
- **Create and maintain systems**
Newsrooms need effective systems that support the culture.

Hiring, promotion and training also play a role in newsroom culture. KRLD-AM regularly offers training to employees. "It sets a culture where you never stop learning and growing," Evans says. At WHBQ-TV in Memphis, TN, news director Ken Jobe says part of the culture is to promote staff from within. "They feel rewarded from a journalistic standpoint." It's a useful point to stress when recruiting new employees, as well. "It shows people they have the ability to move up," Jobe says. Thor Wasbotten, former news director at KGUN-TV in Phoenix and now at Pennsylvania State University, cautions that hiring from within can backfire if not done correctly. Managers promoted from within need support, training and resources similar to that offered to new people walking in the door. All too often, this is overlooked.

Diversity also is an important part of many newsrooms' culture. "You need a variety of opinions," Jobe says, "Married, single, older, younger,

Twelve Questions for a Healthy Newsroom Culture

The Gallup Organization has trademarked a set of 12 employee survey questions that it says are terrific predictors of a successful workplace culture. The details are outlined in *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman of The Gallup Organization. According to Gallup, "Employee agreement with these 12 questions consistently correlates to higher employee retention, higher customer satisfaction, higher productivity, and higher profitability in all kinds of companies in a wide variety of industries." These 12 questions can serve as an instant health check for your newsroom:

1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the equipment and materials I need to do my job right.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor or someone at work seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission/purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year, I have had opportunities to learn and grow.



Section 3

white, black.” Many news managers make a concerted effort to recruit and mentor diverse job candidates as a way of reinforcing the newsroom’s commitment to diversity. Some newsrooms, like KRON-TV in San Francisco, have set up committees to discuss and monitor diversity in staff and content.

The staff-developed job expectations, or “automatics,” at WTSP-TV in Tampa, FL, have become part of that newsroom’s culture. (See “Automatics,” under the Conducting Feedback and Evaluations section.) Such clearly defined job expectations show “the newsroom’s professionalism and dedication,” says news director Lane Michaelsen. “We discuss them before hiring, and it can be a selling point.”

Building Morale

KRLD-AM’s Evans says she tries to live by three simple rules: “Be fair, be flexible and have fun.” Keeping it fun at her station means celebrating staff birthdays and providing food on holidays. It’s good for morale, which establishes a positive newsroom culture. Many morale boosters cost little or nothing:

- **Break bread** Take an employee out to lunch. It could even be fast food, but it shows you care. Be sure to remember people who work nights and weekends by buying them a pizza to show how much you value their work. Provide food on holidays.
- **Send notes** Mail thank-you notes and holiday cards to employees and their families.
- **Loosen up and have fun** Consider a staff picnic or music after the newscast. Celebrate birthdays and employee anniversaries.

WBAL-AM news director Mark Miller says having fun is a hallmark of his newsroom — and a selling point to new hires. “We all get along because we all laugh at each other,” he says. “We don’t pay them enough *not* to have fun.”

An army travels on its stomach, the saying goes, but it’s true of newsrooms as well. Food is a sure-fire morale builder. At WGAL-TV in Lancaster, PA, news director Dan O’Donnell often cooks for the crew—from holiday turkeys to Saturday breakfasts before training sessions. Providing food during big stories is always a welcome gesture. It’s a good idea to make food available to crews in the field as well as the staff in the newsroom.

At WHBQ-TV, Jobe keeps a big candy dish in his office and fills it often. “It’s easy for a news director to be isolated from little problems,” he says. When people come in for candy, he talks to them about things other than work. “That lets me hear what the problems are.”

Maintaining the Culture

To keep the culture on track, managers need to lead by example. It’s not enough to talk the talk; you have to walk it, too. If the goal is a newsroom culture that encourages risk-taking, the news director can’t second-guess every decision. If the goal is a newsroom culture that respects a balance between work and personal life, the news director can’t spend 18 hours a day in the newsroom.

Encourage teamwork by breaking down the walls between work groups and departments. At KSTP-TV, former news director Scott Libin says, the rule was that no “discrepancy report” (a report filed after a newscast when something goes wrong) could be put in writing until it was discussed with the people involved. “It’s harder to judge someone when you’re looking them in the eye,” Libin says. “People began to establish relationships that did not exist before.”



“The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order.”

ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD, ENGLISH MATHEMATICIAN AND PHILOSOPHER, 1861-1947



“A good leader inspires others with confidence in him; a great leader inspires them with confidence in themselves.”

ANONYMOUS

Another way to maintain the culture is to set high standards, but don't be afraid to admit your fallibility. WBAL-AM's Miller believes strongly in the value of self-deprecating humor. “The boss needs to laugh about himself in front of people,” he says. “It shows we're human.”

Do Your Systems Support Your Culture?

According to Jill Geisler of The Poynter Institute, one of the most important aspects to maintaining a culture is to check your systems because systems reflect chain of command, work flow, priorities, departmental connections, expenditures, communication and quality control. If you've really worked at it, they reflect your values, too. “I think systems are the place where leadership and management intersect, where leaders make certain that their vision isn't just

philosophy but, rather, a part of the everyday engine of the business,” Geisler says.

Edgar Schein, in his book *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, says, “One of the most powerful mechanisms that founders, leaders, managers or even colleagues have available for communicating what they believe or what they care about is what they systematically pay attention to. This can mean anything from what they notice and comment on to what they measure, control, reward and in other ways systematically deal with.”

Geisler advises newsrooms to check their systems to see whether the culture that they claim exists is truly embedded in their daily routines. If you can't discern it, then those systems could be defeating the very culture you hope to build. “In organizations, we get what we plan for (or fail to plan for), what we prioritize, and what we reward,” Geisler says.