

July 21, 2008

Reflections on Leadership

Management Tips for the Newsroom

Welcome to "Reflections on Leadership," a weekly essay on newsroom management produced by Newsroom Leadership Group partners Edward and Cynthia Miller.

Even Best Intentions Can Kill Creativity

By Edward Miller

Edward D. Miller is a former editor and publisher of *The Morning Call* in Allentown, PA, and an affiliate of The Poynter Institute. He is a cofounder of the Society of Newspaper Design and the First Amendment Coalition of Pennsylvania. He has served as a Pulitzer Prize juror.

Learn to develop innovation, not squash it

Some leaders have a knack for killing creativity despite (or perhaps because of) their good intentions. News organizations are filled with creative people, but managers need to learn how to develop and deploy that creativity. All too often, however, they do just the opposite. Here are three common "creativity killers."

Interference is easy to spot. Look for the editor tinkering with the front-page layout late in the production cycle. It doesn't need his attention, but he feels compelled to play the role of overseer.

You might find that same editor working over copy on deadline, making subjective and usually unnecessary changes. Instead of mastering the techniques of front-end coaching that would have produced a better story (and a better writer) in the first place, the editor overrides the coaching and editing of others. The humiliation felt by the writer and the assigning editor responsible for the copy may be modest, but it is cumulative. Over time, both will resent the senior editor's pointless and ineffective interference.

All this is done in the name of "good journalism," even though others could have done the journalism just as well without the interference.

By interfering, editors make two mistakes: They fail to do their own job, and they prevent others from learning theirs. This inhibits innovation. People who need to build confidence by increasing their own competence hold back and wait for the boss to intervene. After all, why take responsibility if the boss is going to second-guess your decisions?

Over-control is a first cousin to interference. It is micromanaging the work of subordinates, dominating meetings instead of listening, interfering inappropriately with the plans of colleagues, holding the budget cards too close to the vest, "reserving" decisions instead of sharing responsibilities.

Here's why over-control is bad management. When you ask people what they want from bosses, two answers prevail: autonomy and support. It's as if they were saying, *"Give me a hand, but get off my back."*

That's a bit of a paradox. People know that to achieve their goal of independent competence, they must first be dependent on help from others. When people ask for "support," they don't mean interference or control; they mean the learning and resources necessary to reach the next level of performance. Without the support that leads to autonomous competence, creativity suffers.

Critiques might be the most deadly of the three "killers." You can often deflect interference and over-control; the offending editor simply can't be everywhere all the time. But criticism's sting is long-range and enduring:

- A sarcastic comment at the morning news meeting inevitably will find its target out in the newsroom.
- A snap judgment putting down someone's story idea will inhibit future suggestions.

In a climate of critiques, people develop defensive strategies to avoid judgments and protect self-esteem. Soon, the emotional risk of initiative outweighs any potential gain. What's conventional and safe is reinforced; innovative is inhibited.

How can editors change these habits?

Heed the words of Gen. George Patton, who once advised his officers: *"Don't tell the GI how to do something. Tell him what you want done, and he'll figure out how to do it."*

Learn your own job. I can name a hundred managers who are still doing their old job because they haven't figured out how to do the new one. Stop meddling and start learning. When in doubt, ask the people you work with how they expect you to lead. Their answers might steer you straight.

Stop critiquing. Try it for a week. Don't carp about anything. Too difficult? Okay, try it for a day, but on that day look for ways people are performing well, and take the time to tell them in a way appropriate to each person. The break from critiques will be enlightening to you and refreshing for your staff.

Strengthen autonomy and support. You have a lot of talented people in your newsroom, but everyone needs *support* (especially resources and opportunities to grow) and *autonomy* (freedom to innovate). Your job as a leader is to provide both, not to meddle and micromanage.

Across the country I'm watching buyouts, budget cuts and hiring freezes take their toll. A leader's temptation in stressful times is to take charge by taking over. Bad move. Take

command by teaching others how to get better. Provide the resources, especially learning and leadership development, and then let good people do the creative things they are capable of. Your colleagues need you to teach, not to control.

Trailheads:

"How to Kill Creativity" by Teresa M. Amabile. *Harvard Business Review*, September 1998.