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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.

Urge to Control May Feel Necessary, But It's Harmful

By Edward Miller

Controlling behavior gets in the way of performance

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Why do managers feel the need to control? For many, it's a natural companion to their sense of responsibility:

- *"If I'm ultimately responsible for this team, then I must have a hand in everything it does."*
- *"It's my job to ensure quality."*
- *"I have a young, inexperienced staff, so I must be hands-on."*

In these cases, the motives are laudable, but the consequences of equating responsibility with control are often dispirited colleagues and, eventually, diminished performance.

For other editors, a fear of failure leads to defensive behaviors:

- "If something goes wrong, I have to account for it."*
- "Every time I let people run with the ball, they drop it and I get blamed."*

It's every editor's job to follow the flow of content from idea generation through assignments, line editing, page design and on to final production. That's what we get paid for. But "follow the flow" should mean oversight, not interference and over-control. To maintain oversight that avoids over-control, editors need to provide:

- skills training for everyone on the staff, and
- management training for those journalists and editors responsible for each stage of the flow.

Only when subordinates are thoroughly trained and adequately supported can editors have more confidence in the outcomes, and therefore, more self-restraint.

A few years ago, I was leading a Poynter seminar for managing editors when one of the participants-the late Larry Young of Dallas-slammed his hand on the table and shouted: *"I*

get it!" When we asked Larry what it was he got, he said: *"I get it! My job is to teach, not to control."* I've repeated that story a hundred times because Larry did get it exactly right. It's impossible to control everything in a newsroom, so senior editors must first learn to teach, and then cede control to those who need it.

This doesn't mean that editors responsible for content need to be uninvolved. Here are some tips on keeping the balance:

1. Gen. George Patton had the right idea when he said, *"Don't tell the GI how to do something; tell him what you want done, and he'll figure out how to do it."* This means you first have to know what you want. If editors lack a clear set of goals for themselves and their colleagues, their instructions will be vague or contradictory. *"I want better writing in this section"* is not a goal. It's a prayer, and one that's unlikely to be answered. It can become a goal only when it has clear, mutually agreed-upon standards. Editors who don't know what they want can't possibly guide others, and their interference is often an attempt to figure out on the fly what they really want.

2. Breaking tasks into distinct chunks, each with its own interim deadline, produces better results than imposing a single long-term deadline. Whether the project stretches over a day or a year, be sure to check in at the predetermined interim deadlines. That's when a specific part of the task is supposed to be finished and ready for evaluation and mid-course corrections. Anything more frequent is interference.

3. Follow the lead of good writing coaches who know that there are two conversations that must go well if the coaching is to be successful. The first is the chat before someone begins an assignment. Do both editor and writer agree on what that assignment is likely to produce? The second conversation immediately follows the reporting and determines how the story objectives have changed as a result of the reporting. When these conversations go well, the story usually turns out well.

To cede control, editors need to have confidence in those around them. Continuous training is one way to build that confidence.