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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.

## Evaluation Begins by Analyzing the Job Itself

By Edward Miller

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### *Define a job's tasks, attributes before giving feedback*

Is your newsroom stuck with annual performance evaluations? Can you or the HR folks who inflicted this system point to a single example of improved performance as a result?

Most corporate systems fail on four counts:

- They are annual. A HR friend once wrote that *"evaluating performance once a year is a bit like dieting each year on your birthday and expecting to lose weight."* Evaluations must be continuous.
- Most performance reviews follow a formula, often a scale of 1-5 in which No. 3 is something like "performs satisfactorily." Just what every journalists wants carved on the tombstone.
- The reviews are too often subjective, top-down judgments based on inadequate information, notions and biases.
- Appraisals can be examples of what psychologists call the "fundamental attribution error," which predicts that when things go wrong we tend to attribute causes to the actors rather than the situations or systems in which they work.

Here are four steps any manager can follow to provide useful feedback and evaluation.

1. Agree on a **job description** specific to each person. No two jobs are exactly alike, so begin with conversations with people about the ways their jobs are unique.

2. Agree on the **tasks** and **attributes** of each job. Any job can be defined by a specific set of tasks. For example, beat reporting involves:

- *Reporting*: Generating ideas, observing and analyzing events and data
- *Writing*: Drafting a story and then editing and revising

- *Collaborating with others*: Working with team editors and members as well as with other crafts (research, graphics, photo, etc.)
- *Managing a beat*: Studying trends, developing sources, generating ideas, coaching other beat reporters and editors

In this stage of the evaluation, a reporter and assigning editor should draft a list of tasks specific to that reporter. The list needs to be no more detailed than the one outlined above. What's important is the mutual understanding of what defines the job.

To perform a particular job, people need more than skills and experience. They need personal attributes appropriate to the work. For beat reporters, those might include:

- *Accuracy*: A fundamental competence
- *Integrity*: An essential attitude and ethic
- *Timeliness*: The ability to meet deadlines and anticipate trends
- *Consistency*: Dependable quality and quantity
- *Initiative*: Going beyond the ordinary

During this stage, the reporter and the assigning editor should draft two lists:

- General attributes that apply at all times (Accuracy would meet that test)
- Specific attributes for each task (Initiative would rank high for source development)

Agreement about the nature of the job and the attributes required to do it well must precede any appraisal of a person's performance. Only then can you begin conversations about identifying the learning that will lead to higher performance.

3. Agree on **individual goals**. Like the job description, this list will be unique to each person and should include personal as well as professional goals.

4. Agree on **team goals** and **each person's role** within the team. Journalism is a team sport. If individual goals and performance are not compatible with the team's goals, the team's performance will be diminished.

Notice each of the four steps begins with an imperative: "*Agree on.*" Appraisal systems dictated from above fail when individuals have no hand in their design. Leaders need to get agreement on how the evaluation game will be played before they assess performance. Otherwise, defensiveness and resistance will dominate.

**Next week**: In the next essay, we'll review how to make the actual feedback conversations go well.