

Aug. 18, 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.

Five Questions for Individual Evaluations

By Edward Miller

Involvement and trust go hand-in-hand

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.

Performance appraisals can be intimidating on both sides of the table. For the one being appraised, it means someone else is sitting in judgment, seemingly eager to find fault. For the evaluator, appraisal seems like a lose-lose proposition. Do it poorly and nothing is gained; do it well and the other person is likely to be defensive and unresponsive.

How can leaders avoid all the potential negatives while helping others see what they need to do to improve performance? Here are five questions that can serve as a template for the process. Let each question open a conversation, not an indictment. Listen to the answers and let what you hear move you forward.

1. *What do you do well?* This is more difficult to answer than it might seem. Someone must trust that the next question is not, "*In what ways are you a screw up?*" What's more, you're trying to uncover assets and characteristics that the person might not be aware of, such as their ability to organize work efficiently, their upbeat influence on others or their willingness to teach newcomers the ropes. Traditional evaluations tend to miss these "strengths of character and habit" that are so important.

2. *What would you like to do more consistently well?* Notice the operative word here is "*well.*" It assumes someone can do something, and even do it well. It also assumes that performance could become more consistent. By letting the person name that "something" as an asset (however meager) instead of a liability, the person will be more likely to explore the central issue of achieving a higher level of competence.

3. *What learning would you like to do?* The phrasing may appear a bit awkward, but that's

intentional. It's less confrontational than asking "*What do you need to learn?*" It challenges the person to assess their own skills and performance (preferable to your doing it for them) and to begin to consider a learning plan.

4. *What's in the way of your learning?* This is a risky question because the answer might be "*You are.*" Other likely answers might deal with lack of time, training or resources. What's important is your learning how this person defines the challenge and the obstacles, essential information if you are going to measure progress.

5. *How can I help?* This is the most powerful question of all. It relieves the evaluator of the judge-and-jury role so often found in appraisals and redefines it as a teaching role. It says to the other person, "*My own performance is judged, in part, on yours, so I have a stake in your success. How can I help us both win?*"

One caution: Take your time. Don't do all five questions in one sitting. When I coach in newsrooms, I usually suggest an evaluator plan five 15-to-20- minute sessions (just enough time for a cup of coffee) and deal with one question in each session. You need to build trust in the process, and that takes time.

Earlier in this series I suggested that people will accept feedback if two conditions are present: They trust your intentions and they see a direct benefit to what you're offering. These five questions will help establish those conditions.