



# News, Improved

How America's Newsrooms Are Learning to Change

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## **Chapter 1: Closing the Leadership Gap**

*Chapter 1 of News, Improved shows why leadership and vision matter in the news industry and lays out a new set of leadership skills for the future.*

The reinvention of newspapers in the digital age requires the reinvention of newsroom leadership. Newspapers must devise new strategies to attract readers, grow revenue and connect to their communities through multiple channels, both digital and print. But even in the strong newsrooms where Tomorrow's Workforce has spent the past three years, there is a leadership gap. Good editors are discovering they need to learn to change.

### **Why Leadership Matters**

Constructive change demands engaged, energetic employees and clear strategic goals – both byproducts of strong leadership. Organizational culture expert Toni Antonellis says top editors must ask themselves: “How do we need to behave differently to change the dynamics of the organization?”

Newspaper leaders nimble and innovative enough to navigate the obstacle course of modern news media are beginning to emerge. Dana Robbins, editor of The Hamilton Spectator in Ontario, Canada, responded to declining readership by eliminating the paper's business, entertainment and lifestyle sections, remaking the sports section as a tabloid, and launching a new magazine and an analysis section. Two years later, the Spectator had seen annual readership growth. What pleases Robbins most is his newspaper's newfound capacity to be bold and to innovate.<sup>1</sup>

### **Why Leadership Is Critical to Newsroom Learning**

The goal of Tomorrow's Workforce was to convince participating newspapers that if they devoted more resources to training they would see measurable gains in news quality. The initial focus was training for staff and midlevel editors, but as we began to visit newsrooms leadership quickly emerged as an issue.

One of the nation's top metropolitan newspapers provides an example. We discovered this news organization had not one, but five newsrooms, each with a different focus: quality, quantity, visuals, investigations, and the suburbs. While the newspaper's leadership thought it had articulated clearly the expectations and standards for each of these sub-newsrooms, no one had sorted out the considerable conflict and discomfort caused by these multiple initiatives.

During our newsroom interviews, we heard a desire for more communication, clarity, and collaboration – all qualities of good leadership.

### **Management Is Not Leadership: Editors Behaving Badly**

In America's business schools, the distinction between management and leadership is fundamental. Even the blandly bureaucratic U.S. Small Business Association notes: “Managers



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are very good at maintaining the status quo and adding stability and order to our culture. However, they may not be as good at instigating change and envisioning the future. On the other hand, leaders are very good at stirring people's emotions, raising their expectations, and taking them in new directions (both good and bad)."<sup>2</sup>

Newsrooms need good managers, but even more, they need good leaders who are not "maintaining the status quo," because that type of behavior is costing newspapers readers, revenue and relevance. Top editors who have successfully changed their leadership styles say senior editors must learn to let go of details and instead focus their time, energy and credibility on leading change.

## Closing the Leadership Gap: What Newspapers Need Now

Trust instinct. Take risks. Don't fear fear. Innovate. Grow yourself. That's a leadership development roadmap in 10 words. Two broad areas of leadership skills are critical to creating a dynamic, constructive newsroom:

- **Vision.** The leader must be able to imagine a long-term future for the newspaper within the context of its business conditions, and hold that creative vision in mind as the organization defines goals, crafts strategies, and overcomes obstacles.
- **Communication skills.** A leader must connect the dots between the abstractions of long-term goals and necessities of the daily news product. A leader must be able to explain why change is necessary, prioritize goals, and guide the organization past the inevitable obstacles.

## A Creative Visionary Sees the Possibilities

Vision is an imagined destination, a continuously changing endpoint where a leader hopes to take the organization next year, or in five years, or in a decade. In the news industry, vision can be framed as a series of questions: What would I like my news organization to be capable of one year from today? How would the reporting differ? What would the newsroom structure be? What new skills should we have?

John P. Kotter, a Harvard Business School scholar, says a strong vision "simplifies hundreds or thousands of more detailed decisions ... motivates people to take action in the right direction, even if the initial steps are personally painful (and) ... helps coordinate the actions of different people, even thousands and thousands of individuals, in a remarkably fast and efficient way."<sup>3</sup>

From vision, all other decisions flow. The newsroom leader must keep her vision for the newspaper in the forefront as she communicates with staff, allocates resources, and assesses market conditions.

In "Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies," James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras write: "The essence of a visionary company comes in the translation of its own ideology and its own unique drive for progress into the very fabric of the organization – into goals,



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strategies, tactics, policies, processes, cultural practices, management behaviors, building layouts, pay systems, accounting systems, job design – into *everything* the company does.”<sup>4</sup>

## Clear Communication Translates the Vision into Action

Communicating is more than telling people what to do. A visionary newsroom leader who cannot get his message across will never be able to effect change. Newsroom learning cannot take place without ongoing, almost relentless communication by newsroom leaders to clarify direction and move people in that direction. Julia D. Wallace, editor of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, says the biggest lesson she learned from the ambitious strategic training program she launched in 2004 was “the importance of over-communicating.” Find as many ways as you can, she advises, to say and to show “This is where we’re going. This is where we’re going.”

## Personal Leadership Training: Getting in Shape for Change

There is no magic change bullet for leadership. But willingness to change is the first step. Then self-assessment and reflection. It may be difficult for top editors to identify strengths and weaknesses on their own, and they won’t necessarily get candid feedback from their staffs. To get a fuller picture, Toni Antonellis, organizational culture expert, and Pierre Meyer, industrial psychologist, recommend that top executives receive confidential “360-degree” reviews, performance evaluations by superiors, peers and subordinates. These three-dimensional evaluations can be done through in-house training modules or with outside consultants.

Transforming newsrooms requires a great amount of organizational willpower and individual self-discipline. Modern news media are dynamic and ever-changing. The institutions and individuals who work in this industry must be the same, constantly asking “What do we want to be?”

*Chapter 1 of News, Improved includes:*

- *The stories of editors and their journeys of change, from managing to leading.*
- *An analysis of actions and attitudes that inhibit newsroom risk-taking.*
- *The characteristics of good leadership and how some newspaper editors have acquired them.*
- *Seven self-assessment questions each editor must ask and answer honestly.*
- *Five key habits an editor should break to transform herself from manager into visionary.*
- *How newspapers have used “360 reviews” to improve organizational management.*

<sup>1</sup> Michael Smith, “Take the Risk, Reap the Reward”, (Evanston, Ill.: Readership Institute, April 26, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Small Business Administration, [www.sba.gov/smallbusinessplanner/manage/lead/index.html](http://www.sba.gov/smallbusinessplanner/manage/lead/index.html).

<sup>3</sup> John P. Kotter, “Leading Change”, (Harvard Business School Press, 1996) 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, “Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies”, (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 201.