



## Chapter 3 Newsroom Culture: No More Whining

*Chapter 3 of News, Improved examines the defensive culture of daily newspapers, how it manifests itself in day-to-day newsroom behavior, and why this matters to journalists, to news executives and to the entire news industry.*

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*“Because of a more open workplace, we’re getting better stories in the paper. We’re getting more innovation and creativity than we were getting when everything was running up through a manager. Our circulation is up. That’s really unusual in 2006.”*

**-- Bob Zaltsberg, editor, The Herald-Times, Bloomington, Ind.**

Contrast two groups of professionals facing an uncertain future. One is defensive and resists the notion that change and quality are compatible. The other group is constructive, scanning the horizon for new opportunities. The former describes a typical newsroom and the newspaper industry as a whole. The latter describes a news organization – still rare but growing in number – that is ready to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In an open newsroom, strategic training can enhance credible, engaging and relevant journalism, even in the face of fundamental shifts in the business model of the industry, the demographics of the news audience and, in some cases, the nature of news.

Every organization has a culture that determines how individuals think they are expected to behave and how they perform. John P. Kotter and James L. Heskett, at the Harvard Business School, define culture as “an interdependent set of values and ways of behaving that are common in a community.”<sup>1</sup> Culture helps shape attitudes, morale, values, product, and even vocabulary.

### Why Does Culture Matter to Newspapers?

In its landmark Impact Study in 2000, the Readership Institute at Northwestern University looked at 90 newspapers and found that all but a handful had defensive cultures. Those newspapers with constructive cultures had stronger readership than the defensive ones.<sup>2</sup>

For decades, experts have linked workforce culture and marketplace success. Changing a workplace focus from internal to external, from process to customer, is part of aligning a workplace and its marketplace, say Kotter and Heskett. A company whose culture is out of step with its audience, its competitors or its sources of income is going to put a lot of well-intentioned energy into efforts that harm, rather than improve, the business.



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## **Understanding and Breaking the Defensive Shell**

Defensive culture can take either aggressive or passive forms. In-your-face defensiveness can mean perfectionism to the point of paralysis. It can mean oppositional thinking that blocks reform, competitiveness that tears down colleagues. Behind-your-back defensiveness can mean people mindlessly following routine.

Changing entrenched traditions, even when they are no longer useful, takes time. Industrial psychologist Pierre Meyer says real culture change takes three to five years of intensive work and constant attention. “There are many elements to it, and each element requires time for adaptation and adjustment. In a simplistic way, the change process begins with understanding how current work is accomplished... Before we can begin the process of change, we need to re-think [our] beliefs, realities, and behaviors.”

## **How to Change Newsroom Culture**

Mike Jenner, executive editor of the Bakersfield Californian, saw the culture of his newsroom go from the typical defensive profile to the cusp of constructive in 18 months. One factor in the change was his decision to unlearn behaviors he had learned from other editors and let go of the idea he could control everything. “We’ve got many, many smart people in this newsroom,” Jenner says. “They don’t need me looking over their shoulder on every move.”

Participation by employees in decision-making and open communication by newsroom leaders about goals improves culture, says Meyer. “A crucial hallmark of constructive cultures is transparency – the degree to which all know the strategic intent of the organization and all have a chance to raise questions and make comments.”

## **Staff Engagement, Culture and Training**

All transitions, especially leadership transitions, leave an awkward void, a space that no one quite knows how to fill. Staff committees that reflect a cross-section of the newsroom – and are not led by executives – are an important vehicle for promoting staff engagement.

In Tomorrow’s Workforce newsrooms, members of training committees explore goals with newsroom executives, explain the goals to their peers and ask them what training they would need to meet the goals. When thinking about culture, the committee improves newsroom communication and gets the staff involved in setting goals and learning the skills to achieve them. A staff committee also provides a leadership cadre that is not always visible to upper management, one that may even have more newsroom respect than top editors.

The Learning Newsroom developed a five-part curriculum that encompasses learning priorities for newsrooms that want to improve culture:



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- **Communication:** Efforts to make communication more honest, direct and meaningful for individual and team performance.
- **Business literacy:** A better understanding of the strategies of the newspaper and how the work of all departments – newsroom, advertising, marketing, and circulation – contributes to the enterprise.
- **Innovation:** An overview of ways in which organizations are identifying opportunities and responding with new products.
- **Systems analysis:** Looking at current practices, suggesting more effective ones.
- **Time management:** Exercises to help the staff discover, then modify, time-consuming practices that may no longer be efficient or necessary.

These Learning Newsroom modules, with committee work, improved newsroom culture in most of the participating newsrooms.

Good training that deals with the newsroom as a group can produce positive culture change, even when the specific topic is not newsroom culture itself. For the past few years, the Committee of Concerned Journalists has offered “critical thinking” modules to groups of 25-40 journalists in more than 200 newsrooms. CCJ reported that 75 percent of the participants said newsroom communications – chiefly teamwork and information sharing – had improved because of these workshops.

Not everyone in a newsroom takes to culture change quickly or readily. Some may charge ahead. Many may look on in curiosity. Others may resist – hard and loud. Vickey Williams, the Learning Newsroom project director, says: “This work really kicks up the dust and things may get worse before they get better.”

## **Strategic Training Produces Measurable Results**

Of the 13 highly active Tomorrow’s Workforce and Learning Newsroom newspapers where cultural surveys<sup>3</sup> were administered before training began and again up to two years later, 10 showed consistent improvement – moving away from strongly defensive behavior and starting to embrace constructive ways of working. In two other newsrooms, culture improved among middle managers, key groups that had received intensive training.

*Chapter 3 of News, Improved includes:*

- *A description of the process of culture change unfolding at newspapers including The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Bakersfield Californian, and The Herald-Times.*
- *An analysis of the daily news meeting, with recommendations for making it more productive.*
- *Recommendations for reducing defensiveness in newsroom culture.*
- *A case study of the cultural change process at the Corpus Christi Caller-Times – and the difference it made when the newspaper broke a national story.*



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<sup>1</sup> John P. Kotter and James L. Heskett, "*Corporate Culture and Performance*", (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 141.

<sup>2</sup> Impact Study, Readership Institute, 2000. ([www.readership.org](http://www.readership.org)).

<sup>3</sup> The survey instrument was the Organizational Culture Inventory ®, developed by Human Synergistics, Inc. of Arlington Heights, Ill.