



Chapter 4 The Well-Balanced Learning Diet

Chapter 4 of News, Improved explains the “learning pyramid,” a structure to help newsrooms build more effective staff training programs. This chapter also applies lessons from other industries and suggests low-cost strategies for newsroom training programs.

The news industry trains people as badly as a fast-food diet nourishes them. Training is episodic rather than continuous. Random, rather than strategic. Long on talk. Short on measurable impact.

In the course of the Tomorrow's Workforce project, we developed a “learning pyramid” to help news organizations envision a strategic framework for their newsroom training program. It focuses on goal-oriented training aimed at groups, rather than scattershot learning for individuals.

The Newsroom Learning Pyramid

Imagine a pyramid, rather like the food pyramid, that shows a healthy, balanced training diet.

At the top of the learning pyramid is the individual journalist – an editor, a photographer, an artist or a reporter – learning something new about craft, or topic knowledge, or ethics, or management.

In the middle of the pyramid are groups of journalists – the copy desk or metro reporters, or a mix of disciplines. These teams learn common skills and apply them together.

The bottom is the locus for organizational training – the whole newsroom, all departments, everyone from the executive editor to the news aide. As the foundation of all newsroom training, it supports strategic learning goals and provides the context for individual training.

Foundation Level: What everyone needs to know

Organizational learning is what everyone is working on together – newsroom-wide priorities – whether it is ethics, watchdog reporting or more engaging ways of telling stories. Most journalism training focuses on individuals. Reporters, for example, learn new writing skills, but their editors don't necessarily learn how to help them write better. Effective organizational training includes writers and editors working together – along with photographers, graphic designers and copy editors. This sort of training helps journalists understand the context in which they work. It gives the newsroom a common vocabulary, fosters communication, and improves performance.



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Second Level: Learning and working together

Group learning deepens journalists' individual skills and improves their ability to work together toward common goals. It also helps them learn better from one another. Cross-department learning breaks down the sense that each newsroom job is separate, rather than part of a whole.

Third Level: Individual learning

Individual learning is at the top of the pyramid, built on a strong base of organization-wide, focused training. The learning pyramid is a continuous training framework, with many interlocking pieces. It aligns newsroom goals and learning.

Resources

Better training doesn't necessarily require a bigger budget. The investment of time in training is as important – and often more so – than the investment of money. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution more than doubled the amount of training staff received between 2003 and 2005 without significantly increasing direct spending (about \$45,000 annually). Bringing more training in-house was one key strategy. In 2003 about half of the newspaper's 4,000 training hours took place off site. In 2005, the figure was 10 percent.

Ten Steps to a Newsroom Learning Program

The Tomorrow's Workforce project measured success by improvements in newsroom culture and news content. We looked at the most successful participating news organizations and distilled ten essential elements of an effective learning program.

1. Keep the newsroom's goals out front.

Newsroom goals determine the learning pyramid's foundation. Goals also factor heavily in decisions and priorities for training individuals in the learning pyramid's upper tier.

2. Put someone in charge.

A training coordinator, even if not a full-time position, means that someone comes to work each day with staff training as a top priority.

"The key thing we did was to make somebody responsible for it," said Bob Zaltsberg, editor of The Herald-Times in Bloomington, Ind. In a small newsroom, "that isn't necessarily the easiest thing to do. But it's one of the best decisions I've ever made."

3. Engage the staff.

Whether the goal is changing organizational culture or building staff skills, including staff members in the training committee – both to assess needs and develop the curriculum – is key.



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4. Illustrate specific goals.

Whether it's through a short, staff-produced video or a simple printed guide, find a way to make training goals visible and concrete.

5. Know the newsroom, know the market.

In Tomorrow's Workforce, we performed detailed, pre-training assessments for newsrooms, which helped them link training needs to culture, market challenges, goals and leadership development needs. Guided by Minneapolis evaluations consultant Michael Quinn Patton, we produced a report, a "Learning Matrix," that included:

- Observations about the newsroom,
- Implications of those observations on larger goals,
- Learning needs those observations suggested, and
- Results that learning might produce.

We applied the matrix to leadership capacity, staff capacity, market demographics and challenges, newsroom resources and readership goals.

6. Identify trainers and develop modules.

Explore all three major sources of newsroom teachers: current staff, new hires, and outside trainers. Regardless of who runs the training, that person must keep in mind the basic principle of adult learning: Adults learn by doing. Classes should include opportunities to actually do something. If a training exercise can produce a news story, so much the better.

7. Clarify expectations for attendance and participation.

All staff members must understand the goals and their personal roles in moving toward them. If some staffers – most often those opposed to change – opt out, it is unlikely the program can improve newsroom culture or news content. For this reason, managers must be accountable for staff attendance.

8. Create a long-range training calendar.

The calendar must reflect the newsroom's capacity to develop a quality training program and engage staff in it. Training opportunities should be frequent enough to support the message that learning is continuous.

Allowing staff members and their supervisors to plan ahead is critical. People can plan to attend the sessions most relevant and interesting to them, rather than simply decide thumbs up or down on a random session at the last minute.

9. Consider quality of training.

The impact of training may be assessed by four measures: reaction, learning, application and impact on the news product. Time-starved newsrooms can learn what they need to know by focusing on the first measure, reaction, and the last, impact on news content.



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10. Measure impact of training.

Too often, news organizations fail to measure whether training has improved content. In addition to measuring cultural change in partner newsrooms, Tomorrow's Workforce evaluated whether changes in news content reflected training goals. We generally used a simple count of stories, photos or other elements in a 28-day sample of the newspaper to assess change.

Chapter 4 of News, Improved includes:

- *A review of the Minneapolis Star Tribune's recent redesign effort – one that emphasized changes in thinking about beats and stories as well as new design formats.*
- *An analysis of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's cross-disciplinary training program. Designed to improve the newspaper's storytelling ability, the program reduced the portion of inverted-pyramid articles on the front page from two-thirds to 40 percent – in just one year.*
- *A description of how a mid-sized newspaper, the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, merged editor and reporter training in its successful "Learning Cell" project.*
- *An in-depth comparison of two successful training programs at starkly different newspapers: The Oregonian and the Gaston Gazette of North Carolina.*