



Dothan Eagle publisher Jim Whittum teaches a class on libel.

SUCCESS STORY

Dothan Eagle: Focused Training Strategy Replaces Shotgun Approach

RESULTS

Staff members at the Dothan Eagle, a daily newspaper with a circulation of about 34,000, recognize and appreciate that training is a high priority in the newsroom. Editor Ken Tuck has made training a priority.

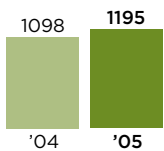
Tuck looks at the changes this way: "Training goes hand-in-hand with improvement. The more quality training you can provide your staff, the better they become and the better the newspaper and Web site become."

The Eagle has revised its approach to training, working to make it job specific and adjusting a shotgun approach to a more targeted one. "Just bringing more of a focus on training has been great," says Tuck.

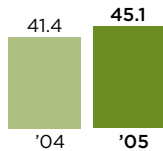
Within two years of implementing suggestions from Tomorrow's Workforce and customizing newsroom training, the Dothan Eagle has accomplished the following:

- The newsroom culture has improved by reducing passive-defensive behavior and increasing constructive behavior. Job satisfaction has increased, particularly among younger staff members.
- Training has been reorganized to bring more training into the newsroom rather than sending people off site. Training hours per employee increased nearly 10 percent to an average of 45 hours per staff member in 2005. The dollars spent on training decreased, however, because more training is now done in-house.
- News content has been improved with the incorporation of more "real people" stories with more points-of-entry on section fronts and increased diversity in the photo report.
- The Eagle has tied training to content goals, including a newsroom readership campaign called "What do readers want?"

TOTAL TRAINING HOURS:
8% Increase



AVERAGE TRAINING HOURS PER EMPLOYEE:
9% Increase



FROM NEWS, IMPROVED:

"Training is a must. It will ... make [your employees] work harder for you because they see the investment you are making in them."

— Editor Ken Tuck





Staff members at the Dothan Eagle attend a session on media law taught by publisher Jim Whittum.

“When you seek and find quality training, it’s worth every second and every dollar. As fast as the media landscape is shifting, if you are not providing your newsroom with quality training, you are falling behind, and eventually your newspaper will be irrelevant.”

— *Editor Ken Tuck*

BUILDING MOMENTUM

When Tomorrow’s Workforce consultant Judy Christie first visited the Eagle newsroom in July 2004, a redesign of the newspaper was in the planning stages. The newsroom wanted to improve the newspaper with new story forms, fresher writing and more “real people” stories. The newsroom also wanted to lower the number of institutional stories.

Staff brainstorming meetings initially shaped training. The new approach had two key parts – in-house writing and design training – organized and led by Editorial Page Editor Bill Perkins and Design Editor Andrew Small. In addition, the paper requested training sessions for the editors’ group on topics such as goal-setting and time management.

After a year, on a recommendation from TW, the Eagle created an employee training committee. The staff committee is an integral part of planning for training.

Staff Reporter Lance Griffin, who leads the committee, feels the staff feedback has been helpful: “The staff knows what we need.” The committee met steadily in the beginning and gathered suggestions from co-workers, making recommendations to Tuck. Those were used to pull together the training calendar for the year.

Bringing training in-house can be beneficial, but as the Eagle case demonstrates there can be bumps along the way. The writing coach idea, a component of the TW Learning Plan, was well received by Tuck and embraced by Perkins. However, initially because it was voluntary, it got off to a slow start. People responded that they didn’t have time. Out of frustration Perkins resigned from leading it.

The staff requested it be brought back and that it be mandatory. Now the biweekly classes are well-attended, and the staff is engaged. Perkins not only leads two sessions in Dothan every other week, but also drives to a sister paper’s newsroom to lead a session for them.

Both Perkins and Small say they have learned from the teaching process. “The main thing I’ve learned is how to coach better,” says Small. Perkins is enjoying talking about sophisticated writing approaches with the group. He combines writing discussions with staff requested training on such basics as punctuation. “I’ve brushed up on the vocabulary of grammar,” he says.

“I would say our employee satisfaction and newsroom culture is at an all-time high. By investing heavily in training for the entire staff, it has shown them that management cares about each person. Training money is spread out equitably throughout the entire staff. Employees appreciate that.”

— Editor Ken Tuck

SUSTAINING CHANGE

Dothan newsroom leaders commented that incorporating change has been difficult, but sustaining change is also a challenge. As one editor said, for about a month after a visit by writing coach Bruce DeSilva, the Eagle was “a different paper.” People need to be reminded regularly to apply what they are learning and to be held accountable for it.

An encouraging component of the Eagle’s progress is that the paper recognizes the ongoing need and is continuing to focus on writing with its in-house program. In addition, in a TW visit in April 2006 to the newsroom, there seemed to be much more discussion about writing styles than in earlier visits. As one editor said, “it was a different paper” for about a month after a visit from an outside writing coach. But people revert to old habits and need to be reminded regularly to apply new learning.

Survey results indicate that communications are improving, with staff members getting the message that change is needed and feeling they can participate in discussions concerning the paper. They may not yet fully understand or feel comfortable with the changes, however, and this is an area for ongoing work by newsroom leadership.

Tuck is committed to improving training and he urges other editors to do likewise. He noted that good training is worth every second and every dollar. “As fast as the media landscape is shifting, if you are not providing your newsroom with quality training, you are falling behind.”



The Dothan Eagle redesign brought more story forms to the news pages.

DOTHAN EAGLE

JUST THE FACTS:

Newspaper:

Dothan (AL) Eagle

Daily Circulation (M-F):
34,176*

Number of Employees:
28

Ownership:
Media General

URL:
www.dothaneagle.com

* Audit Bureau of Circulations
(Total Avg Paid Circ.) 9/30/06

NEWS, IMPROVED: HOW AMERICA'S NEWSROOMS ARE LEARNING TO CHANGE

As news organizations adapt to a changing media landscape, strategic learning is critical for organizations that want to increase their audiences and maintain journalistic quality. *News, Improved: How America's Newsrooms Are Learning to Change* looks at research and development from \$10 million in training projects sponsored by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to show how leadership, goal-setting and staff development improve the culture of the newsroom and the content of the news product – both key drivers of audience appeal. Learn how American newsrooms are becoming more adaptive and creative, fueled by continuous, strategic training.

TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE

With support from more than 50 journalism organizations, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation created Tomorrow's Workforce in 2003 to demonstrate how investments in training and professional development for mid-career journalists can improve the quality and appeal of journalism. Working with 17 newspapers, the project has developed a strategic approach to training that has helped newsrooms train more effectively and document the impact of training.

KNIGHT FOUNDATION

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