



News, Improved

How America's Newsrooms Are Learning to Change

www.newsimproved.org

Newsroom Culture Guide

Why Newsroom Culture Matters

Workplace culture plays a role in promoting or inhibiting learning in the newsroom. At the same time, training that takes culture into account will be more effective for the organization as a whole.

If your newsroom is like most, the workplace culture is defensive. That's a problem because defensive cultures tend to resist change and are slow to adapt to changing consumer needs and habits.

To learn more about workplace culture, read two important (and short) reports by the Readership Institute:

- Five-Minute Guide to Culture
www.readership.org/culture_management/culture/data/five_minute_guide.pdf
- Inside Newspaper Culture
www.readership.org/culture_management/culture/insideculture.asp

Assessing the Culture of the Newsroom

The first step is determining what type of culture your newsroom has: Defensive (common in the newspaper industry) or Constructive (common in adaptive and innovative organizations).

The Readership Institute's work is based on a survey, the Organizational Culture Inventory,[®] developed by Human Synergistics, Inc., of Arlington Heights, Ill., (www.humansynergistics.com). We highly recommend you administer the survey and use the results to launch a discussion of how your newsroom can be more effective in meeting today's competitive challenges.

If you cannot administer the survey, you can do a cursory assessment by checking off the traits that are the closest fit for your newsroom. For example, as we discuss in Chapter 3, your daily news meeting may tell you a lot about your newsroom culture. Also, ask newcomers, especially journalists in their first newsroom for their perspectives on the "personality" of the newsroom.



Culture checklist

For the most part, people in the newsroom tend to

Area	Constructive	Defensive
Communication	- Communicate openly and honestly	- Say as little as possible about what they are thinking and doing - Assert their point of view so strongly that others are reluctant to speak up
New ideas	- Discuss lots of ideas with others and develop the best ones with give and take. - Let ideas bubble up from the ranks	- Shoot down new ideas quickly with skeptical comments about why they won't work - Wait to see what supervisors want
Collaboration	- Work together as teams across departments, disciplines and ranks	- Work in silos and aggressively guard turf
Goals	- Balance getting details right with priorities that reflect the big picture in setting priorities.	- Work long hours to make sure every detail is perfect - Debate fine points at the expense of the big picture

Training for the Defensive Newsroom

If you believe the culture of your newsroom or of important segments of the newsroom tend to be defensive, here are some things to think about as you develop your training plan:

- Training in and of itself can improve culture because it improves communication. Develop training to build a common understanding of goals and standards, even language. Get everyone to participate.
- Training that crosses disciplines promotes collaboration, another hallmark of an adaptive culture. The example we gave in News, Improved: storytelling training that trains visual and word journalists together.
- Training that includes opportunities to question and debate in a “safe” environment reduces fear of change. Training that features real examples of the work that is required keeps the discussion on point and reduces the natural tendency to resist the abstract. As we discuss in Chapter 4, content analysis will help identify specific areas where you want improvement and samples of what the best work will look like will make the goals specific.



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Also, keep in mind the modules the Learning Newsroom project (www.learningnewsroom.org) developed to address culture change directly:

- 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 staff discover time-consuming practices that may no longer be efficient or necessary and stop or modify them.

Finally, as we discussed in Chapter 4, there is no substitute for staff engagement in actually developing the training and conducting some of it. This in and of itself allows staff members to better understand goals, engage in conversations about them with their peers and learn what each newsroom discipline needs to know to help move the organization forward.