



News, Improved

How America's Newsrooms Are Learning to Change

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Guidelines for goal-setting

Training is most effective when it takes you where you want to go. So the best training programs are based on well-understood and practical goals.

As we note in Chapter 2, we encountered news organizations that tended to have a lot of goals piled atop one another. As a result, they tended to have staffs that said they were receiving mixed messages about what was important.

Here are three important characteristics of effective goals:

1. They grow from a well-understood vision for the direction of the organization that embodies journalistic values and audience development needs.
2. They are of a manageable number, small enough to allow the staff to focus, learn and apply before introducing a new set of goals.
3. They are specific and practical rather than vague and idealistic.

A Forward-Looking Vision

As we discussed in Chapter 1, top editors in the newsroom must be able to develop a vision for moving the organization forward and they must communicate it clearly and relentlessly. To do this, they may need to explore whether their leadership style is communicative enough and whether they understand the digital evolution of media well enough to lead in the 21st century. These explorations may suggest training and development needs of leaders even before staff training begins.

A Manageable Number of Practical Goals

We found that lists of goals in some newsrooms tended to be long and highly fluid. Ambition and flexibility are important, but often there were so many goals (and so many interpretations of them) that there was little chance of sustained, newsroom-wide progress. And often the primary goal seemed to change weekly, sometimes in response to new ideas from the executive office and sometimes in reaction to problems in content.

As we described in Chapter 2, Michele McLellan developed an exercise to help newsroom leaders prioritize and clarify their goals. Here's how it works:

Step 1: Gather the newsroom leadership group away from the newsroom for a half-day. For this exercise, define the leadership group broadly, at least to the Deputy Managing Editor level in larger newsrooms and to the department head/section editor in smaller newsrooms. Include others: the editor who coordinates training, staff members who are influential in the newsroom and likely to spread the word, the public editor or reader representative. Plan on about a dozen or so people who broadly reflect the perspectives of the newsroom. Include at last one vocal skeptic, typically found within the leadership group.



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Step 2: Ask each group member to write down the three things the newsroom needs to do to improve (in context of the leadership vision). They should write one each on a Post-it note. Ask people to focus on what the newsroom produces – print and online content – rather than on newsroom processes. For example, “better planning” is not appropriate to this exercise; “more engaging centerpieces for the local cover” would be appropriate. This should take about five minutes.

Step 3: Ask participants to stick their notes on a wall in the meeting room without identifying who suggested what. Expect a total of three dozen or so ideas. Read all the ideas aloud quickly while asking participants not to volunteer which they suggested or further explanation for their ideas.

Step 4: Divide the group into small teams – two or three people. Ask them to agree on their top three priorities from the ideas on the board. Listen in carefully as the teams deliberate. Make a note to yourself when team members appear flustered or frustrated with narrowing the list radically. After about 12-15 minutes, ask each team to report their list of three to the rest of the group.

Step 5: As each team reports, put a star on each Post-it note with a selected answer on it. Put the remaining Post-its to the side. Discuss the exercise so far with the full group. What’s working? What was challenging? If you saw discomfort in the teams, raise the issue and get the group talking about it. Typically, they are experiencing what staff members feel when they perceive “mixed messages.” Share that with the group if appropriate.

Step 6: This step may vary depending on how many ideas survived Step 4. In one newsroom we visited, there was remarkable consensus – four ideas were chosen consistently. If you have five or fewer, ask the group to brainstorm about dropping one or two ideas or looking for ways the ideas might combine into a single goal (for example, tighter writing and better storytelling might combine.) On the other end of the range, which was more typical, 15-20 ideas survived. If this is the case, ask the group as a whole to sort the ideas into “baskets” of related items. Guide the group to create two or three “baskets.” For example, “more enterprise” and “more unique content” might go into a basket entitled “enterprise reporting;” “more centerpieces” and “better visual story-telling” might go into a “story-telling” basket.

Step 7: Divide the group again into one team for each basket. Ask each group to create one goal from the contents of their basket and summarize it in one short phrase or sentence. Now you have three goals. Ask the entire group to brainstorm and refine them. Make sure they are practical.

Here are some examples of goals from newsrooms we worked with:

- More alternative story forms.
- More short-turnaround beat watchdog reporting.
- More stories based on public records requests.
- Community connections with (specific community).



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- Fewer institution-focused stories.
- Fewer long routine-meeting stories.

We recommend that goals be informed by the work of the Readership Institute, which has identified types of coverage and audience experiences that promote engagement in print and online.

What do you do with these goals? We describe how you can build on them in:

- [Making the Message Stick \(link\)](#)
- [How to Analyse Your Data \(link\)](#)
- [How to Build a Newsroom University \(link\)](#)