



Opinion page editor Dick Mial talks with a reader.

## SUCCESS STORY

# La Crosse Tribune: Focused Training Energizes Leadership, Staff and Newspaper

## RESULTS

The La Crosse (Wis.) Tribune improved its news content and its newsroom culture – important steps toward increasing readership – thanks to an aggressive training program.

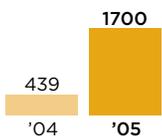
Undaunted by a shoestring training budget, Tribune Editor John Smalley and his staff created a program that provided 1,700 training hours in 2005, an average of 36 hours for each of the newsroom's 47 professionals.

Smalley did some learning of his own, changing his leadership style to promote more collaboration and learning in the newsroom. The Tomorrow's Workforce partnership "forced me to focus on my role as editor and leader of the newsroom, and brought me face to face with what's working well and where my growth areas are," Smalley said.

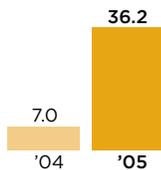
Within a year and a half, the training initiative had measurable results:

- The workplace culture of the newsroom began to improve, shedding some of the defensive behavior that is typical of news organizations and an obstacle to creativity and change.
- After training in local demographics, the staff created and launched "Bella," a lively and popular weekly section for women.
- The newspaper reduced its heavy daily helping of longer stories about routine government meetings and actions through writing training and creation of a "News Tracker" graphic to report more government news in brief.
- Writing became tighter and brighter with the help of a writing coach who helped the staff quickly produce an award-winning project on the Mississippi River.

**TOTAL TRAINING HOURS:**  
**362% Increase**



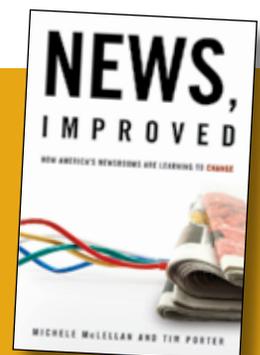
**AVERAGE TRAINING HOURS PER EMPLOYEE:**  
**525% Increase**



## FROM NEWS, IMPROVED:

"Training is just essential. We can't move forward and create an 'open idea' culture and have a newsroom where people take chances and try bold things without training them to think and to act that way."

— Editor John Smalley



“I think one of the best residual effects of the TW project so far is that it forced me to focus on my role as editor and leader of the newsroom, and brought me face to face with what’s working well and where my ‘growth areas’ are.”

— *Editor John Smalley*



Reporter Jenny Dolan, who writes for the *Bella* section in the La Crosse Tribune, confers with a colleague. *Bella* is aimed at women age 25-44.

## IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

The La Crosse Tribune is a 35,000-circulation newspaper in a small Wisconsin town. It produces a news report that emphasizes local news, including government and community events. The newsroom staff is a mix of new journalists and veterans.

In 2004, Smalley wanted to make the newspaper more engaging and relevant to readers. However, the quality of news content was uneven and the newsroom had not responded to new readership goals. It would take more work to improve the staff’s skills and increase its capacity to change and adopt new practices.

Lee Enterprises, Inc., the owner of the La Crosse Tribune, invited Tomorrow’s Workforce to partner with the newspaper in 2004 and provide the newsroom with an assessment of its learning needs and consulting services as it developed its training strategy.

The project analyzed training needs in the context of staff and leadership attitudes, market challenges and the strategic goals of the newspaper.

TW interviews with staff and managers showed they did not share a consistent vision for the newspaper and staff members believed the leadership was sending mixed messages. Staff members were hungry for more training, but they did not feel the newsroom management valued it, according to a survey by Tomorrow’s Workforce. And there was a perception gap: Managers generally thought the organization was motivating and providing more learning than the staff did.

Tomorrow’s Workforce recommended that the top editors clarify their vision and communicate it more aggressively to the staff before starting any training. Until the staff had a clearer idea of the newspaper’s direction, it did not appear that training could be highly effective for the newsroom as a whole. TW also recommended that the newsroom target specific training and improvement goals to move forward.

The recommendation was a catalyst for Smalley to significantly change his approach as a leader, and he launched the newsroom training effort with a vision statement urging his staff to try new things and improve the newspaper through training.

Smalley also appointed a training coordinator to help “keep the training calendar on the front burner.” The key resource investments for training in La Crosse are ones that Smalley controls – his own willingness to more actively communicate his vision and the allocation of staff time to plan and attend training.

Smalley also found more direct dollars for the training budget. The Tribune also overcame limited dollars by teaming up with other Lee newspapers in the region to provide training, including a regional conference on making Page One more compelling, and bringing in editors from other Lee newspapers to train. His formula for a continuous training program – a mix of brown bags with the occasional “Big Event.”

While Smalley and the newsroom staff are proud of what they’ve accomplished, they see that maintaining an ongoing and aggressive training program is key to future success.

“Training is just essential. We can’t move forward and create an ‘open idea’ culture and have a newsroom where people take chances and try bold things without training them to think and act that way,” Smalley said.



Courts reporter Dan Springer works on a story.



La Crosse Tribune city editor Scott Rada confers with courts reporter Anne Jungen in the newsroom.

“I think by providing to the staff ... a clear and directed training plan, there was some added credibility to all of our other efforts.”

— Editor  
*John Smalley*



**JUST THE FACTS:**

Newspaper:

**The La Crosse (WI) Tribune**

Daily Circulation (M-F):

**31,941\***

Number of Employees:

**47**

Ownership:

**Lee Enterprises, Inc.**

URL:

**[www.lacrossetribune.com](http://www.lacrossetribune.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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