



# News, Improved

How America's Newsrooms Are Learning to Change

[www.newsimproved.org](http://www.newsimproved.org)

You can use our Learning Matrix to analyze your data after you have:

- Interviewed top editors, middle managers and staff.
- Received from newsroom executives a practical set of manageable goals.
- Assessed print and/or online content in light of the goals.
- Reviewed available readership research and demographics in light of goals.
- Assessed the culture of the newsroom.

As you will see below, the Matrix allows you to record

- An **observation** from your research.
- The **implication** of that observation.
- The **learning needs** suggested by the observation and implication.
- The **result** sought from the learning.

For example:

- **Observation:** You learned in interviews with staff members that they would like more coaching, but editors told you they don't have time for coaching.
- **Implication:** Staff members are not reaching their potential. The quality of their work could be improved with more effective editing.
- **Learning needs:** Train the editors in coaching, giving feedback, line editing and time management. (Better yet, train the editors and staff members together so they form a common understanding of the roles and goals of their editors.) Organize the training around achieving goals for content – such as more variety of story forms or more enterprise reporting from public records.
- **Result:** Better communication, more effective editing, higher quality work, better understanding of goals and how to achieve them.



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Here is a sample introduction to the report, which typically is about 25 pages long:

## INTRODUCTION

This report is based on interviews with staff members, market and demographic data, the cultural assessment of the newsroom and an analysis of the newspaper's content.

The report is organized by elements of the newspaper and of the newsroom:

- **Strengths & Assets** – The foundation on which to build.
- **Content** – What the reader sees.
- **Business Operations & Newsroom Impact** – The economic circumstances in which the newsroom operates.
- **Mission & Priorities** – The goals and the objectives of the newspaper.
- **Organizational Culture** – The “personality” of the newsroom, as determined by the Organizational Culture Inventory® study.
- **Staff Capacity and Characteristics** – The skills, attitudes and desires of the rank and file.
- **Management Capacity and Characteristics** -- The skills, attitudes and desires of mid-level managers).
- **Leadership Capacity and Characteristics** -- The skills, attitudes and desires of the top newsroom executives.
- **Learning & Professional Development** – Training capacity and needs.

Each section of the report has five components, the first four of which are contained in a grid called the Learning Matrix:

- **Findings** – Observations and collected data.
- **Implications** – What the findings could mean to the newsroom.
- **Learning Options** – Suggestions for training to address the findings.
- **Results** – Goals that might be achieved through the training.
- **Notes** – Clips from the interviews or research that illustrate the findings.



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Here are a few brief excerpts to illustrate the analysis process:

## Strengths & Assets

Findings	Implications	Learning Options	Results
Staff members enjoy their jobs and are willing to contribute more to the success of the newspaper.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive acceptance of change.</li> <li>• Ready pool of volunteers.</li> <li>-- Potential frustration if goodwill is misused or ignored.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involve staff in discussion, decision and planning stages of all newsroom initiatives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge transfer from veterans to less experienced staff.</li> <li>- More engagement, and thus buy-in, on newsroom initiatives.</li> </ul>
Newsroom employees express a high degree of peer-to-peer respect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff is willing to learn from each other.</li> <li>• There are natural newsroom leaders who can be involved in quality initiatives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create peer-to-peer learning programs.</li> <li>• Establish mentoring system for younger staff members.</li> </ul> <p>Draw on staff expertise to shape training curriculum.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More interaction, thus collaboration, among staff.</li> <li>• Cost-effective, in-house learning.</li> </ul> <p>Better development of younger staff members.</p>

## Content

Findings	Implications	Learning Options	Results
There is a strong emphasis on local news more than half of the stories in the newspaper are local.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community news is a priority.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing evaluation, through surveys and informal discussion, of what type of local news connects most with readers.</li> <li>• Ongoing discussion of Readership Institute findings as applied to local content.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More awareness of impact of the paper on readers.</li> </ul>
A high percentage of local news stories are process or institution oriented; ordinary people stories are rare.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newspaper seems stuffy, institutional.</li> <li>• News pages don't reflect the diversity of the community.</li> <li>• Readers who are not interested in government news may look elsewhere for news of their interests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop story-planning strategies that seek out people stories.</li> <li>• Re-examine beat priorities.</li> <li>• Explore new story forms that minimize process but still report the news.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A more "people friendly" paper.</li> <li>• Less emphasis on institutions, more on people.</li> </ul>
Traditional journalistic writing styles dominate stories and headlines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headlines and ledes may not draw in readers.</li> <li>• More creative writers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrate the best writing.</li> <li>• Create and discuss common standards for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More varied writing in the paper.</li> <li>• Better headlines.</li> <li>• Less frustration</li> </ul>



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are frustrated by adherence to rigid forms.</li> <li>Paper lacks personality.</li> </ul>	<p>good headline and story writing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Train line editors to coach reporters.</li> <li>Explore new story forms for institutional stories.</li> </ul>	among best writers.
Diversity of the community is not reflected in the content.	At best, lack of attraction to minority readers. At worst, alienation of those readers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tours of minority neighborhoods.</li> <li>Meetings with community leaders.</li> <li>New source development by reporters.</li> <li>Redefinition of beat coverage.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Better reflection of the community.</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> </ul>	

## Content Notes

- We're a "little too stiff and formal and gray – and tedious. ... We do a lot of stories because we can – or we think we should." The paper has an obligatory nature. "Stories are edited to be safe ... the wit and style is edited out." – Reporter, veteran.
- Process and government stories – several mentions. "We're from the open receptacle school of journalism. We seem to be on top of government issues to a fault. We do a lot of process." – Mid-level editor.

## Organizational Culture

Findings	Implications	Learning Options	Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The culture of the newsroom newspaper is mostly defensive.</li> <li>Main behaviors are perfectionism (avoid mistakes at all costs) and opposition (confrontation prevails, even passively.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Newsroom is risk averse.</li> <li>Constructive cultures are more adaptive, have higher readership, defensive ones less likely to engage audiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create more collaborative opportunities.</li> <li>Include all segments of the newsroom in planning new editorial initiatives.</li> <li>Create opportunities to discuss, evaluate and challenge assumptions about content of the paper.</li> <li>Reward risk-taking.</li> </ul>	A more adaptive, nimble workforce.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Newspaper is considered a collegial place to work, perhaps too nice.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of discussion or feedback about weaknesses or differences inhibits improvement and change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create opportunities for critical self-assessment of the news product.</li> <li>Set annual goals for individual staff members.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More feedback for staff.</li> <li>Better sense of collective values.</li> <li>More open environment for criticism.</li> </ul>



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## Staff Capacity & Characteristics

Findings	Implications	Learning Options	Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The staff is highly accomplished and possesses a wide range of journalistic skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High capacity for excellent work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use the staff's expertise to teach subjects desired by other staff members – CAR, beat and source development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Better skilled staff members at all levels.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff wants more feedback on performance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Editors are not providing sufficient feedback. Reporters are unsure of their status or the quality of their work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Train editors to coach better.</li> <li>Set and follow up on annual goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More communication between reporters and editors.</li> <li>More coaching, direction and feedback.</li> </ul>

## Management Capacity & Characteristics

Findings	Implications	Learning Options	Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mid-level editors are respected, but seen by some as having little authority.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lines of authority are less clear, so decision-making is impeded and confidence in line editors is eroded.</li> <li>Some editors and reporters will wait to see which way management is leaning before acting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarify roles of mid-level editors vs. those of leadership team.</li> <li>Create an opportunity among managers and leadership to discuss and evaluate newsroom structure. Adjust accordingly.</li> <li>Offer training in managing up to mid-level editors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearer roles.</li> <li>Structure that takes advantage of strengths and minimizes weaknesses of key managers.</li> </ul>