

Reading: Building a Toolkit for Newsroom Leaders

By Kathleen McElroy

Take a poll in any newsroom and the journalists would likely say their colleagues who have been promoted to leadership roles are usually talented, charismatic and/or well-connected.

None of the above-mentioned attributes guarantees these journalists possess the wherewithal to lead; furthermore, they often are thrust into new roles with few tangible resources or even definitions of what leadership is and is not.

Exceptional news stories have long been produced in dysfunctional newsrooms, large and small. And just because a newsroom avoids issues such as sexual harassment and racial bias does not mean it is an environment where people feel safe and motivated to do their best work. All journalists, whether on staff or freelance, deserve a newsroom that incorporates established workplace practices, like training in behavioral ethics, into its culture.

Journalists, however, are notoriously skeptical toward outside influences on this profession, including consultants, politicians and Wall Street. The journalistic trope “If your mother says she loves you, check three sources” celebrates the importance of verification but embraces unbridled suspicion. That includes training that could make newsrooms more efficient places to produce news and where the only drama should come on deadline, not from bosses.

“Part of journalism’s mission is that institutions need an outside set of eyes,” one colleague said. He calls out newsrooms for having a “provincial mentality,” one in which “if you didn’t come up through our way or organization, you can’t really understand what we’re doing or why we’re doing it.”

“But that’s not true,” he said. “Journalists would never accept that defense from a politician or CEO. All those things that journalists lean into are the things they’re least likely to buy into when it comes to their own culture.”

Another colleague links journalistic culture to the lack of leadership training. “Because we are taught to challenge authority,” he said, “we don’t know how to *be* authority.” Few newsroom leaders are trained to write an evaluation, discuss career strategies or work in teams. No wonder leadership often takes the form of yelling or doing nothing when something clearly needed to be done.

Behavioral ethics tells us that people rise in a culture by affirming the values of that culture. It’s the way they gain credibility in that culture (like the previously mentioned “well-connected”). Places embracing workplace ethics often have “no jerks” hiring rules. But when leaders and followers in toxic workplaces face ethical choices, they often repeat bad behaviors. In her research, “The Networks of Complicity,” my colleague Minette Drumwright describes why sexual harassment was an open secret in newsrooms. No wonder young people, women and journalists from underrepresented communities often feel discouraged and leave the profession at a faster rate than white men.

To effect positive change, journalists need to name the toxicity, employ tools for application and find allies. We teach how to do all three.

This curriculum is designed for journalists at all stages of their career. In addition to emphasizing behavioral ethics in order to create safe and fair newsrooms, the modules explain how to give voice to your values and how to understand and change organizational culture. This curriculum defines leadership as a learnable thing, not an innate trait.

Even better, we hope the next generation of leaders will use the concepts and tools provided in this curriculum to build a better newsroom, one that is inherently open rather than forced to provide safety and affirmation. This curriculum doesn’t provide all the answers, but it should at least spur questions that need to be asked.

News is changing, and the places that produce today’s stories are changing, too. “It’s no longer the time of the lone wolf but of the beehive,” a friend said. Can we build an equitable queen bee?