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Reflections on Leadership

Management Tips for the Newsroom

Welcome to "Reflections on Leadership," a weekly essay on newsroom management produced by Newsroom Leadership Group partners Edward and Cynthia Miller.

Experiments Can Improve E-Mail Management

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Audit the traffic, get buy-in for changes

Here's an e-mail from an editor describing a common predicament:

"One of the growing and frustrating trends is the tendency for managers to manage through e-mail instead of taking the time to instruct, lead or coach their employees through difficult situations. It is all too easy to reprimand an employee over e-mail in an attempt to avoid a difficult conversation."

E-mail has become an indispensable tool. Because it's only a tool, however, limitations must be acknowledged. Never should it be a substitute for important and often difficult face-to-face conversations. Here are some thoughts about managing e-mail:

An editor's e-mail traffic seldom conforms to a traditional bell-curve distribution pattern. Take out junk mail and messages from readers and other "strangers," a high percentage of the rest comes from close colleagues, either members of your team or editors nearby on the chain of command. Because the important traffic tends to be concentrated among a few people, it's possible to negotiate guidelines that serve everyone's needs. Here are three steps you can take this week:

1. Audit e-mail traffic for a week. See how many messages fit into these categories:

- Readers and strangers
- Personal messages unrelated to the job
- Junk mail
- Substantive work-related messages from colleagues
- Internal housekeeping messages

2. Suggest a two-week experiment with your team. Keep it simple; don't try to change everything at once. One place to start could be the format of the subject line to make it

more useful. For example, put an asterisk in the subject line to signal that there is no text to follow. The subject line is the message: *"* Budget meeting moved to 10 a.m."*

Or you may want to use agreed-upon keywords in the subject line: *Meeting Notice, Budget-line Change, ASAP, Code Blue, Whenever*. Key words enable the recipient to sort incoming e-mail into categories so the high-priority subjects (*ASAP, Code Blue*) are grouped and easier to access.

The important step here is getting buy-in from those you correspond with frequently. Colleagues will cooperate if they think the changes will save time.

3. Evaluate the experiment. Ask your colleagues to evaluate the experiment and suggest modifications. If everyone agrees it was a success, be ready to suggest further improvements.

After the initial success, here are some guidelines you can propose for content:

- Limit messages to one screen. Anything longer should be an attachment.
- Never criticize someone on e-mail. Feedback should always be face-to-face.
- Be careful how you praise on e-mail. Praise is feedback and is best done face-to-face. What's more, praising the obvious person involved is likely to overlook the not-so-obvious. You can avoid this by first asking the person worthy of praise *Who else was involved?* A reporter is likely to mention a supportive assigning editor who cleared the schedule or another reporter who helped think through the story.

Armed with that valuable information write an e-mail to the bosses praising all those involved. Use quotes from the reporter to cite the others. This doesn't take much time, but it can be a powerfully motivating tool.

- Try to limit e-mail to operational questions or comments on schedules, agendas and budgets. When you are dealing with the substance of a story or a person's attitude and behavior, those conversations should be in person.

One final idea: Try a "buddy system." There are times in the day when you want to be away from e-mail. Have a "buddy" who can watch your back and alert you to the important messages that need your immediate attention. You, of course, will provide the same service to your "buddy" when needed.