



What Makes a Great Editor?

By Jack Hart

"Every reporter is a hope,
every editor a disappointment."
-- Joseph Pulitzer

He's a red-faced, cigar-chomping, whiskey-swilling curmudgeon, a newsroom tyrant with the vocabulary of a longshoreman and a heart cast from hot lead.

He's a larger-than-life figure of journalistic myth, the pugnacious city editor that Stanley Walker, the author of a 1934 newspaper potboiler, described as "consistently brutal ... a chilly, monstrous figure."

And bloated though the stereotype may be, it has its roots in reality. Most newspaper veterans can remember the shaking knees that threatened to fail them when they faced an old-time city editor across an old-time city desk.

But something odd happens when reporters of any age recall their best editors, the mentors who taught them to understand and love journalism. I've been through just that exercise in a dozen newsrooms and at just as many conventions and workshops. The responses seldom vary.

Their best editors, the respondents say, were great teachers. They took a personal interest in young journalists and showed an obvious concern for them and their futures. They took time. They listened intently. They set high standards and established challenging goals. They laughed a lot. And some of them were even -- dare we say it? -- gentle.

So once again myth crumples before reality. The curmudgeon model retreats to the late-night movies that keep bringing it back to life in the guise of Clark Gable and Jack Webb. And it becomes increasingly poor form in the newsroom, where what once was the norm is now the professional bad example. Today, most editors recognize that pounding on a desk with your shoe is no way to build a career.

So what does make a great editor?

Getting a grip on the elusive qualities that answer that question is critical to the future of our profession. These days, with competition for talent and audience looming on every side, the ability to keep good newspaper journalists happy and productive is more important than ever before. As Carl Sessions Stepp, a former Gannett editor who now teaches journalism at the University of Maryland, puts it, "Most writers would give the vowels on their keyboards for a good editor."

Opinions about the qualities of a good editor vary, of course. And what works in one newsroom might be suicide in another. But a lot of attention has been focused on editing lately. It's a regular topic in seminars and workshops across the country, and in 1996 the APME Reporting, Writing & Editing Committee, then headed by Peter Bhatia, conducted a major national study. Last year Knight-Ridder and Penn State, among others, gathered reporters and mid-level editors in multiple seminars designed to address the question. And the country's training editors recently took up the subject in an enthusiastic list-serve discussion that lasted for weeks.

The themes that emerged from all that conversation echo my own findings.

Before visiting newspapers for editing and writing workshops, I often distribute 50-item questionnaires aimed at uncovering the nature of the reporter-editor relationship there. Typical items ask reporters to agree or disagree with statements such as "My editor motivates me to do my best work," or "Takes time to talk with me when I feel the need" or "Gives good advice on collecting and organizing information."

The questions seem to tap eight underlying themes, broad areas of editing behavior that reporters widely recognize and appreciate:

1. Attention and Availability:

"The most common complaint from writers," according to Carl Stepp, "is lack of quality attention from editors."

The problem is understandable, if not forgivable. The mid-level editors who work most closely with writers -- call them line editors -- are beset by a thousand different daily demands. The 1996 APME study, which gathered line editors from across the country to discuss their jobs, produced one constant refrain. Editors simply didn't have enough time to spend with reporters. Instead, they clawed their way through days filled with meetings, phone calls, budgets, personnel problems and an ever-increasing onslaught of niggling demands that deflected their attention.

The APME study showed that editors spent only 20-30 percent of their workdays talking with reporters. The reality is probably worse. When I coach editors at newsrooms across the country, I ask them to log their activities in 15-minute segments through an entire week. The results show that they spend only 17 percent of their time engaged in anything that could be called coaching.

In contrast, a recent tribute to William Shawn, the legendary New Yorker editor, writer after writer expressed astonishment at the time Shawn devoted to them and their work. John McPhee, in particular, raved about the hours he spent with Shawn during the formative stages of his very first New Yorker story.

The great editors of legend apparently spent most of their time with writers, not in meetings.

2. Collaboration:

Writers want attention from their editors, but they want it to carry the respect and sense of partnership that characterizes a truly collaborative relationship.

Collaboration means lots of talk during the early stages of reporting and writing. That's the time for the kind of conversation that digs into the broad philosophical and structural issues of a story, which is more likely to be professional discussion among equals than the directive, nit-picking feedback that reporters get from poor editors.

Conversation early in the process is also critical if editors are to heed Don Murray, the godfather of newspaper writing coaches, and his first rule of coaching -- that editors "make use of the knowledge and experience of the writer." Lots of talk during the early stages of stories allows reporters and editors to shape them together and to create shared expectations.

That leaves no room for the directive approach that went with the curmudgeon stereotype. Brendan Gill, for his part of the tribute to William Shawn, emphasized how Shawn, during an editing session, was able to "put his own ego on hold and listen intently to the writer." As Rhonda Owen, former writing coach at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, puts it, "A good editor listens more than he talks."

Beyond that, an editor builds a collaborative relationship by displaying several attitudes and taking dozens of specific daily actions.

Mike Weinstein, Carolina Roots team leader at the Charlotte Observer, asked reporters there about the qualities of the best editors. They said collaborative editors:

- "See you as a partner in producing great stories, not as a schoolmarm ready to catch

errors."

- Are "not wedded to their own beliefs about the right way of doing things. They listen."
- "Believe the writer's success is the editor's success."
- "ALWAYS read a story start to finish - sometimes more than once - before making suggestions or memo marks...."

Other sources have their own list of key qualities, According to them, a collaborative editor:

- "Edits in the writer's voice." (Carl Sessions Stepp)
 - Is "open-minded rather than arbitrary, and knows there are lots of right answers." (Cindy Stiff, newsroom trainer)
 - "Doesn't micromanage." (Rhonda Owen)

And, says Kevin McGrath, writing coach at the Wichita Eagle, collaboration means "editors have to stop ramming rewrites down their writers' throats."

1. Motivation and Support:

Reporting and writing are lonely, challenging tasks. They involve a multitude of decisions -- some of them with potentially extreme consequences -- and very little feedback. Little wonder, then, that fear, self-doubt and confusion go with the territory.

Gene Foreman, the longtime Philadelphia Inquirer editor who attended a number of last year's line-editing seminars, noted several reporter comments that reflected that anxiety. "Being a reporter can be emotionally wearing," said one. "The editor needs to provide comfort, solace, support and encouragement."

When writers put their hands on keyboards, they put their egos on the line. Which is one reason why so many commentators say it's a good idea for editors to keep writing themselves. The exercise reminds them of the anxiety that writing produces. And that, in turn, gives them a lot more empathy for the reporters they coach.

It also reminds them of how much writers need praise. For most writers, nothing an editor offers is more valued than a little positive feedback.

"I know there's a whole school of thought in newspapers that experienced professional reporters just do it and don't need their hands held," said Cynthia Gorney when she wrote features for the Washington Post. "I think that's crap. What makes an editor great is support."

2. Expertise:

Writers want editors who can serve as a resource. They need someone who's well read, who's plugged into the community and who has a sense of local history. They want help finding sources and filling holes in their own knowledge.

Reporters who are experts in their own fields probably can't expect editors to backstop them on subject expertise. John Russial, the UO professor who's a former Philadelphia Inquirer night copy-desk chief, points out that no editor could approach The Inquirer's great medical writer, Don Drake, in his knowledge of his subject. But even a Don Drake can expect an editor who's knowledgeable enough to ask intelligent questions.

Every reporter, on the other hand, has a right to an editor who's an expert with the English language.

One of the reporters Mike Weinstein quizzed at the Observer summed it up: "A good editor knows how to make a story better. That means a lot more than deleting unnecessary sentences or making a story clear or rearranging paragraphs. A good editor has the skill, knowledge and writing experience to read a story, digest it, think about its direction, scope, goals, tone, voice and character development and then figure out which of those need to be improved to make the story the best it can be."

3. Trust and honesty:

Trust lies at the heart of the collaborative relationship, and great editors give reporters no reason to doubt their intentions. Editors who lose the trust of their reporters are dead at their terminals.

In a newsroom, the importance of trust doesn't mean that reporters and editors should be pals. Trust rests on the editor's ability to maintain a professional relationship with reporters. That means, among other things, that criticism will be of the work, not the person, and that it will stay between the editor and the reporter. As a reporter said at one of the editing seminars Gene Foreman attended, "An ethical editor does not discuss reporters with other reporters."

One of the most common threats to newsroom trust is the insidious process that's been called "secret editing." Editors who take control out of the writer's hands, who rewrite massively without consulting the writer, who don't have the courage or won't take the time to discuss significant changes with writers before making them, quickly sabotage their relationships with reporters. "I want to be there when changes are made," said one

reporter. "My name is on it."

Criticism of the work is essential to a collaborative relationship, of course, but it will reasonably diplomatic and -- whenever possible -- face to face with the reporter concerned. A good editor, another reporter said, "Is honest, honorable and candid without being a jerk."

Editing is a tightrope, however, and too much diplomacy is just as damaging as too little tact. As another reporter told a gathering of line editors, "You lose credibility when you sugarcoat reality."

Laszlo Domjan, director of staff development at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, has expanded on the notion: "In my experience, the problem with today's editors is far less frequently that the person's a tyrant who terrorizes the staff with overly blunt and gruff talk. Far more often it's that the editor is indirect -- doesn't want to offend or hurt anyone's feelings. Not that the indirect editor doesn't vent his/her true feelings. That happens -- but it's to other editors. Of course, word eventually floats back to the staffer. And the editor winds up losing respect and credibility for not being honest with the staffer."

4. Agent and Champion:

Great editors get reporters what they need to excel. That means time, space, ideas, good assignments, equipment, travel and physical support from other departments such as research, photo and design. Larry Welborn, the training editor at the Orange County Register, says, "A great editor knows how to get things done in the newsroom culture."

That translates into a mastery of basic management skills. Effective editors organize their time, know how to deal with conflict and pay attention to detail. They communicate constantly -- up, down and horizontally. They're good, says Michael Roberts, the training editor at The Cincinnati Enquirer, at running meetings, setting standards and doing budgets.

They also keep reporters plugged into what's going on in the newsroom so that reporters don't feel isolated. And they make sure reporters get credit for their work. Nothing helps cement an editor-reporter relationship like an editor's efforts to get a reporter a raise, some public recognition or some attention from one of the paper's top editors.

5. Challenge:

A writer who doesn't value personal growth isn't much of a writer. And good writers who

aren't regularly challenged to improve either stagnate or leave.

Good editors are key to creating that challenge. Not only do they set standards, but they also create continual opportunities for reporters -- as well as photographers, illustrators, designers, copy editors, researchers and others -- to explore untried territory.

Kathy Norton, public editor at the Poughkeepsie Journal, says, "My definition of a great editor: Somebody who can effectively lower the boom when you've messed up, but an hour later inspire you to come back tomorrow and pour your heart into the next story."

6. Personability:

The final trait essential to great editing may be the most fundamental. Reporters, not surprisingly, prefer to work with editors who are decent human beings.

Stress fills most newsrooms. Conflict is as essential to putting out a newspaper as coffee. And the profession's macho traditions mean that civility is sometimes a rare commodity.

For a reporter facing a deadline, ideal editors are harbors safe from the storms that regularly rage across newsrooms. They stay cool in the face of crisis. They project a quiet confidence that pushes aside uncertainty. They have a sense of humor that breaks tension.

Carl Stepp describes all that as "a positive storyside manner." Good editors are fun to be with, and they make story-conferencing or shoulder-to-shoulder editing a pleasurable part of the reporter's day. They are, in other words, the complete opposites of the curmudgeons of yore.

"There's nothing worse than sinking your heart into a story," one of the Charlotte reporters told Mike Weinstein, "only to have the first person who reads it react with a dour attitude and a big ole frown."

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Of course, editors are defined by more than their relationships with reporters and the others who produce the content of the newspaper. Editors who are paragons of collaboration with reporters may create false camaraderie by painting upper management as the enemy. That way lies frustration and, eventually, failure. Gene Foreman, in summarizing what he heard at several editing seminars, said, "Top editors want their line editors to take ownership in the whole paper, to recognize that they are part of the team that is running the place."

Rhonda Owen says a great editor "admits when he is wrong and doesn't pass the buck to upper management for unpopular decisions."

But enough.... Editing is a world filled with human beings, not demigods. And newsrooms are imperfect places, chaotic corners of reality characterized by never-ending deadlines, incessant distractions and a thousand daily opportunities for error.

So to ask an editor to meet every standard set by every editing critic may be a bit much. "Think of what we're demanding," says Chip Scanlan, head of writing programs at the Poynter Institute. "We're talking about Christ-like figures, for God's sake."

Given the standards we set for editors, each of them will inevitably, in someone's eyes, turn out as the disappointment that Pulitzer described.

So let's close with a dose of realism. Not every editor can be all things to all reporters. And, in the end, the only thing a writer can absolutely, without exception, demand from any editor is an honest effort, a willing spirit and the recognition that reporting and writing are two of the hardest things that any human beings ever sets out to do.

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