



Kindling the Copy Editor's Flame

By [Steve Buttry](#)

writing coach, Omaha World-Herald

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"Word has reached me that you are having fun on the set. This must stop."

Jack Warner, quoted in "Lauren Bacall By Myself"

By Steve Buttry

Jack Warner sounds like a 21st Century newspaper editor. Working on a copy desk or anywhere in a newsroom should be fun. Copy editors should feel energized by their work. They should look forward to going to work every day. A management cliché is that the supervisor must "light a fire" under workers. That's not necessary in journalism. Journalists come with a fire already lit. We come into the business excited about the creative challenges news presents. The newsroom manager's job is not to light the fire, but to tend it and give it fuel. Inspiring journalists is one of the most important jobs of any newsroom manager. Your success depends on the work of the copy editors on your desk. Journalists often mirror the energy of an enthusiastic leader or the lethargy of a dispirited leader. You should consider whether each action or statement is more likely to nurture or discourage creativity. You should examine whether your actions, statements and attitude are more likely to inspire effort or fuel cynicism. You should ask whether your words and deeds are more likely to make the jobs under you more rewarding or more frustrating. Sometimes you have to bear bad news. Sometimes you have to enforce deadlines, ensure copy flow, fill unpopular shifts or carry out budgets. Sometimes you need to deliver honest criticism. Sometimes you have to tell unwelcome truths about company policies, a staff member's performance or decisions by you and other editors. You must tell these truths candidly, but that must be a small part of your communication with staff members. Newspaper work should be fun, and supervisors make a huge contribution to how much copy editors enjoy their jobs.

Praise, Praise, Praise

Praise daily. Every supervisor should make a point every day of telling her staff what they have done well. This must be as pressing as the next deadline or the news meeting. However else your day gets away from you, you must praise the good work of your staff. Praise must be specific and prompt and whenever possible delivered in person. "Drive-by praise" such as "good catch" or "nice headline" as you pass the person's desk can seem insincere. Specific praise not only shows sincerity, but shows that you really noticed the good work. It also teaches by specifically identifying and reinforcing what the editor did well and what you'd like to see the editor do consistently. Tell the editor you really liked the strong verb he used and how much information he squeezed into a one-column head. Thank the editor for spotting a bright wire feature that might have slipped past if not for her alertness and sense of whimsy. Applaud the initiative in raising an important question with the metro desk and a reporter. Every day praise at least half of the people who work directly for you. If you can't praise half the people who are working for you, maybe you need to deal with some performance issues. You may need to criticize, too, but don't mix your praise directly with your criticism. "I really liked the mix of stories you used on that page, but ..." doesn't count as praise. The staff member will only hear what you say after the "but."

Spread the praise around. If you have multiple levels beneath you, praise at least one person who works indirectly for you. Praise at least one person who doesn't work for you. This fosters better teamwork in the newsroom and builds bridges between the copy desk and other departments. It also builds some good will that may help when you need to have less pleasant conversations with the same colleague.

Praise your workers to your bosses. Copy editing is a thankless job. Your staff does not get bylines, even for the best headlines and layouts. Great catches generally remain anonymous. Hardly anyone sees the hard work involved in cutting a complex 25-inch wire story to fit a 12-inch hole and still cover the issue well. Few colleagues and no readers appreciate the work involved in compiling a package of briefs. You need to notice good work and extra effort and spread the word to your bosses. Drop by Joanne's desk and tell her about someone's excellent work. When you pass Deanna in the newsroom, tell her about someone who deserves praise. Send Larry an e-mail, calling his attention to a stellar performance. Larry has said that copy editing is not his area of strength. You need to take this as an invitation to educate him about the good work your staff does. The top editors won't always remember or have time to praise or thank the editor, but sometimes they will. And they should know who's doing good work on your desk.

Celebrate success. One of the supervisor's most important functions is identifying and rewarding excellence and improvement. When a staff member excels, you should celebrate appropriately to the success. If it's major success, you might encourage your bosses to recognize it with a bonus or lunch on the company or an extra day off or praise from on high. Celebrate publicly when that's appropriate. Don't forget the small successes that might just merit a "way to go." Especially if the budget is too tight for tangible rewards, find creative and appropriate ways to celebrate and recognize achievements. It's especially important to

celebrate improvement by a staff member who's struggling. It's easy for a supervisor to think, "It's about time" when a staff member finally delivers, or to say you're not going to praise someone just for doing his job. But for the struggling employee, getting it right is a breakthrough that you need to recognize and celebrate appropriately. Don't overdo it. That can be read as sarcasm, like the basketball fans who cheer a bad shooter who finally makes a free throw. Identify the goal the staff member has achieved. Discuss how to do it again, or how to achieve the next goal. And be generous and sincere with your praise.

Challenge Your Staff to Do Better

Turn criticism into challenges. You cannot let substandard work pass unnoticed. But you may not have to point it out. If you didn't like something about a headline or page or a news judgment or if you think someone failed to catch a wire story that we should have run or didn't catch some problems in a story, ask a neutral question: What did you think of that headline? Why did you decide to play up or down the particular stories on this page? The staff member may not have liked the headline herself or may be second-guessing the news play. Then you can agree on the problem and help the copy editor frame a challenge to address it. If the editor doesn't agree with your assessment, then you may have to criticize. Do so candidly and then frame the challenge in the same conversation. "Your headlines use too many weak verbs" stings more than, "I'd like you to take a little more time on each headline to see if you can find stronger verbs." "Your editing is sloppy" stings more than "I want you to slow down a bit when you're editing so you can catch mistakes like this." While the criticism may still sting, the challenge turns the criticism from a cause to brood into an opportunity to show improvement. The challenge can energize the staff member and provide a specific avenue for growth and recognition, which the editor will appreciate after the sting subsides.

Follow up. Any time you issue a challenge, follow up and assess how the staff member met the challenge. If he responded strongly, be generous and prompt with your praise. If the improvement was marginal, ask him what he liked and didn't like about his response to the challenge, be candid about what you liked and didn't like and set a new challenge.

Turn praise into challenges. Don't challenge just in terms of weaknesses. Challenge your best staff members to become even better. If you absolutely loved a piece of work, still ask the staff member how she could have improved it. Ask about aspirations and together identify challenges that will help accomplished staff members build on their strengths. Challenges energize high-achieving journalists and help them reach new heights.

Identify reachable goals. Discuss with staff members their strengths and weaknesses and set goals to help them build on the strengths and overcome the weaknesses. Set long-range goals, such as laying out more pages. Set mid-range goals, such as laying out a particular page daily or weekly. Set specific immediate goals, such as using more visual elements on this particular page tonight. Work with the staff member to achieve the goals. Tell him how well you think he's

doing at reaching the goals. Don't just say "nice job," but note how that effort helped meet the goal you both set. On the other hand, if the editor fell short, remind him of the goal and renew the challenge of meeting it.

Don't overdo the "good cop" routine. Supervisors often have to carry out unpleasant policies or directives from higher editors or corporate offices. It's easy and tempting to play good-cop-bad-cop, with the top editors or publisher as the bad cop and the sympathetic mid-level supervisor as the good cop. Sometimes that's effective and helpful. Sometimes it's honest. You want the editors on the desk to know that you champion their work. You want a newsroom where the flow goes up as well as down. You don't want to hurt your credibility by arguing too vigorously for a policy your staff knows you wouldn't support. But if you play good cop too much, you erode your own credibility and strength, as well as undercutting your bosses. The fact is, you are management. The more you take responsibility for the policies and decisions you carry out, the more reporters will respect your own authority.

Confront problems. Confronting a problem is never pleasant, but ignoring a problem almost never works. If the staff member has not responded to challenges you have presented positively, you must address the problem directly. Do this privately rather than in front of the person's colleagues. Identify the problem, keeping your focus on the behavior or the situation, not the person. Avoid assigning or accepting blame. Shift the discussion from the problem to the solution. At this stage, you do assign and accept responsibility. Tell the copy editor what you expect of him and explain what he can expect of you. The solution needs to be shared. Even if your role is only feedback, you must spell out your role. Make sure the copy editor understands and accepts his role in the solution. Make sure that you provide feedback and carry out any other roles you have accepted.

Communicate face to face. Shooting e-mails back and forth is tempting, easy and sometimes necessary. But you should communicate important messages and many lesser ones face to face. If you have a complaint, look the staff member in the eye and state the problem. If you have praise, go to the staff member's desk, smile and deliver your praise. (However, if you keep missing connections, send the praise by e-mail rather than risk forgetting to praise. Or better yet, send a hand-written note.) Never send an e-mail to a staff member when you're angry. Written messages last longer than your anger. Physical presence, eye contact and a demonstration that you care are important parts of effective communication. The first two are lacking in an e-mail message. And the third is weak (your words may say that you care, but your actions say this one isn't worth getting out of your chair). After you communicate face-to-face, maybe you should follow up with an e-mail, to spell out a goal clearly or reinforce or document a message. But deliver the news, good or bad, eyeball to eyeball. Don't use an e-mail message or meeting with the full staff to communicate about a problem with only one or two staff members. Deal with the offenders face to face, one on one. If you tell the whole staff a message that's really intended for Editors A and B, chances are A and B will be the only ones who don't pay attention. And Editors C through Z will resent you for implying that they also offended and/or will resent A and B for causing trouble for everyone else.

Respond to bad times. We've been through tough times at the World-Herald, especially on the copy desk. The pay freeze, hiring freeze, desk reorganization, change in how we handle editions and the redesign have stressed your staff in ways that you and they cannot control. Editors need to lead grumpy staffs even in these times. Acknowledge the difficulties. Your morale will suffer and so will your staff's. Commiserate with griping staff members. Then appeal to their professionalism. Maybe someone's talking openly about leaving. Tell him, "You're going to need some good clips then. How about working these stories into a terrific package?" Maybe someone's griping about the latest unpopular corporate decision. Join the griping for a few minutes if you're not thrilled with the decision yourself. Then make a light-hearted comment about the need to get back to work. And get back to work. In difficult times, swallow some of your criticism if it's not a matter of upholding standards. Dial up the praise and the thanks and the pleases.

Keep looking forward. Unhappy people like to look back. But going back is difficult if not impossible. Your staff members will complain about the desk reorganization and long for the days when we had a separate features copy desk or when we made the metro edition more distinct from the sunrise. Don't debate these issues with them. For one thing, they may be right. And if they're wrong, you're not going to convince them. To a certain extent, you need to let them vent. Where you feel the need to engage, take one or both of these approaches: Sympathize (which is not the same as agreeing) or shift the focus of the discussion forward, to discuss ways to improve the current situation rather than returning to the past.

Play to strengths. If an editor is strong in a particular area, but needs to develop in other areas, don't simply concentrate on improving in the problem areas. Sure, identify the problems and present the challenges. But usually you should assign this person work that calls on his strengths.

General Leadership Tips

Enjoy your job. No job is perfect, but newsroom leadership positions offer creative, exciting work with interesting, dynamic people. It's also demanding and sometimes thankless work. If you don't enjoy the job, you won't do it well. If you are not happy in the job, identify the issues that make you unhappy. If some of them are in your control, change what you can. Address with your bosses issues that they control. Assess the issues that your bosses won't change or that you and your bosses can't change. Can you place them in context (remember, no job is perfect)? Can you make adjustments so that you can be happy in those circumstances? If not, perhaps you should talk to your bosses about a non-management role. Supervising isn't for everyone.

Share control. Discuss with your staff, individually and collectively, ways that you can give people more control over what they do. The ideal situation is where you set standards: meeting

deadlines, steady page flow, strong headlines, clean copy, etc. and the staff members have as much freedom as possible to find the best ways meet the goals. People with more control over their work generally feel more responsibility for their work, feel happier about their work, do better work and take the initiative and creativity to find better ways to meet goals.

Build camaraderie and teamwork. Watch for opportunities to encourage camaraderie and teamwork among the staff. Some of it may come directly through work: assigning a couple editors whose skills complement each other to work together on a task. Some of it may be tangential: a potluck to celebrate a holiday or achievement, a surprise birthday celebration, a Scrabble tournament on the desk after work some night. Don't try to force friendship. Some journalists are loners who like to find some solitude on a copy desk. If they're doing good work, leave them alone. Develop camaraderie among the rest of the staff and they'll join the fun as they feel comfortable.

Show your excitement. Let your staff see when you are excited about a job well done or a looming task. Ask lots of questions. Draw other people into the discussion of play and space and elements for the package and coordination with other departments. Don't reserve your excitement and your praise for the stars on your staff and for the big stories. You expect staff members to regard their work as important even if they are writing or shooting for the inside pages. You need to show each staff member that you also regard his work as important. Your neglect of a staff member may reinforce her view that she's stuck in an unimportant job.

Get physical. Physically show your energy and your enthusiasm. You can do this without getting silly and without crossing any lines of propriety. And you can do it within your own personality. Don't pump your fist in the air over an exciting development if that doesn't feel comfortable to you. But if you would do it on the softball field, do it in the newsroom when the occasion calls for it. Maybe a high five, a handshake, a thumbs-up or brief applause is more your style. At the very least, smile.

Respect the editor's authorship. Copy editors often labor in anonymity. They don't get bylines for their headlines and layouts, but they still can and should take pride in them. Respect that pride by giving them as much leeway as possible to be creative. Respect that pride by giving them the chance to improve a substandard head or layout rather than simply redoing it yourself. Ask staff members individually and as a group how you can give them more control over their own work, while ensuring that your group meets your goals for the desk as a whole or the newsroom as a whole.

Value your staff's ideas. Encourage copy editors to suggest local angles to stories they see on the wires and to suggest follow-ups to local stories they edit. Guide them in where and how to pitch the ideas, but don't volunteer or insist on pitching the ideas to another desk yourself.

Use your sense of humor. Too many editors are too serious. Sometimes you have to be, but

you don't always have to be. You should be fun to work with. Laugh with the folks on your desk. Poke fun at yourself. Have fun. Be fun.

Avoid sarcasm. Sarcasm and humor are not the same thing. Lots of journalists are sarcastic and your staff members will speak sarcastically to and about you. They will annoy you with their sarcasm. They will annoy you inappropriately with their sarcasm. Do not respond in kind. Your power as the supervisor makes your sarcasm inherently meaner and more demeaning. It's not always fair, but it's true.

Apologize. You're going to make mistakes. You may use sarcasm inappropriately with staff members. You may lose your temper. You may make the right decision but communicate it ineffectively. You may make the wrong decision. Apologize. Don't grovel, but apologize. Apologize specifically and clearly. If you believe you made the right move but know you should have consulted the staff member or at least informed her, apologize specifically without dwelling on the area of difference. (If the area of difference needs to be dealt with to avoid future problems, keep this discussion distinct from the apology.) Staff members will remember an arrogant, inflexible attitude much longer than they will remember most mistakes their bosses make.

Respect your staff's personal life. Staff members are entitled to a life outside the newsroom. When work has to intrude, acknowledge the intrusion. Apologize for calling at home or for interfering with dinner or vacation or weekend plans. Especially on the night desk and especially after our recent reorganization, daily work itself is a major intrusion on personal life for many copy editors. So be extra sensitive about added intrusions and be as flexible as you can in responding to the stress of the daily intrusion.

Respect your own personal life. You have a demanding job. You will meet those demands better for the long haul if you protect and respect a healthy personal life. If your job cuts into family time, as many news jobs do, make an effort to spend the remaining family time enjoyably. Be creative in finding meaningful ways to use time with your family. Tend to your own needs as well. Find time for exercise. Make time for a hobby or some pursuits you enjoy. Get an annual physical, and don't delay getting treatment for any physical discomfort or emotional distress. Have fun. Regularly. Especially when you're feeling a lot of stress on the job. You may experience a personal crisis, such as a troubled marriage, troubled children, health problems, a death in the family or an ailing parent. Confide in your supervisor and discuss whether you need some temporary relief from some of your job stress. That's a sign of wisdom, not weakness. And it will help your career better than appearing distracted without explanation or collapsing eventually under the combined stress. Confide in your immediate staff about the personal crisis, too. You may be sharing your stress in ways you don't recognize, and they're entitled to a general understanding (but not all the details).

Think people, not just production. You face major responsibilities to meet deadlines, fill

space, manage story lengths and coordinate copy and page flow. Sometimes you may feel as though you run an assembly line. Resist the temptation to act that way. You need to ask when is this story or that page going to move, but don't let production dominate your communication with any editor. Sure, you need to get that information, but don't forget to ask how good it's going to be or whether your staff members are enjoying their jobs or how you can help them perform better. And give permission now and then to take the extra time to really polish a particular story or headline or page.

Other resources on newsroom leadership

Edward Miller's "Reflections on Leadership":

<http://newsroomleadership.com/Reflections/index.html>

Poynter.org's "Leading Lines": <http://www.poynter.org/lead/>

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