



Conducting Feedback and Evaluations

One of the most common complaints from the staff in television and radio newsrooms is that they don't get adequate feedback. Providing regular feedback is an important leadership skill because it is a way of establishing and reinforcing the newsroom's mission, making sure your expectations are understood, and holding people accountable for meeting them.

Former news director Scott Libin, now at The Poynter Institute, says it's impossible to give too much feedback and difficult to give enough. Feedback is critically important, however, and not just for your employees. "Each time you provide feedback, it is a chance to share your vision," says Angie Kucharski, vice president of news and station manager at KCNC-TV in

Denver. Besides, says News 8 Austin news director Kevin Benz, "We make our jobs easier by making our people better."

In a healthy newsroom, feedback comes often, in many forms, and it's framed in a positive way. When employees get feedback only when they do something wrong, they can become defensive and resentful. Constructive feedback, on the other hand, offers an opportunity for professional development and can motivate staffers to do better work. (See "Motivating Employees" under the Newsroom Leadership section.)

To be effective, feedback must be both timely and specific. Nexstar vice president and corporate news director Susana Schuler expects the

group's news directors to demonstrate "a religious dedication to feedback." She advises them to give the staff feedback daily in one form or another and to hold informal, one-on-one sessions to review tape at least once every six weeks with each staff member or newscast group. "It is one of the most important keys to success," she says. New hires should get the most frequent feedback—weekly for the first three months, Schuler advises. You either get a great employee or you know it in 90 days," she says.

Paul Lewis at WTIC-TV in Hartford, CT, is one of many news directors who use a variety of methods to provide feedback. "I send out daily love notes," he says. "I pump them up. Some people like to get an email because they can keep it. I do a handwritten note if it's really special. And for extraordinary work, I may get the general manager involved and ask him to send a note." Lewis also puts out a weekly memo highlighting good work and asks the staff to nominate "wins." He believes it spurs a healthy competition for recognition and leads to better work.

Lewis even gives feedback during the interview process. "I take a lot of time to break down a tape. I talk about the things that are important to me," he says. "With finalists, I'm testing them to see if they can handle it." Lewis tries to meet one-on-one with each staffer for half an hour or more, at least every six months. The key, he says, is to put feedback sessions on the calendar to make sure they really happen. It's also important to schedule them to fit the employee's workday. Location matters, too. To make sure the news director's office does not become associated with negative conversations, call employees in

MAKING FEEDBACK WORK
Schedule time to conduct feedback
Provide feedback to everyone
Don't do it all yourself
Make it a two-way conversation

for purely positive feedback every so often.

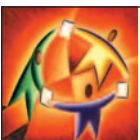
It can be difficult to focus on the product in the midst of a busy news day. Mark Miller, news director at WBAL-AM, archives every story and newscast in digital format for later listening. Once a month, he schedules uninterrupted time to listen to each person's work and then arranges for a one-on-one review.

During that conversation Miller plays examples of the employee's work to illustrate the points he wants to emphasize.

To make feedback sessions most productive, they need to be conversations, not monologues. News directors cite the following helpful techniques:

- **Ask questions** Have the employee evaluate his or her own work. Begin with what they're proud of. Then ask what they'd like to improve.
- **Show and tell** Come prepared to demonstrate both what's working and what needs improvement.
- **Be specific** Spell out any changes you would like to see and offer practical suggestions for improvement. Don't ask for better standups; explain what it takes to do better standups.

News directors don't have to do all the individual feedback sessions themselves. It's not only OK, it may even be desirable to delegate responsibility for some of the routine feedback to other news managers. The chief photographer can offer feedback to the photojournalism staff, for example. It's crucial, however, for the news director to model the approach and to



"Our chief want in life is somebody who shall make us what we can be."

RALPH WALDO EMERSON



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make sure all newsroom managers know what the expectations are for each employee they supervise.

To reinforce the importance of feedback in the newsroom, managers can create a culture in which feedback is not just their job but everyone's responsibility. How to do it:

- **Involve everyone** Ask employees to nominate colleagues for recognition for work that might not otherwise receive credit.
- **Create an award** A formal award, with financial or other perks attached, can recognize an employee or a team.
- **Go public** Put a dry-erase board in a central location where everyone can contribute positive comments.
- **Look for teaching opportunities** Ask one employee to explain to others how he or she accomplished a good piece of work. This rewards the employee publicly and provides valuable training for others.

Each feedback session should be tailored to the content and the specific needs of the individual. Praise in public, criticize in private. In general, says Marci Burdick, senior vice president of Schurz Communications, novices need gentler handling than veterans. She believes in coaching novices through their mistakes and being direct with veterans if they're not producing.

Some of the most productive feedback sessions are not conducted in private. Many news directors use the daily editorial meeting to highlight a "win"—something that went right or was done well the day before. NPR managing editor Bill Marimow calls that "incidental public praise." It's less about rewarding the person responsible than it is about teaching others. "Establish the

principle you want to reinforce and illustrate how it was met," he says. WTIC-TV's Lewis practices what he calls "pre-emptive feedback" during editorial meetings. In discussing how a story will be done, he offers specific suggestions that reinforce the newsroom's goals.

Post-newscast meetings are a great time to provide constructive feedback, but at many stations they wind up being a recitation of mistakes. "Show debriefs are not about finger pointing," says Schuler, "they're about feedback and quality control." When Libin was at KSTP-TV in Minneapolis-St. Paul, he instituted daily debriefs. "In the past, they tended to occur only if things went wrong," Libin says. "Of course, you want to address errors before they repeat themselves, but the key is to have a meeting every day and focus on what goes right."

If you give feedback often, the formal employee evaluation should go more smoothly. Letting employees know how you think they're doing on a routine basis is a good way to avoid unpleasant surprises at performance review time. "Regular reviews let people know where they stand," says WHBQ-TV news director Ken Jobe.

Performance Reviews

Stations use a variety of methods and timetables to conduct performance reviews. Some schedule reviews on employees' anniversary dates. Others do all of them at the end of the year. At KLAS-TV in Las Vegas, the station does detailed "360 reviews." A dozen co-workers, selected by a news manager, are asked to fill out evaluation forms for each employee—rating them on everything from knowledge and skills to dependability, teamwork and professional growth. It's a time-consuming process, so it's spread throughout the year. Managing editor Eric Hulnick says he completes two reviews a month, on average. The employee sees a summary of the co-workers' feedback in addition to the supervisor's rating.



"People are not motivated by failure; they are motivated by achievement and recognition."

F. F. FOURNIES, AUTHOR

The employee and supervisor meet, develop an action plan, then meet again and sign off on the plan. Hulnick finds that co-workers' ratings mean much more to the employees than what supervisors say.

KCNC-TV's KucharSKI covers four areas in her employee feedback sessions: the person's strengths, weaknesses (paying special attention to areas of specific and immediate concern), setting goals and establishing timelines. It's not enough to note what needs improvement, she says. Employees need to agree on a specific plan and a schedule for making progress.

Thor Wasbotten, former news director at KGUN-TV in Phoenix and now at Pennsylvania State University, stresses that "nothing in the formal performance review should be a surprise to the employee. Areas to be worked on should be addressed throughout the year." He also reminds news directors that reviews should be based on the entire year's performance, not just last month's work.

To be prepared for formal performance reviews, KucharSKI recommends some timesaving systems. Here are some suggestions:

- **Make a feedback file for every employee** Save a copy of any written feedback you send. Make notes about conversations and file them as well. At review time, the file provides specific examples of each employee's performance.
- **Take and send notes** Jot down what you notice about employee performance for easy reference and recall. Keep dated notes in the individual's file. Take a half-hour weekly to review the notes and send written feedback, if warranted.
- **Tap consultants** Save notes from the talent coach to review before conversations with employees.

EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK
Effective feedback
Timely
Specific
Written and oral
Public, if positive
Private, if critical

■ Schedule reviews

Put them on the calendar well in advance to give you and the employee time to prepare and to make sure they really happen on time.

Managers may also consider asking employees to reflect on their own performance. Many news

directors ask the employee to critique his or her own work before the news director offers guidance or suggestions. They elicit and respond to employee concerns.

News managers should also find a way to get honest feedback from the staff on their own performance. "Ask about ways you interact with them and what they think of it," says Schuler. This can be done through informal conversations or by asking employees to fill out an anonymous questionnaire. Either way, it's important to stress to employees that you really want their candor. You must also make a commitment to yourself that you will not bear grudges if you don't like what you hear and that you will work on your weaknesses.

"Automatics:" Setting Daily Performance Expectations

Evaluations are built around expectations, which have to be clear, consistent and well understood. At WTSP-TV in Tampa, FL, each working group has set its own expectations. When Rich Murphy worked at WTSP-TV as chief photojournalist (before moving to WTTG-TV in Washington, DC) he initiated the idea of "automatics"—which WTSP-TV news director Lane Michaelsen describes as a list of "what you expect of yourself every day and what others should expect of you." The photojournalists took a couple of months to develop their list, in a process Michaelsen describes as agonizing but worth it. "It built a lot of trust, and it took care of simple things that get in the way of getting work done."

Since then, the station's reporters, producers, tape editors and assignment editors have



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developed their own automatics. Each list begins with the statement, “I will ...” and includes 20 or more specific promises that employees say they will keep every day.

Michaelsen says the automatics are used routinely to keep tabs on performance. “Instead of waiting for something to become a real problem, we can meet and talk about problems along the way.” At annual evaluation time, staffers rate themselves on each automatic. Supervisors rate them, too, and then meet one-on-one with employees to discuss their performance. One reason the system works, says Michaelsen, is that it’s not top-down. “The most important thing is that it has to come from the working group. The process is as important as the product,” he says.

Other newsrooms have adopted the “automatics” concept and developed their own lists. News 8 Austin even incorporated the idea into a formal training program for new hires. (See “Getting New Hires Started Right” under the Recruiting, and Retaining section.)

SAMPLE OF WTSP-TV AUTOMATICS

REPORTERS WILL

Bring story ideas every day

Talk to the photojournalist

Write quickly

Learn something new

PHOTOJOURNALISTS WILL

Always have a tape in the camera

Always use an earpiece

Keep in touch with the desk

Report failed equipment ASAP

ASSIGNMENT EDITORS WILL

Answer the phone courteously

Communicate with producers

Check for new information before newscasts

Update the story idea file

while improving their work. WBAL-AM’s Miller says he coaches during story development by asking reporters what’s missing or what else is needed to tell the story well. Three weeks later, he does it again. “I make them think about what worked, what didn’t and how would we do it differently.”

The key to effective coaching is to ask good, open-ended questions and to refrain from imposing your own judgments. Coaches have to watch not only their words but also their body language and facial expression, which can so easily convey disinterest or disapproval.

Managers must learn to coach rather than fix their employees’ work. For example, when reviewing a script, advises Jill Geisler of The Poynter Institute, “Sit on your hands. Keep your mitts off the copy. Talk, don’t type.” As news director at WITI-TV in Milwaukee, Geisler says she trained herself to ask reporters to tell the story orally before she looked at what they’d written. Then, after reading the script, she could make specific suggestions based on what they had said and let them make the revisions. “On tight deadlines

Coaching for Success

Coaching is an approach to providing guidance and feedback that can help employees grow

I would ask their permission to type a change in their copy,” she said, to show respect for the writer.



“The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.”

WILLIAM JAMES, AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER, 1842-1910

In a broadcast newsroom with effective coaching, staff members share responsibility for what goes on the air. Photographers help reporters write. Reporters and photographers offer material for teases and tags to newscast producers. And managers ask questions instead of just giving orders.

In a coaching newsroom, people aren't shy about seeking the help they need, and they often turn to peers to get it. Chief photographer Bob Gould at WZZM-TV in Grand Rapids, MI, invites other photographers into his edit bay to screen stories that he's working on. It's a reality check, he says, "to see if an edit works, if sound is understandable."

Miller has established a formal peer-review process for new hires in his newsroom. "I pair

them up with one of the two or three people who really get our philosophy of news coverage," he says, and they act as coaches for the new hires. "The best ones also learn from it, so it's a win-win." The result of the peer review is a newsroom with a coaching culture, where reporters routinely ask each other for help on stories.

At Northwestern University, research on newspaper newsrooms found that older journalists often felt underused and underappreciated. The veterans also said they wanted to mentor younger journalists but were not encouraged to do so. Many broadcast veterans probably feel the same way. Newsrooms might consider establishing a mentoring program to help younger journalists build new skills while keeping veterans fresh and engaged in their work.