

Reflections on Leadership
A System for Error Management
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When editors discover errors in the paper, the temptation is to react swiftly. The justifications are familiar:

- *You can't ignore errors; accuracy is the bedrock of credibility.*
- *How else will they learn if I don't point out their errors?*
- *It's my job to maintain standards of quality.*

The reasoning is unassailable. Who can be against accuracy, credibility, quality and learning? It's the timing that needs rethinking. Responding immediately to published errors has two consequences:

- It threatens self-esteem. Getting people's attention about mistakes is one matter; driving them over the line into anxiety and defensiveness is another. Citing errors on the day of publication takes you too close to that line. The risk isn't worth it.
- It prevents you from seeing patterns. The salience of a day's errors often masks their underlying causes, such as the failure to provide proper training. Detecting long-term patterns is difficult when your attention and emotions are fixated on that day's paper.

One caveat: I'm not writing about "code-blue" errors or egregious screw ups that need correction in print in the next cycle. I'm talking about the kinds of "errors" usually cited in the morning news meeting: poor grammar and syntax, confusing leads, inaccurate or incomplete reporting. If the editor's intent is to improve performance, she has to be more concerned about long-term learning than short-term lashing out.

Here's a system that will help improve accuracy. It doesn't cost anything, it saves time, and it produces learning. But it requires restraint and purposeful teaching.

1. **Appoint a monitor** to collect and codify errors, and to look for patterns. Most morning critiques are too reactive to that day's mistakes. Learning requires a more systematic look at what's wrong and why.

2. **Classify the errors.** A minor typo is not as important as a reporter who doesn't know how to cover a trial. Here are three classifications you can monitor:

- *Spelling, syntax, and style.* This covers mastery of the rules of our language and of your newspaper's style.
- *Reporting skills.* Some stories are factually accurate and grammatically correct, but incomplete because of inadequate reporting.

- *Quality of writing.* Acknowledging quality is not enough; a good editor must know how to teach it. The first step toward learning is to capture examples of the range of quality in your staff's work.

3. **Publish the “Winners & Sinners.”** Each month a select group of editors and reporters, after screening and classifying the errors, should publish an instructional report. In the *Spelling, Syntax, Style* category, the report could list the errors in alphabetical order, following the format of a stylebook. Be sure to include examples of good usage. In *Reporting Skills*, the report could compare a story with significant holes to a comparable but well-crafted piece. The same technique could be used in a *Quality of Writing* section. Giving an example of what NOT to do is only useful if you can show how it should have been done. That requires either finding a piece for comparison, or rewriting the original as a demonstration.

4. **Protect the guilty.** Under no circumstances should you flog someone publicly. If an example exposes a specific person, either change the text to document your point or don't use the example at all. This is the hardest part of the exercise. It's much easier to clip the error and post it publicly, but that leads to defensiveness, not learning. Exercising restraint means you will have to overlook some examples you'd like to publicize. So be it. The consequences of public reprimand far outweigh the inconvenience of finding another example.

5. **Hold people accountable.** Just because you protect the guilty doesn't mean you can't hold people accountable. By publishing *Spelling, Syntax, Style* errors, you can demand that henceforth people learn and follow the rules, especially if your “Winners & Sinners” is carefully put together to spotlight the high-priority errors you're trying to eliminate. When someone repeats one of the highlighted errors, you can give him the “Winners & Sinners” page and open a conversation about his being responsible for his own learning.

6. **Search for systemic problems.** Some problems are the result of insufficient education and training. Ask your monitoring group of editors and reporters to help uncover those systemic causes.

7. **Identify those who keep making the same mistakes.** Give them special attention, but hold them accountable for results. Some will respond to instruction and improve their effort and eventual performance. Others won't. Work diligently until it's clear someone is in the “won't” category. Then help find him another career.

8. **Don't try to measure accuracy.** A stated goal such as “*Improve Accuracy*” appears to be a positive and noble objective, but in fact, it is a “negative goal,” that is, it can only be judged by the absence of something--errors. That distinction is important in any evaluation system, which is much more effective if it aims at positive, measurable goals. Breakthroughs to higher performance will come on through persistent and competent teaching, not by counting errors.

Trailheads:

- *The Leader's Handbook: A guide to inspiring your people and managing the daily workflow* by Peter R. Scholtes. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998.

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