

NOTHING AND

by Louise Flanagan

COACHING

HAD A HEYDAY MOMENT – BACK THERE IN THE 80s WHEN POYNTER INSTITUTE COURSES HAD AN IMPACT ON SOUTH AFRICAN NEWSROOMS. THEN IT BECAME A TECHNIQUE THAT WENT OUT OF FASHION, IT WAS COSTLY, TIME-CONSUMING AND IF IT DIDN'T INVOLVE THE RIGHT KIND OF MENTOR, IT COULD HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON MORALE. BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AN ORGANISATION STICKS IT OUT BY PUTTING ENERGY INTO COACHING AND DEDICATING TIME AND RESOURCES TO IT?

So what does a coaching editor do? Nothing and everything, that's what.

It's the job that can involve anything that nobody else has time to do, that fits into odd corners of the day, that is defined by constant interruption and which is ideally invisible.

It's the job that's the first to disappear when those financial guys start **frowning at editorial expenses** and it's the job that's often the most difficult for editors to justify keeping. It doesn't work at all if you don't have ferocious support from your editor.

It's also an enormously rewarding job.

I've been coaching editor at the Daily Dispatch in East London for four years now. Most newsrooms have someone who does **at least some of the work** that goes with this job but probably under a different title – like deputy news editor or general dog's body. The difference in being called a coaching editor is that it makes staff development – rather than tomorrow's newspaper – the cornerstone of the job.

This is the way it works at the Dispatch. We have a news-desk run between three people: the news editor, who is in charge of the reporting staff, assigning the news and running the daily diary; the night news editor, who is in charge of collecting our reporters' copy and doing the first rough cut on it; and the coaching editor, who's supposed to help **make life easier for everyone else**.

In a small organisation, one person could do all three jobs, mostly because they have no choice. In a bigger organisation, these three people have to work together as though they're all the same person. It's better if these three people don't report to each other (our three all report directly to the editor) so they can't pull rank on each other and have to co-operate and compromise with each other instead. This only works if these three people and their team **share a passion for getting the best stories** and pushing everyone in that team to their limits.

These are some of the things the coaching editor does (or tries to do, when there isn't a crisis relating to getting tomorrow's paper out):

- Get in at the planning stages of hiring new newsroom staff. The coach often ends up helping them do their jobs so it's a good idea to have some input on who's being hired in the first place and why. This means being involved in planning which jobs need to be filled or cut up and re-assigned to existing staff; what skills and qualifications are needed to do the job and getting these written into the letter of appointment; what can and can't be taught to new employees within the newsroom; **what sort of journalists will fit into your newsroom team**; interviewing and selecting applicants, and shuffling work among existing staff until the staff gap is filled.

- Help orientate new staff. With junior staff, this usually means spending several hours over a few days showing them the basics of their new jobs, **finding them a newsroom buddy for quick help**, doing a fast check on their skills and abilities,

arranging – or doing – some basic assessment of their work over a few weeks, and giving them feedback on their work. With senior staff, or **people hired to do a job you don't know how to do yourself, at least make sure they know where the coffee is kept**, exactly what their job involves, who they report to and who they should ask for help. And just be available to network on their behalf for a while.

- Find out what people want to do in their jobs and find them the training to help them do it.

- Get newsroom people to talk to each other. That often means setting up teams who may work together on a particular story for a couple of hours or a couple of weeks (maybe a reporter, a photographer, a librarian, a page designer and the news editor), **make sure the brief and deadlines are clear, then get out of their way** unless they ask for help. Lots of troubleshooting can be done on the spot by getting the right people to talk to each other immediately (that means before it's too late to get the story out of the paper). One of my colleagues calls this MBWA – Management By Walking Around. It works. Tea and muffins with it help even more.

- Listen to staff who are miserable. And don't gossip about it. **Minor misery that's ignored can turn into huge newsroom problems**, but different people's problems looked at together can be turned into useful solutions, like swapping two staffers who're getting bored with their jobs. If you know who wants to move across the room or learn a new skill, you can fill urgent staffing gaps fast.

- Think like a company accountant when it comes to looking after newsroom resources. The best trick I learnt here was from working for years in NGOs and the public sector – **if you spend a bit of time imagining what it would be like to have to explain losses and inefficiencies** to international funders or parliamentary standing committees, then it's really easy to get into the habit of guarding organisational assets.

- Think like a unionist when it comes to looking after staff interests. **Have a good working knowledge of labour law, company policy and media ethics**, be able to apply them and

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share that information with anyone who needs it.

- **Think like a frontline reporter out on a job 200km from home, wet, tired and battling to meet deadline**, when it comes to backing up the news team. Find them the resources to do their jobs, find the right space in the newspaper for their stories and make sure they get home again.
- Listen to the complaints from the public and use those to help direct training and resources needed.
- Find resources for your team and teach them to use them. Network, network, network.
- Move around. Change the times of your shifts, move from newsgatherers to subs, visit the out-of-town bureaus. If you don't know what everyone's working conditions, skills and job requirements are, then you can't help them.
- Fill in for other jobs when necessary. This gives you **a really good idea why some people need a break from their jobs** and often gives you ideas on how to streamline the work flow.
- **Everyone hates criticism** and the coaching editor is frequently appointed to pass on the bad news. Don't lie about the bad news but find some good news to go with it – there's usually something good to rescue from every story.
- Find stuff to praise. Look for the best thing in the newspaper every day and tell that writer/photographer/sub that you noticed it. We try to run a newsdesk-reporters-photographers meeting once a month where we put all the best and the worst stories and photos up on the walls – it's astonishing how fast everyone gets motivated to **make sure that they get something up there with the good stuff**.
- Institutionalise ways of assessing work. For us, that means trying to set up a performance development system. We battle to do this, but in some areas we're getting there. This is the best way to give fair, ongoing feedback.
- Daily newspapers and stress go hand-in-hand. **The daily newspaper demands of endless creativity and initiative against the grind of daily deadlines can be shattering**. Expect that staff will have both great days and off days. In times of severe stress, if you can't do anything else for them, then organise them coffee and biscuits.
- Be available as a writing coach. This is down at the end of this list because it's often lost in the rush of newsroom work, but it's really the most important part of the job and you have to fight hard to get it back to the top of the list. Get into the habit of regarding writing coaching as priority work – let it be known that anyone needing help on a story can talk to you at any time, and respect their need by stopping whatever you're doing to listen and help. Listening is usually all that's needed – **what most writers need more than anything is someone who**

will listen to them thinking through their stories out loud. By the time they've told it all to you, re-told it in different ways until they can see that you understand it, they usually know exactly how to write it. Read the story tomorrow morning and you can see that quote the writer was so excited about made it into the second paragraph, which in turn made that story the page lead.

- Never turn your cellphone off. You never know who will need you.

The coaching editor doesn't have to do all of these things and can often just make sure that the tasks are being done by someone in the newsroom. But if there is one task that's worth spending as much time as possible doing yourself, it's listening to the writers and being available to read and edit their work. The best calls I get are the ones after hours from reporters who say, **"I'm sorry to bother you but I really wanted to ask you what you thought of this intro..."** When you get those calls, consider your salary well earned.

Louise Flanagan has been working as a journalist and researcher in East London for the past 17 years. The only common thread in all her jobs has been getting information out and helping others do that too. She worked for the alternative press in the 1980s, as a freelancer during the 1994 elections, as a reporter for the Daily Dispatch and as an information manager and researcher for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Since 1999 she's been back at the Daily Dispatch as the coaching editor. She can be contacted at louisef@dispatch.co.za



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