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Thoughts On A System-Oriented Approach To Editorial Management

By

S M Ali
THOUGHTS ON A SYSTEM-ORIENTED APPROACH TO EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT

By S M Ali

"A NEWSPAPER Editor", a noted Asian journalist once said, "must face up to three major challenges."

Then, in his precise language which many of us greatly admired, he outlined the three challenges: How to exercise your authority without being authoritarian; how to delegate responsibilities to your deputies without losing control over what goes into the paper; and how to be accessible to even the junior-most member of the staff without appearing to undermine the authority of heads of various departments.

The bigger the paper the more serious are the three challenges facing the Editor.

While these challenges exist for the Editor of any newspaper, big or small, there are situations where they are seldom visible or identified.

In a small community newspaper, be it a 12-page weekly or a four-page daily, an editorial staff of say, eight journalists may very well produce the paper, with the Editor himself sharing all the
responsibilities with his colleagues, from reporting and feature writing to sub-editing and page lay-out. Here, occasions when the Editor is obliged to assert his unquestioned authority are rare. Differences of view among members of the staff are quickly — and informally — resolved through consultations. There is no formal delegation of responsibilities if the Editor is out of town for a few days. Again, whether he sits inside a tiny cubicle or shares a long table with other members of his staff, he is in constant communication with all his colleagues. Whether one calls it a system or just a loose arrangement, it works. The paper comes out regularly, without hitting too many snags.

Such newspapers do exist in small provincial towns in several Asian countries. For all that we know, they will continue to exist as they are for a long, long time.

There is another kind of situation where the three challenges exist but only under the surface, causing little or no concern to the Editor. He may well be a towering personality whose appointment is based on political rather than professional credentials. In some cases, he may be a prominent intellectual and, therefore, an excellent leader-writer. On the other hand, his knowhow in reporting or sub-editing may be minimal; his knowledge of newspaper management virtually non-existent. He may be in charge of a national daily, with a big staff, but he communicates directly with only a select few in the editorial department. This select few instinctively know his wishes, even if they are seldom spelt out, about what should go into the paper and, what is more important, what should be kept out. These wishes which often reflect the views of the proprietor are usually faithfully carried out.
Once in a while, something goes wrong, perhaps with a political report that is a little too balanced for the Editor's liking or with the publication of a letter in the correspondence column that creates the wrong kind of waves. Such a "disaster" then results in recriminations, probably in the transfer of the offending staff member from one editorial job to another, if not in his suspension.

This scenario is not an imaginary one. This writer worked in such a situation in two different newspapers in his early journalistic career. Luckily, with the growth of the Asian newspaper industry and with an increasing number of professional journalists moving into jobs of chief editors, every major newspaper in this region is obliged to try out some basic principles of sound editorial management.

It is within the framework of these principles that we are able to redefine the job of the Editor as well as find answers to the challenges mentioned at the start of this article.

In the process, our approach to problems of editorial management becomes increasingly system-oriented, instead of being based on personalities, human equations and instant improvisations.

Newly two decades ago, this writer watched this system-oriented approach tried out, with considerable success, in a major daily newspaper in Lahore (Pakistan). Years later, he helped to introduce it in a newspaper in Thailand. Again, it worked.

In retrospect, what do we see as the main elements in this approach?
By far the most important element in this approach is consultation, not only between the Editor and heads of various sections but also between heads of various sections and other staff members. Again, it is not just consultation for the sake of consultation, but it is consultation aimed at collective decisions, except on matters where the Editor may be obliged to use his prerogative. Again, even when the Editor does use his prerogative, perhaps relating to a sensitive report or an editorial comment, he may still find it possible to take his deputy or the head of the section concerned into his confidence. If the Editor uses his prerogative far too often, all on his own, serious strains in his relationship with his colleagues become inevitable.

It is important that this system of consultation must follow an organized pattern.

The system that this writer saw working in the Lahore daily is worth recalling.

The Editor would be in his office by nine in the morning. He would spend his first half an hour taking a second look at his own paper and other dailies (which he had already glanced at during his breakfast at home), marking the reports, features or leaders which he would discuss with the writers concerned or with their immediate superiors, some for commendations and others for criticisms. He would pick up a few bad headlines, some atrocious 'typos' or perhaps even a display advertisement which clashed with a news photograph. Incidentally, his deputies, by now already in their own offices, are also involved in the same exercise.
Once he had finished with this exercise, he would be ready to receive visitors, if any. It is usually in the afternoon when he would have more time for callers from outside.

The main editorial planning conference, chaired by the Editor, would punctually start at ten. It would be participated in by the Deputy Editor, News Editor, Chief Reporter, Business Editor, Feature Editor and Assistant Editors (who were generally responsible for writing leaders and assisting the editor in other areas). All would have with them copies of the paper they had marked earlier in the morning. But the News Editor would also have with him the report left behind by the Night Editor, containing such information as the printing time of various editions, any problem faced in meeting deadlines of various pages, the absence-without-leave by any sub-editor or the mechanical failure in the production facilities. The News Editor would deal with the report himself, unless there was something in it that called for the editor's intervention.

The agenda of the morning editorial conference seldom varied. It would start with a quick post mortem of the day's paper, often page by page, mainly of its news coverage, both local and foreign, with almost a simultaneous comparison with what had appeared in other dailies. The Editor would be asking a lot of questions, about a local report which was taken from the national news agency instead of from the paper's own reporting desk, about the absence of a follow-up story on a previous day's report, about lack of photograph with a feature story so on and so forth.
Together with the review of the day’s paper, the meeting would identify possible follow-up stories for the next day, topics for leaders and even ideas for features which could be linked to some local reports just published. The Editor would like to know from the Chief Reporter what major local reports he had scheduled for the day and from the News Editor (or from the Foreign Editor, if there was one) what major developments were expected on the foreign scene. There would be also similar questions put to the Business Editor about his day’s plan for the trade and commerce section.

The success of this morning conference inevitably depended on two factors; how well the Editor exercised his initiative in guiding the discussion; and how well-prepared were all the section heads with their respective plans for the day. When the two factors were not balanced, the discussion could easily turn into something of a monologue by the Editor (when others were not well-prepared) or into an unproductive talk suffering from a lack of direction and concrete plans (when the Editor himself had not done his home-work).

The morning conference usually lasted for about 45 minutes. The Editor would then spend another 15 minutes with his Assistant Editors discussing the main points for the next day’s leaders. Meanwhile, the Chief Reporter would hold his own meetings with other reporters, collectively or individually, on their assignments. The News Editor would be back to his room to attend to his various administrative chores.

From then on, the Editor would leave every one else alone to get on with his or her job. For next couple of hours, until lunch, he himself would
be relatively free to look into several specific matters which called for his intervention, from some problems in the production or advertising section to complaints or requests from individual staff members. There would also be time for a meeting with the General Manager on some non-editorial matters and time for receiving visitors from outside the organization. (One Editor I worked with always found time for visitors. "After all", he said, "some of them turn out to be my best news sources, my best contacts with the outside world").

For the rest of the day and early hours at night, the key man in the production of the paper would be the News Editor who would coordinate with the Chief Reporter, keep an eye on the newsdesk, watch over the flow of copy and, generally speaking, keep the system going. But he would always have time for one or more quick chats with the Editor. He would exercise his authority with caution, often leaving major decisions to the Editor. As one News Editor once put it, "No Editor can delegate too much authority to any of his colleagues. That's abdication."

It would be the News Editor again who would chair the evening news conference, with the Night Editor (or one who would be in charge of the newsdesk at night), the Chief Reporter and probably a couple of reporters and sub-editors. The Editor, if he was around, would drop in, but he would leave it to the News Editor to conduct the discussion. This meeting would be mostly concerned with distribution of the reports among various news pages, the selection of news photographs, the lay-out of the late news pages (especially of the front page) and the handling of foreign news. There would be competing claims of news reports, both local and foreign, for front page treatment, even for the lead, with the
On most days, the Night Editor would return to his desk from the meeting with a pretty clear idea as to what the paper would look like the following morning. However, depending on late night developments, he would still have the authority to switch stories from one page to another and work out a new lead. More often than not, he would do so after consulting the News Editor, on phone, or seek the advice of the Editor. News Editor or the Editor would not be out of touch with the newsdesk until the printing time of the first edition, that is, around midnight. When (and if) the Night Editor — or the man in charge of the desk — phones for a decision, the Editor would be ready with one and, due to time constraint, without the benefit of consultation with either the Deputy Editor or the News Editor. He may decide to change the lead, drop a particular report or even delay the printing deadline to accommodate a new developing story, local or foreign, on the front page. This is the time when the Editor’s news judgment is on test — and so is his authority. At that stage, he may or may not go into the rationale of his decision, but he would be ready to explain it at the editorial conference the following morning. If he does not, there will remain unanswered questions in the minds of members of his team.

By the time the Editor has answered a midnight call from the newsdesk, he has been through a 14-hour schedule, a schedule which is both demanding and exciting and which he has handled without losing his cool and, hopefully, much of his sleep.

When the system works efficiently, the Editor’s schedule gets reasonably shorter, with fewer midnight calls from the newsdesk. Then the Editor has more time to himself, for writing occasional bylined pieces on
subjects of his special interest or perhaps for visiting some foreign countries for exclusive interviews with heads of governments. When he goes a little bit beyond his normal daily routine, he demonstrates that he is not only just "managing" the paper but also adding something to its contents and, in the process, deriving some intellectual satisfaction for himself. And this, in the long run, can be important in making the Chief Editor more of a leader than just a boss.

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A former Managing Editor of the Bangkok Post and the Hongkong Standard and Executive Director of the Press Foundation of Asia, the writer is currently the UNESCO Regional Communication Adviser, based in Kuala Lumpur. He has written this piece in his personal capacity.

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