

Culture, Integrity and Trust

By Jill Geisler

Leaders, imagine this scenario:

At this very moment, there's a major problem brewing in your newsroom—but you have no clue.

- You think you have systems to guard against major mistakes or misdeeds.
- You believe your staff would alert you to potential dangers.
- You trust that the values you stand for are understood and shared.

But right now, some wrongheaded action or wrongdoing actor in your shop is poised to drive a dagger into the heart of your confidence and your newsroom's credibility. If only you had known...

Now that I've painted a picture guaranteed to keep you awake at night, let's talk through the fear.

First—a disclaimer. Like many journalists, I'm suffering from "Jayson Blair Fatigue." It is a malaise; equal parts headache, dyspepsia, and depression when I read yet another pundit expound on the New York Times mess. I'm particularly queasy about those who try to pin it all on one single cause: leadership, arrogance, diversity, youth, liberal-mindedness, greed, speed, competitiveness or fluoridated water.

Sorry, it's never quite that simple. The folks at the heart of the Times' story know that. So do most newsroom leaders. They recognize the interwoven fibers of newsroom success and failure; the culture they create, the integrity that is its hallmark and the trust that keeps it strong.

But back to your story, your newsroom—and the nightmare scenario. We're dealing with it now, in concept, to keep you from living it: A Very Bad Thing is afoot on your watch but you know nothing of it. What in the world can you do right now?

Perhaps it is time for you to ask some questions of the people who work for you; questions that help you identify your potential blind spots, liabilities or strengths.

Time for you take a reading of culture, integrity and trust in your organization. It is my fond hope that you will walk away from such conversations happy and proud.

If you want to sleep better at night, consider doing more than having a few chats: circulate the questionnaire that follows to your staff. Encourage them to identify themselves as they return it—with absolutely no fear of reprisals. If they feel the need for anonymity, that raises even more important questions: what does it say about you, about them, and about the work environment?

And now, the twelve tough questions:

Culture, Integrity and Trust:

Twelve Tough Questions for Newsroom Staff and Managers

Developed by Jill Geisler, Leadership and Management Group Leader, The Poynter Institute

1. What do we stand for as an organization?

2. What does a staff person need to do to succeed around here?

3. What does a manager need to do to succeed around here?

4. Are all employees held to the same standards of professional performance? If not, what standards are differentially applied?

5. How solid are our systems of verification on stories?

6. What ethical guidelines do we have here? Written? Understood?

7. How welcome are people to question our guidelines in cases where they can envision journalistically sound alternatives?

8. How clearly do staffers understand their obligation to avoid conflicts of interest, including the areas of gifts, outside employment or political activity?

9. How much peer pressure, if any, exists among staff against “blowing the whistle” on a colleague?

10. How comfortable do staffers feel bringing bad news to their managers? Why?

11. How responsive is our organization to outside complaints?

12. What, if anything, is needed to build stronger trust between staff and managers here?

I hope any surprises you discovered in your staff’s responses were pleasant ones, and you can comfortably put my scenario—and your fears—to rest.

If not, you know now you have some of leadership’s most important work ahead. Let us know if we can help.

Please feel free to share feedback in our forums or personally to jgeisler@poynter.org.