

# READERSHIP INSTITUTE

Media Management Center at Northwestern University

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## A Conversation about Changing Newspaper Culture

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The newspaper culture results from the Impact study of readership caught the attention of many in the industry when they were released a year ago. The picture wasn't pretty. Newspapers have a defensive culture that makes them slow to react to changes in the environment, focused on personal agendas rather than customer needs, and reluctant to work across departmental silos. (Detailed findings at [www.readership.org/culture\\_management/culture/data/final\\_culture\\_report.pdf](http://www.readership.org/culture_management/culture/data/final_culture_report.pdf))

But it was a message that resonated--newspaper people nodded in agreement when the descriptive evidence was laid out. And it was a message with some hope and motivation. A small number of newspapers in the study had cultures which, while still showing strong signs of defensiveness, had above-average constructive aspects.

Most important of all, those mildly-constructive newspapers also tended to have higher readership and more of an external, reader orientation.

A committee of the Associated Press Managing Editors, chaired by Peggy Kuhr of the *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, WA, was more than just interested in the results. Members were curious to know more about why culture--the behaviors that are expected, explicitly or implicitly, for people to fit into the working environment of a newspaper--should be of concern to editors.

They wondered how newspapers can start to make the move from defensive to constructive. They asked whether there were lessons to be learned from other businesses that had attempted culture change in order to get better results.

Working with the Institute, committee members interviewed several non-newspaper organizations that have been working on changing their cultures. Kuhr drew up a list of sharp questions and posed them to Mary Nesbitt, Managing Director of the Readership Institute, and Robert Cooke, professor of management studies at the University of

Illinois, Chicago, who has made the study of organizational culture his life's work and who partnered with the Institute to study newspapers.

The full committee report was presented at the 2001 APME convention in Milwaukee in October and will be available online in early 2002. From that report, here is the dialogue among Kuhr, Cooke and Nesbitt.

**Q. Why should newspaper editors care about the results of the culture surveys?**

**Nesbitt:** I think newspaper editors know intuitively that what goes on inside the building and inside their newsrooms--how people work together and don't work together--affects the news report in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Think of some of the best, most rewarding, most exciting occasions in newsroom life. Election nights. Big breaking news. Complex and dramatic investigative pieces. Very rarely are they the product of a single person's heroic endeavors. They come from a group of people in many different roles, committed to a single purpose--that of telling readers something important that they don't know about something they, readers, care about. These are truly "constructive" occasions within a newsroom, where the greater good is top of mind.

The trouble is, news people coalesce for these special occasions and then fly apart for the bulk of their working life. (It's not just the newsroom; other departments are the same way too.) The key is to find ways to work more collaboratively more often, in the service of the reader. That is the challenge for editors and other newspaper leaders.

And they should care, because constructive newspapers tend to also have higher readership. (They also have higher employee satisfaction and lower turnover.)

It's not just about working collaboratively within the newsroom, either. Constructive newspapers feel less threatened by working across departmental boundaries. They are able to do this without compromising important principles and integrity, probably because there is a better understanding across all departments about why and where lines have to be drawn.

**Q. We hear that, of all the industries Cooke has surveyed, newspapers' culture is most like that in the military and hospitals. What are the similarities?**

**Cooke:** There are striking similarities between many newspapers and military units along all three of the cultural styles measured by the Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI). First, Constructive norms--such as those for Self-Actualizing and Humanistic behaviors--are relatively weak in both types of organizations. Second, Aggressive norms are relatively strong and, like the military, expectations for Perfectionistic and Oppositional behaviors are particularly prevalent. Third, Passive norms are somewhat strong particularly with respect to Conventional and Avoidance styles.

We have observed the same pattern of styles in hospitals; however, not all of them exhibit this type of culture. We're most likely to see these defensive and self-protective norms in hospitals where there is conflict between physicians, nurses and/or the administration, and where quality of care is viewed as below average.

We've also seen this pattern of styles in other types of organizations including insurance, accounting, and manufacturing firms, but there is greater variance in the types of cultures found in such industries.

**Q. Should we (newspaper editors) be worried about those similarities, and your overall results?**

**Nesbitt:** I would be worried if newspaper editors thought that being this way was the only or the best way to fulfill the journalistic mission and serve readers. It's true that many of the qualities of hospitals and the military are ones that drive to newspapers' credibility and the trust relationship with readers, like reliability and dependability. But newsrooms don't have to be entirely regimented, hierarchical and rules-driven to accomplish the same ends.

Editors have often noted, ruefully, that although newspapers write about change in the rest of the world, they are tremendously hide-bound in their own operations. The culture results indicate to me that some newspapers--a relatively small number but some--are making progress.

I'm putting an interpretation on this, because we don't have any comparable newspaper data from years past and this is the first extensive baseline measure of the industry. But I think what we are seeing is evolution, away from a culture that served newspapers well in a relatively stable past toward one that will enable them to be more responsive to a changing environment.

What does worry me is whether the change is happening fast enough, given the growth of competition and the length of time--three decades or more--that we've been dogged by declining readership. We have that clichéd window of opportunity, but it is closing.

**Cooke:** Should editors be worried? Apparently so, given that I've read some great articles (including, ironically, *newspaper* articles) that have been fairly critical of the culture of U.S. Army and Navy. One article that I read almost a decade ago linked the defensive culture of the Navy to everything ranging from accidents to sexual harassment. By the way, the reporter did such a fine job portraying the culture of the Navy that I thought he must have seen some of our OCI results for ships.

More recently, I came across an interesting article on the Army, explaining the need for cultural change and the way in which traditional military norms interfere with the effective use of technology, information, and human resources.

It is possible that these Defensive cultural norms are necessary for military units and other reliability-oriented systems like nuclear power plants at certain times and under certain conditions. However, it is clear that the most effective of these organizations also exhibit relatively strong Constructive norms and that these norms are operative when appropriate. These latter conditions are most likely more prevalent in newspapers and, given the absence of such norms, there is likely some cause for concern.

**Q.** What, specifically, surprised you about the results?

**Nesbitt:** As an ex-editorial person, I wasn't shocked to see newsrooms identified as defensive environments but I was surprised by the relative homogeneity of the results across departments. There is a shared newspaper culture, not very healthy, that crosses functional and departmental lines. There's a positive in that--it's not just newsrooms being, well, you know what newsrooms are like; it's everybody doing things "the newspaper way." This shared problem is in itself a piece of common ground on which to build.

Another surprise: I expected to learn that smaller papers were more constructive and larger papers defensive. I saw it as an issue of scale. Wrong!

**Cooke:** I certainly don't know newspapers as well as Mary does and, therefore, I *was* surprised that so many of them had Defensive cultures. Generally, when we look at a sample of organizations from a specific industry, we find about the same number in each of four categories: Predominantly Constructive, Passive, Aggressive, and mixed. This certainly was not the case for the Readership sample; the number of Constructive papers turned out to be much smaller than I had expected.

**Q.** If you were a newspaper editor, what you do after seeing the survey results?

**Cooke:** Though you may not have meant it this way, I'm going to take your question literally. Playing out the aggressive cultural norms prevailing in many of the newspapers in the sample, I would first challenge the methods used to generate the results (Oppositional culture) and question the survey's ability to tap the unique characteristics of news organizations (Perfectionistic).

Alternatively, passive norms would prevail and I would rationalize the culture of my newspaper on the basis of the industry's results (Conventional) and conclude that any changes I might initiate are likely to fail given the nature and state of the industry (Dependent).

I might then temporarily face reality given that the survey results strongly suggest that a more constructive culture is not only feasible, but also desirable and related to valued outcomes such as readership. Thus, I would charge my internal Human Resource group or engage external Organizational Development consultants, all of whom I can fire at will (Power), to constructively redirect the culture of the organization. And, as soon as possible, I would try to forget the whole thing (Avoidance) and move onto seemingly more pressing problems.

That's a worst-case scenario, of course. Perhaps Mary can present a more constructive alternative!

**Nesbitt:** I like Rob's answer because it's the easy way out!

He's hit on an important point: responding to the culture results demands a counter-cultural response. I would make a real effort not to be defensive or explain away the results, but try to see my newsroom and the sorts of things we expect and encourage through an objective lens.

I would talk with staff in small groups, share the results, ask questions and listen to their thoughtful observations on why things are the way they are and how they could be. I would make sure to always frame the discussion in the context of "making the organization more effective" (as opposed to, say, making this a more fun place to work).

At the same time, I would make a really clear-eyed assessment of whether I had the management team working with me that could help make positive change. They need to share the vision, be able to translate it into actions and coach others. It is at this level that change efforts often fail. Leaders have the vision but they are reliant on the larger team to work it through. That would be my first step--getting an unvarnished picture of how things are, and whether change is possible with the current management team, before forming a plan and launching into action.

**Q. Should we assume that a constructive culture is good in today's fast-changing world; and defensive cultures are not?**

**Cooke:** Other studies consistently indicate that constructive and adaptive cultures are appropriate for such environments and the results from the Impact readership study indicate that this is the case for newspapers. The strength of Constructive norms was strongly and significantly related to respondents' assessments of the adaptability of their newspapers. Similarly, in a separate survey using the Ideal form of the OCI, respondents specified Constructive norms as most appropriate for newspapers operating in today's dynamic environment.

**Q. Some people would argue that newsrooms work better when the culture is more perfectionistic and oppositional. After all, the public's biggest complaint about us is that we make too many mistakes, and there's a tradition of "creative tension" being an effective newsroom atmosphere. How would you respond?**

**Cooke:** A moderate oppositional and perfectionistic orientation can be useful, particularly if these cultural styles are reinforced by strong constructive norms. However, in most of the newspapers studied, oppositional and perfectionistic norms were stronger than moderate and norms for constructive behaviors were too weak to turn "tension" into "creative tension."

More generally, we have no credible evidence (from surveys administered in nuclear power plants, manufacturing firms, or hospitals) that oppositional and perfectionistic norms prevent mistakes, reduce accidents, or enhance members' ability to respond to crises. Though one study in hospitals suggested that strong perfectionistic norms resulted in a lower rate of medication errors, the researcher dismissed these findings on the basis of inaccurate records. She explained that the perfectionistic norms in certain hospitals were so pervasive that the nurses simply could not or would not report errors. Besides messing up the results of the study, this trend almost ensured that the problems leading to the errors would not be identified or resolved in those hospitals.

Thus, I would seriously question whether strengthening these defensive norms would reduce mistakes and readers' complaints about mistakes. Perfectionistic norms, in particular, are more likely to instead encourage or require the *appearance* of competence, precision, and accuracy. For newspapers, this would translate into a tendency to present stories with a greater degree of certainty than the available information would warrant, to portray a greater mastery of the subject matter than justified, and to reluctantly acknowledge mistakes or do so in the least visible manner possible. Achievement and humanistic norms would have a more positive effect.

**Nesbitt:** Being a perfectionist by nature and a journalist by training, I do think that some perfectionism is important. But the key word is "some"--at what point does it stop being useful and start being counter-productive? Newsroom editors know perfectionism has its limits. After all we are writing the first rough draft of history in 24-hour increments and never get it complete or right.

Sometimes we are perfectionistic about entirely inappropriate things. I always think of a reporter, who shall remain nameless and who used to labor for hours over his ledes as deadlines drew nigh. When the copy was wrenched from his hand, the lede was no better than the one he'd written three hours earlier. It would make no difference to the reader. That's perfectionism gone berserk.

Oppositional behavior is important in a newsroom too. We want critical thinkers who don't accept things at face value, who turn over every rock and stone and who ask hard questions. But let's remember, when we talk about organizational culture we're talking about how people relate to each other in the workplace. And presumably we all are, or should be, on the same team. So it's all in "how" people express disagreement or alternative points of view, and whether a critical pose becomes an ingrained, automatic reaction that fosters argument instead of problem-solving.

**Q.** The surveys were completed by mid-2000--before this most recent series of layoffs and continuing difficult economic times for newspapers. If you surveyed the same newspapers today, do you think the results would be different?

**Nesbitt:** The kinds of behavior expectations that the surveys measure are not much affected by the kind of economic downturn we have been experiencing. So the culture profiles would not change, nor would any of the "levers for change" – the kinds of practices that companies can embrace to bring about culture change.

We found that job security--people, especially in editorial departments, feeling that their jobs are not in jeopardy--was a strength of newspapers vis-a-vis other businesses. It was one of the top three strengths, in fact. My hunch is, if the surveys were done now, it would still be a strength but not so near the top.

**Cooke:** Organizations tend to "play out" their cultures when facing changing economic environments and the possible need for restructuring. That is, they take actions that are consistent with those that led to the emergence of their constructive or defensive cultures in the first place. Thus the administration of a survey today might produce results that differ in intensity but not in direction compared to those obtained last year.

This continuity is exemplified in a positive way by a branch office of a high-tech company, known for its favorable culture, that we were scheduled to survey during a previous downturn. It turned out that the company decided to consolidate locations and started making arrangements to close this office. I was surprised that they decided to go ahead with the survey anyway and even more surprised to see that the culture remained so constructive. The sensitive and enlightened manner in which management handled the closing simply reinforced the positive norms that had evolved during better times.

**Q.** Are there successful organizations with defensive cultures that you can name? What are they?

**Cooke:** There are quite a few successful organizations out there with defensive cultures, but they are successful despite rather than because of their cultures. The growth and profits realized by organizations result from a myriad of factors beyond culture--including ownership of patents and copyrights, geographical monopolies, historical dominance of markets, and being in the right place at the right time.

Such advantages provide the organization with slack resources that, in turn, can allow management to get away with unenlightened leadership practices, sub-optimal technologies, counter-productive human resource systems, and/or rigid structures based on control and command. If management allows this to happen, these factors lead to and reinforce a defensive culture.

When managers of such organizations are presented with their OCI results, they sometimes argue that defensive cultures must be good given that their firms are successful. I refer to this as the “misattribution of success to culture,” given that people tend to attribute success to themselves or things they have created (like culture). However, their organizations are “successful,” at least along certain criteria, despite rather than because of their cultures.

I’m not going to name any of these organizations, but everyone can. Just think about the ones you know that seem to be doing quite well in terms of financial indicators but treat their customers, suppliers, and/or employees poorly. Though profitable, these organizations could be even more successful if their cultures were adaptive and their priorities better balanced for long-term effectiveness.

**Q. The APME Culture Committee has found that many companies suggest hiring an outside person if you want to change the organization's culture. What do you recommend and why?**

**Nesbitt:** I think third parties are often very useful in helping insiders get a relatively unbiased outside perspective. It is often the case that leaders in newspapers have come up through the ranks and, naturally, are products of the existing culture. Their challenge is to step outside it and lead it toward something very different. The tug of the familiar is very strong and leaders often need external support that they can trust.

Staff take their cues from leaders and it is very important that leaders model the kind of behavior they want to encourage. This is another area where a disinterested third party can be helpful, as a kind of mentor.

But at the end of the day, it is leaders who will create the conditions in which change can happen, not consultants.

**Cooke:** It sometimes is necessary to bring a new leader in from the outside to effect cultural change. This approach can speed up the process but there are certain risks involved. Also, I’ve seen some fine examples of cultural change and organization

development effected by insiders. Typically, the leaders involved have used external consultants and transferred ideas from other industries to facilitate the transformation process.

**Q. Do you have any other advice?**

**Nesbitt:** The prospect of changing culture is very daunting and the temptation is to say it's just too big to tackle. Let's wait until the economy improves – yeah that's it! I'm a big advocate of going at it in practical, concrete ways. Here's a couple.

First, look for something that the newsroom and the rest of the newspaper can rally around because it's in everyone's interests--like building readership. Under a fiat from the publisher, the team works cross-departmentally toward a real goal with real measurements. If people are being held accountable across departments, it's in their best interests to work collaboratively and to succeed.

Second, instead of trying to tackle all of the improvement areas at once, take them sequentially starting with the most crucial ones--i.e. where newspapers are performing worst. An example for most newspapers would be a couple of management practices--how people are selected and placed/promoted into jobs; and how people are trained and developed. And an important by-product of improving management practices is that culture will be positively affected as well.

**Cooke:** One of the most important things for leaders to recognize is that practically everything they do has the potential to shape and reinforce the culture of their organization. This includes not only the ways they approach their jobs and their interactions with others but also the systems, structures, and technologies they implement or allow to take hold. Similarly, the actions they take to accomplish tasks in the short-term can have a lasting impact on cultural norms and the organization's ability to get work done over the long term.

Thus, managers can re-direct the cultures of their organizations by considering the impact of their leadership styles, their decisions, and the structural and technological changes they implement on behavioral norms and expectations.

**Q. Can you recommend other reports or books about culture for editors who'd like to know more? Any other sources of information?**

**Cooke:** There are many great books out there. The classic on organizational culture and its impact on effectiveness is Corporate Culture and Performance by John P. Kotter and James L. Heskett, (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Another excellent book is The Knowing Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton (Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

There's an interesting report on the culture of the FAA that might be of interest given that newspapers share some of the reliability orientation of that agency. Prepared by the United States General Accounting Office, its title is [Aviation Acquisition: A Comprehensive Strategy is Needed for Cultural Change at FAA](#) (Washington DC, August 1996, available on-line at [www.gao.gov/archive/1996/rc96159.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/archive/1996/rc96159.pdf)).

From an academic perspective, a wide range of thinking on culture is presented in [The Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate](#) edited by Neil M. Askanasy, Celeste P.M. Wilderom, and Mark F. Peterson (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2000). For those explicitly interested in the outcomes of, and the factors causally related to the OCI styles, Janet L. Szumal has prepared the [Organizational Culture Inventory Interpretation & Development Guide](#) (Plymouth, MI: Human Synergetics, 1998).

Finally, many of the popular business books on change directly or indirectly focus on organizational culture. These include [Change the World](#) (Robert E. Quinn, 2000), [Leading Change](#) (James O'Toole, 1995) and [Champions of Change](#) (David Nadler, 1998), all published by Jossey-Bass (San Francisco).