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Carla Kimbrough
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, ckimbrough2@Unl.edu

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As newsrooms make cuts, put training first

CARLA KIMBROUGH-ROBINSON

Carla Kimbrough-Robinson has spent nearly 20 years in newsrooms and is a trained life coach with Inspire Higher International, LLC, a Denver-based personal development company. She can be reached at coaching@inspirehigher.net.

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If your newsroom is shrinking, this is the time to pour more resources into helping your staff become the best they can be. And, it doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg.

Understanding staff needs is the first step in creating a staff-development program. As the top editor, decide what skills you would like to see your staff polish over the coming months or year.

Then, go into the newsroom to ask the staff their needs. Keep the survey simple, so that staff members won't be turned off.

With the vision and the needs in mind, use a four-prong approach to building your professional-development program. Look at your inner circle first, tapping your in-house talent. Then, explore the next ring of influence: local experts, who can be from all walks of life; move to the next ring, outside trainers who travel to your newsroom; and, the final ring, outside training.

In-house talent

Look for the reporter who knows how to dig up public records; the one who knows how to get sources to open up in sensitive situations; the reporter who wrote the Sunday piece that has the newsroom buzzing; or the one who hasn't had a correction in years.

Identify the copy editors who have a way with words, always nailing the headline with clarity or pizzazz. Or find the copy editor who has an eye for libel or who is the king or queen of grammar.

Talk with the graphic editor and photo editor about giving a session on what makes a good graphic or photograph. Visuals, after all, capture a reader's eye before written words, so give the visual leaders time to share what they know.

Look to the Web master to teach your staff how to collect audio or video or how to post their stories to the Web.

Helping these staff members pull together a brown-bag session will help those individuals build confidence. You may discover some reluctance from staff members who don't want to share because they don't feel comfortable giving presentations. Give them a simple one-page handout with questions that will help them outline their session.

Local experts

In your community, there are people who have expertise your staff could use. In one program I organized, I called upon a local high school math teacher who reminded staff about calculating percentages and more basic math that some journalists seem to shun. If you have the benefit of having a college nearby, you can touch base with college professors to share their knowledge on a variety of subjects.

Now, the local resources do not have to be in the academic arena. Instead, they can come in the form of a local organization that serves a constituency your newsroom wants to reach or cover. Perhaps a local government official who discusses community planning or business development might give your newsroom insight into the big picture. A local history buff who knows the neighborhoods and city history better than anyone can be particularly helpful if your newsroom recruits beyond the state or city borders.

Outside talent

One way to get more bang for your training buck is to invite outside teachers who know the craft well to share with your staff. Instead of paying the cost of conference registration, airfare travel and hotel for one or two people, use that money to bring in a trainer to train dozens of staff members. Sometimes you find these speakers at other conferences or through staff recommendations. Some organizations, including SPJ (www.spj.org/bbtraining.asp), have trainers they can offer your newsroom. Your newsroom also might look for ways to host a national or regional conference so that the staff can take advantage of the various speakers brought in by the conference.

Outside training

Sending a staff member or two to outside training can have big payoffs. It's a great reward for those who work hard and contribute in big ways. But spreading the wealth around is important, so that other staff members aren't left wondering 'why does he/she always get to go and I never do?' Develop a way to decide who gets to go to the outside conferences that people can understand.

The best kind of training is free or almost-free training. Look for the fellowship programs that are offered through various organizations that offer scholarships.

Whether staff members attend a conference or a fellowship program, you might consider attaching two stipulations on the front end: 1) make sure they actually produce or apply what they learned in your newsroom, and 2) make sure they give back to other staffers.

Whether you have a small budget or big budget, investing in your staff is never a waste, especially in tight times. ❖

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