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A Newsroom Divided: Kenya, the Election Crisis, and the Nation Media Group Epilogue

After discussing it among themselves, the editorial leadership of the Nation Group went to CEO Linus Gitahi and asked him to call a meeting of all senior editorial staff. They said the staff needed an opportunity to discuss openly what was happening in the newsroom. They decided to hold the meeting off-site, on neutral ground, so that participants could focus. Gitahi reserved a room at the nearby Stanley Hotel for all day Thursday, January 24, 2008. The meeting would start at 9 am.

Some 35 people attended—the managing editors from print, radio, and television, as well as news editors from each of the group’s departments, and key administrators. CEO Gitahi opened the proceedings, but they were led by Editorial Director Wangethi Mwangi. The goal, says Mwangi, was to allow staff to speak their minds. “Our objective was, first of all, to let people ventilate, let people tell their experiences, no holds barred, just say anything that you think will help you relieve that pressure from your mind,” he recalls. “The second objective was that it would help in the healing process.”

Group Managing Editor Joseph Odindo recalls that the atmosphere in the room at first was tense and mistrustful. But before long, a few staff began to describe honestly what they were feeling and soon all wanted to talk. “It was confessional, if you like,” says Odindo.

You spoke your mind. Nothing that was said there was to be used against you. And we encouraged people to be very specific, whether they were taking about the CEO, whether they were about the group managing editor, just say it.

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For himself, Odindo wanted “an acknowledgement from the very top, that we were allowing external influences to influence our reporting.” Others wanted to discuss the unpopular policy of not naming ethnic communities when reporting on conflict. Still others wanted to talk about their personal experiences, ways in which the national tensions had divided families and even spouses.

“It wasn’t a very happy meeting,” recalls Mwangi. “Our decisions were questioned. And we had to explain ourselves to our people.” But Odindo found it very effective. “When we all left there, it was the best thing that had ever happened to the Nation,” he remarks.

People were hugging one another. During the meeting, some people were in tears as they were speaking. They were that emotional

Over the next weeks, relations in the newsroom improved noticeably. The human resources department also engaged therapists to run guided discussions in each news department of grievances. Those meetings also helped speed amicable conditions. The investigation into the crash of the vote tabulating system concluded that it was due to a mechanical malfunction—not to political saboteurs.

Nationally as well, tensions abated. After an intervention by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, President Mwai Kibaki and his challenger Raila Odinga on February 28 signed a power-sharing agreement which called for a coalition government. Kibaki would remain as president; Odinga would serve in the newly-created office of prime minister. The cabinet was sworn in on April 17. Over 1,000 people had died and more than 350,000 fled their homes as a result of the election-triggered violence.