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9B17C050

Newstar Magazine Exercise: Managing Editor Role

Professors Andrew Stevens and Ann Frost wrote this exercise solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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*Newstar Magazine* History and Context

*Newstar Magazine* (*Newstar*) is an award-winning magazine covering progressive politics and culture. Since the 1980s, *Newstar* has been publishing principled journalism and critical commentary. The magazine is published four times a year by Newstar Incorporated, an independent non-profit organization overseen by a volunteer board of directors. *Newstar* is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association, and its staff are members of Local 290 of the Union of Canadian Publishers (UCP).

Through the 1980s, the magazine increasingly covered issues relevant to women, trade unionists, artists, and people employed in the resource economy. This shift in emphasis began to annoy the government that helped to support it, and by the late 1980s the provincial government cancelled *Newstar*’s funding—ostensibly because its original mandate had changed, but many felt that at the heart of the decision was the magazine’s criticism of government policies. Its supporters stepped in to help *Newstar*. As a result of donations and innovative fundraisers, such as benefit concerts and dances, kitchen parties, art raffles, and garage sales, the magazine stayed afloat.

The *Newstar* bottom line took another hit in 1996, when it lost its status as a registered charitable organization. A further blow was struck in 2010, when the magazine was denied a long-standing grant from the federal government. Faced with dire financial projections for the coming year, staff and board members reworked *Newstar*’s funding model and launched an ambitious drive to double the number of monthly donors. The campaign was met with an outpouring of characteristic enthusiasm from *Newstar* readers who collectively contributed an additional $15,000 in annual revenue. The monthly injections of reliable revenue were enough to keep *Newstar* publishing award-winning journalism.

Over time, *Newstar* has expanded its focus and readership, increasingly reaching out to subscribers and newsstands across the country as politically minded and progressive Canadians seek out an alternative to the increasingly corporatized mainstream press.

**Newstar Magazine Exercise**

**Role-Specific Information—Managing Editor**

**What’s Happening?**

You have been employed as the managing editor of *Newstar Magazine* for approximately six months. (See Appendix A for a full job description.) The small publication has a rich and vibrant history, and one that you are glad to be part of. This history is important and also means that board members and the two staff members, you and the publisher, share in the magazine’s political outlook. The board itself is designed to be a working board, meaning that members are active as volunteers and participate in providing assistance and expertise to you and the publisher, as needed. This work includes outreach, fundraising, boosting readership, as well as handling the labour relations function (e.g., negotiations, performance reviews, and hiring).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **2016–7 Budget Highlights** | |
| Annual revenue (donations, fundraising, grants, subscriptions) | $159,005.00 |
| Wages and benefits | $75,962.00 |
| Total expenses | $159,475.00 |

Financially, the magazine has always been cutting it close. Much of this situation is a result of the turbulent and uncertain world of print media. A stagnant national subscriber base and flat ad revenue mean that *Newstar* requires a great deal of financial diligence and oversight to remain financially solvent. Matters are made worse by the uncertainty of external grants and government support for arts and culture. Thus, the magazine requires that the managing editor and publisher possess not only a great deal of skill and expertise but also a willingness to work for relatively low wages and minimal benefits. Burnout is not uncommon in the magazine industry, and managing editors and publishers typically change jobs after just a few years. Your predecessor left after two years because the strain was too much. For these reasons, recruitment and retention have always been problematic.

So far you have enjoyed the job but the workload is getting heavier. As you see it, you are putting in more time and labour than the publisher, which is unfair. In fact, you have been required to take on some additional work responsibilities, such as correspondence with the subscriber base, which is the publisher’s job. Already you feel like quitting and finding a new job elsewhere. Recently, you decided to contact the board chair to set up a meeting to discuss the problem.

When you met with the board chair, you knew that it would be a tough conversation. You expressed your frustration with how things are going at the magazine after just a few months on the job. With *Newstar* always on the edge, both the managing editor and the publisher must work at full capacity. However, the workload is unevenly distributed, and some important tasks are not getting done. You have even learned that the printers have not been paid in a few months, and the subscriber base has decreased by a few hundred readers, from 2,310 to 2,030. This decrease happened when the magazine lost an institutional subscriber.[[1]](#footnote-1) To put the subscription numbers in perspective, *Newstar* had approximately 2,400 subscribers four years ago. Thus, the current number of subscribers represents a huge drop, and one that should not have been allowed to happen. On the positive side, there has been a huge uptake in social media “likes” and online readership, but neither generates revenue or paid subscribers. The stress of working with a sinking magazine is a lot to deal with.

In a two-person workplace, there is little room for anonymity when it comes to dealing with a complaint about a co-worker, which explains why you have not been completely forthright with the publisher. Also, the subtle hints you have dropped have not gained traction. How can the board deal with this situation without poisoning your working relationship with the publisher?

Shortly after your meeting with the board chair, the board requested that both you and the publisher complete a short performance review questionnaire. The ad hoc performance review process is conducted in accordance with the Letter of Understanding and Article 16 of the collective agreement that you and the publisher have agreed to (see Appendix C). Your responses to that questionnaire are attached in Appendix B. The next step involves a meeting with the board chair to discuss your responses.

Next Steps and Considerations

You love the work and the magazine, but you need things to change. If things do not change, and the workload issue is not addressed, you will need to consider resigning. Before your upcoming meeting with the board chair, you will need to consider the following:

1. Board members do not deal with the day-to-day running of the magazine, but they are tasked with overseeing the strategic direction of *Newstar* and its overall success. You will all need to reflect on the publication’s history to map a way forward.
2. In a unionized environment, staff and board members must pay attention to language in the collective agreement and show sensitivity to the processes of labour relations. Any changes to job descriptions and other contractual language require negotiations and ratification.
3. To your knowledge, there is no record of the workload issues having previously been addressed with the publisher, which is probably due to a lack of routine performance reviews, a lack of board oversight, and the nature of a two-person workplace.
4. The job descriptions for the managing editor and publisher might be a source of the current problem(s). The job descriptions state the expectations related to the distribution of work, but are they fair?
5. Any rift between you and the publisher could harm the magazine’s bottom line. Your quitting would lead to obvious drawbacks, and the same thing applies if the publisher resigns. If that happened, you would have even more work on your plate, and the search for a new staff person would take a lot of time and energy.
6. Hiring a third employee has been discussed and would certainly be welcome but would not resolve the underlying issues.
7. The relationship with the publisher is strained at this stage, and you find it difficult to compromise. Approach this exercise from a positional standpoint and go from there.
8. Four years ago, the board held a strategic planning retreat, after which it committed to achieving several objectives. However, many of those goals have not yet been realized—specifically, seeing revenue increase by 10 per cent in two years, increasing staff wages to $25 per hour by the end of the contract, increasing circulation by 2 per cent each year for the next five years, and reducing staff turnover to zero by next year. Currently, due to the financial realities of the publication, the hourly wage rate is $18.80.

Appendix A: Job Description—Managing Editor

Job Purpose

As one of two core staff members, the *Newstar* Managing Editor is jointly responsible for managing the affairs of the organization according to the strategic direction set by the Board of Directors. The *Newstar* Managing Editor takes primary responsibility for the creative production of *Newstar Magazine*, its website and related materials, and works collaboratively with the Publisher to carry out additional duties as outlined below.

Primary Duties and Responsibilities

Editorial

* Editorial administration (planning upcoming issues, writing and circulating calls for submissions, evaluating and responding to article queries, assigning articles, overseeing the editorial budget and negotiating rates with contributors, and working with writers and volunteer editors to develop quality editorial content)
* Editing the magazine and related materials
* Writing the “Letter from the Editor” and contributing other content as required
* Writing the semi-annual donor appeal letter and working collaboratively with the Publisher to produce other subscriber/donor correspondence as needed (e.g., renewals, reader surveys, and other related communications)

Design/Art Direction

* Designing the magazine and related materials (e.g., subscription cards and direct-mail brochures)
* Commissioning illustrators and photographers to produce artwork and related materials for Newstar Magazine
* Occasionally designing ads for inclusion in the magazine, as required
* Overseeing the art budget and negotiating rates with contributing illustrators and photographers

Website

* Maintaining and updating the website
* Assembling and circulating the e-newsletter on a regular basis
* Posting relevant articles from other sources to the Newstar blog

Marketing and Promotions

* Planning and coordinating, in collaboration with the Publisher, circulation and other marketing projects (e.g., direct mail, gift offers, ad campaigns)
* Developing, in collaboration with the Publisher, promotional materials (e.g., direct-mail packages, advertisements, brochures)
* Coordinating with other staff and volunteers to ensure a Newstar presence at events, fairs, talks, and screenings

Fundraising

* Working with the Fundraising Committee to develop and implement revenue-generating events and activities for the organization

Staff Supervision and Volunteer Management

* Training, supervising, and delegating duties to support staff, as resources permit
* Assisting the volunteer Board of Directors to promote Board member involvement and ensure effective management of the organization
* Participating in Board meetings and committee meetings as required
* Recruiting and managing editorial, event, and office volunteers

The Managing Editor also assists the Publisher with advertising sales, mailings, and grant applications.

Recognizing that Newstar Inc. is a volunteer-driven organization with limited staff resources, all reasonable efforts will be found to recruit volunteers to assist with or carry out these and other duties, as applicable.

APPENDIX B: *NEWSTAR* PERFORMANCE REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE: MANAGING EDITOR

The performance evaluation process is conducted in accordance with the Letter of Understanding between *Newstar* and Local 290 of the Union of Canadian Publishers (UCP). The results of this performance evaluation will be made available to the *Newstar* Managing Editor and Publisher and the *Newstar* Board of Directors.

The purpose of this performance review is to address the strengths and limitations of the Managing Editor and Publisher with the intent of acquiring information that will lead to improving performance through appropriate support and guidance.

Questions:

1. **On average, how many hours do you work each week?**

47. The work demands longer hours during the editing periods, and relaxes *slightly* in the few days between issues.

1. **What revisions, if any, would you recommend making to your respective job descriptions so that they better reflect the actual duties and responsibilities of these positions?**

The Managing Editor job description reflects the extensive work that needs to happen, but could be revised to redistribute some work around marketing and fundraising, which many other magazines assign to publishers or marketing-specific staff.

1. **Do the job description accurately reflect the actual duties of the Managing Editor and Publisher positions?**

The job description for the Managing Editor reflects the core duties well: editorial, design, and the website are my priorities. These duties alone take an overwhelming amount of time to complete. One issue won’t be quite finished before another one starts to ramp up.

1. **Walk us through how much time you spend on the following types of work as a percentage of your overall monthly duties.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Percentage of time spent on job description duties** | |
| **Managing Editor job description** | **Estimated percentage of time** |
| Editorial | 40 |
| Design/Art direction | 20 |
| Website | 15 |
| Marketing and promotions | 20 |
| Fundraising | 5 |
| **Total** | 100 |

1. **Is there an even distribution of work between the Managing Editor and the Publisher?**

From my perspective, my days are always sprints: I have long to-do lists and new to-dos arise throughout the day, so I work consistently at full capacity.

The work is very intense—just to meet the bare minimum of creating a magazine. Many other magazines regularly promote campaigns and subscription offers (I know this because I subscribe to email newsletters with other national magazines, and they regularly send me emails with offers). I feel like we are flatlining and not communicating with readers—not enticing them to step up their involvement with the broader Newstar project. Our leaky-bucket subscription situation means that our circulation needs to constantly be jolted into sustainable action, but these initiatives aren’t happening at a rate or intensity that can help us.

1. **If a third position were created, what would be the duties and responsibilities of that position?**

It would be great if a third position were responsible for managing some pitches, contributors’ payments, and basic subscription management so that the Publisher’s role could be about more creative campaigns and network-building. The third position could be an administrative role, allowing the Managing Editor and Publisher to devote their time to substantially more creative and innovative work.

1. **What do you find most rewarding about the job?**

The editorial side of the job is rewarding—developing good writing, hearing from contributors that the editorial process was inspiring and fruitful, and hearing that articles were interesting to readers. I feel best when someone tells me that the content exceeded their expectations.

# What do you find the most frustrating about the job? How would you improve it?

The most frustrating part of the job is knowing that we are working under a suffocating ceiling of limitations—financial limitations, time restraints, emotional rollercoasters, and what I feel is a dearth of inspired conversations about independent media.

I feel that I am close to burnout already, and I find *that* frustrating; I don’t want to be *already* burnt out—I want to continue building the magazine, meeting people and developing good ideas, and supporting marginalized voices without feeling exhausted at the end of every day.

I feel frustrated that we don’t fairly pay our contributors, including the fact-checkers, copy editors, illustrators, and writers. Given how much work is involved in creating a great article, and how chronically underpaid writers are, it’s not fair that we pay them a pittance.

What would I do to improve it? We need money to solve a lot of these issues, especially the pay issue. This means finding grants and funding opportunities that are sustainable, but more importantly, it means finding a way to ensure that we’re self-sufficient. The challenge with grants is that funding agencies cannot guarantee steady annual funding, and we can’t count on funding to increase as our needs develop. Many granting agencies have fewer opportunities for political projects than for arts and literary projects.

But the bottom line is, even if there is a lot of work going into paying people better and developing quality editorial content *but* *no one is reading the magazine*, then it all feels futile. We need more readers and more engagement.

Appendix C: Collective Agreement

Letter of Understanding between Newstar Incorporated and Union of Canadian Publishers (UCP) Local 290.

Recognizing the importance of meaningful oversight and working relations between the Board of Directors and *Newstar* staff, both parties agree to develop a performance review process, in accordance with Article 16 (Labour–Management Committee).

The terms and conditions of the performance review process will be developed jointly between staff and Board representatives on the Labour–Management Committee.

**Article 10: Wage Rates and Job Classifications**

1. Job classifications and the minimum monthly wage rates for all full-time employees covered by this Agreement shall be as set out in Appendix A.1 of this Agreement. Job classifications and the minimum hourly wage rates for all part-time and casual employees covered by this Agreement shall be as set out in Appendix A.2 of this Agreement.
2. A completely itemized computation of the employee’s pay and overtime hours shall be shown conspicuously on his/her paycheque or the slip accompanying it.
3. The Employer agrees to draw up job descriptions for all positions for which the Union is the sole bargaining agent. These descriptions shall be presented and discussed with the Union and shall become the recognized job descriptions unless the Union presents written objection within thirty (30) days. If such objection cannot be resolved, the issue may be subject to the Grievance and Arbitration Procedures. Recognized job descriptions shall be attached to and form a part of this Agreement.
4. Any changes to recognized job descriptions must be arrived at through negotiations and mutual agreement between the Employer, the Union, and the employee(s) affected by such changes. If mutual agreement is not reached, the matter may be resolved through the Grievance and Arbitration Procedures. Once the matter has been settled, the new job description shall be deemed to be the recognized job description and shall be attached to and form a part of this Agreement.
5. Existing recognized job descriptions shall not be eliminated by the Employer without prior agreement of the Union and the employees covered by this Agreement.
6. The Employer recognizes that the employees have the right to determine how they can best fulfill the requirements and responsibilities of recognized job descriptions on a day-to-day basis.
7. Payments for (a) and (b) above shall be retroactive to the first day.
8. Job descriptions, classification titles, and rates of pay applicable thereto for any new classification or position that may hereafter be established shall be subject to negotiations and agreement between the Employer and the Union, and a supplementary agreement shall be executed in respect to any such positions.
9. Any employee required to temporarily fill for one (1) day or more a position in the scope of this Agreement paying a higher rate of pay shall receive a temporary pay of higher duties (TPHD) of 5 per cent above their base salary. If any employee is required to temporarily fill a position paying a lower rate of pay, s/he shall not have his/her rate reduced.
10. The Employer agrees to the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

**Article 16: Labour–Management Committee**

Upon request of either party, a labour–management committee shall be struck. The Committee shall consist of two (2) representatives from each party.

**Article 17: Employee Benefits (Section 3–Health Benefits Plan)**

The Employer agrees to provide a comprehensive Personal Health Plan through Blue Cross ($49.40/mo/employee), which includes dental coverage and coverage for prescription drugs, ambulance service, hospital services, medical equipment, registered therapists and health practitioners, orthopaedic shoes and supplies, eye care, in-Canada travel, death and dismemberment, and other services carried by the Plan.

The Employer agrees to provide a health and wellness program that pays up to $300/year for physical and mental health needs (e.g., gym membership, winter clothing, etc.).

**Article 18: Benefits for Casual and Part-Time Employees**

All part-time employees will enjoy the same benefits as full-time employees. These benefits will be paid on a pro-rated basis. Casual employees will receive a payout in lieu of receiving vacation and sick leave benefits. Such payment will be made after a casual employee has accumulated benefits equivalent to one day’s pay. Casual employees are not eligible for parental and compassionate leaves.

Article 28: Wage Re-opener

Notwithstanding the provisions of Article 27, Duration of Agreement, this Agreement may be opened for the negotiation of the Schedule of Wages as contained in Schedule “A” only, effective April 1 in year 2 and April 1 in year 3. It is understood and agreed that in such event, all other provisions of this Agreement shall remain in full force and effect.

Further, and also notwithstanding the provisions of Article 27, Duration of Agreement, this Agreement may be opened for the negotiation of the Employer’s payment for a Health Benefits Plan as contained in Article 17, Section 3, effective as required by the carrier’s premium increases.

**Appendix “A”**

1. Job classifications and minimum monthly wage rates for full-time employees:

Effective at Contract signing

Classification Wage Rates

Editor/Publisher $17.80

Effective April 1 Year 1

Classification Wage Rates

Editor/Publisher $18.80

1. Job classifications and minimum monthly wage rates for part-time employees:

As agreed on by the parties.

1. The amount of $200.00 per month per Managing Editor/Publisher shall be paid into a Registered Retirement Savings Plan, unless the employee opts to instead receive the same amount minus *Newstar*’s Employment Insurance and Canada Pension Plan contributions as part of gross pay.
2. Retroactive pay shall be paid in full or deposited to a Registered Retirement Savings Plan, at the employee’s preference.

1. One hundred institutional subscriptions represent approximately $4,000 in annual revenue. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)