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Newstar Magazine Exercise: board chair role

Professors Andrew Stevens and Ann Frost wrote this case 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—Board Chair

What’s Happening?

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

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **2016–17 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 small, two-person staff complement possess not only a great deal of skill and expertise but also a willingness to work for 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. For these reasons, recruitment and retention have always been problematic.

Last week the magazine’s managing editor contacted you, expressing a need to meet to discuss an undefined “workplace issue.” You took up the invitation and met for coffee.

When you met with the managing editor, right away you realized that it would be a tough conversation. The managing editor was visibly upset and frustrated 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 perform their jobs at full capacity. The managing editor quickly made it clear that the problem was the distribution of work. Workload is unevenly distributed, and important tasks are not getting done. As a result, the managing editor believes they are working longer and harder than is fair. The printers have not been paid in a few months, and the subscriber base has decreased substantially 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. A psychological toll is associated with this inequity and has led to the managing editor considering leaving the magazine.

Not long after the meeting, you decided to reach out to a former managing editor who had worked with the current *Newstar* publisher for about a year and a half. Those reflections were important to hear. The perceived inequitable distribution of work and the publisher’s lack of initiative go back a long way.

In a two-person workplace, where both the managing editor and publisher work side by side in a small office, there is little room for anonymity when it comes to dealing with this complaint. There are also external pressures. *Newstar* and its staff and board are part of a small progressive community, and while confidentiality is critical throughout this process, those who know the magazine will not be shy about expressing their opinions about what is going on. Reputation matters for board members and the magazine as a whole, so it is important to address the problem with care. How do you confront the publisher without letting on that a complaint was raised? To address the issue, you make a request to both staff that a performance review be conducted, in accordance with the Letter of Understanding and Article 16 of the collective agreement (see Appendix C). What both staff members had to say in the questionnaire is illuminating (see Appendix A and B). Now it is time to address the problem head-on and resolve the problem before matters worsen for both *Newstar* and the employees. The next step involves a meeting with the two staff members.

Next Steps and Considerations

So far, the conversations you have had have been informal, and you need to get more than the managing editor’s side of the story. You will need to develop a strategy to defuse the simmering conflict and put the magazine and staff on the right track. You will need to consider the following:

1. As board chair, you do not deal with the day-to-day running of the magazine, but you are tasked with overseeing the strategic direction of *Newstar* and its overall success. Reflect on the publication’s history to map a way forward.
2. In a unionized environment, you will need to 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. Neither employee has an official record of poor performance or disciplinary infractions. At the same time, there has been a lack of routine performance measurement and regular board oversight. Consider these factors when you craft a solution and reflect on the use of written and verbal feedback.
4. The job descriptions for the managing editor and publisher might be a source of the current problem(s). (See Appendix A and B for the job descriptions.) The job descriptions state the expectations related to the distribution of work, but are they fair?
5. If the publisher is not doing his or her job, what will you do? Progressive discipline or the termination of employment is possible, but you will need to assess the implications of these options.
6. The recent budget and subscriber numbers provide a source of information you should examine, along with the results of the employee questionnaire.
7. A rift between the managing editor and the publisher could harm the magazine’s bottom line. Dealing with the loss of an employee in the short term might be equally damaging. A mediated solution might be worth pursuing.
8. Reconfiguring the rates of pay to reflect workload is feasible but would require the consent of staff to open up the agreement. You are not back at the bargaining table for some time.
9. 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: *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 descriptions 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.

1. **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 can’t 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 B: *Newstar* Performance Review Questionnaire: Publisher

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?**

Between 40 and 45, on average.

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?**

I would add some house duties—sitting on the board of directors of the not-for-profit entity that owns and operates the building in which *Newstar* is located, taking care of our office space, and sharing house duties such as shovelling. It’s small but it adds up, and including it in the description ensures that there’s an awareness of these requirements.

Additionally, right now I am mostly responsible for dealing with advertisers (e.g., coordinating deadlines, sending reminders, renewing agreements, and invoicing). While advertising is mentioned in the description, it’s only in the context of new advertisers.

1. **Do the job descriptions accurately reflect the actual duties of the managing editor and publisher positions?**

Mostly yes. Some tasks within the publisher’s job description are funding-dependent and, as a result, have never actually arisen for me (e.g., direct-mail campaigns and reader surveys). Those tasks still fall within the description of course—just a note that my duties haven’t as yet included those tasks.

I’ll also note here that some of the more innovative, growth-based projects noted in the job description (marketing and promotion projects, for instance) are often sidelined in favour of the more pressing day-to-day tasks (even though the growth-based projects are indeed pressing in their own way).

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** | |
| **Publisher job description** | **Estimated percentage of time** |
| Financial | 25 |
| Circulation | 35 |
| Revenue generation | 10 |
| Administration | 25 |
| Board relations and volunteer coordination | 5 |
| **Total** | 100 |

1. **Is there an even distribution of work between the managing editor and the publisher?**

It’s complicated, but generally the answer is “no.” The one benefit to my job is that many of the tasks are fairly black and white, in that once they’re done, they’re done. There is always more to take up once they’re done, of course, so it’s never-ending in that sense. But the managing editor’s work can stretch and expand to fill as much time as they have, especially with our collaborative editing process and the high standards of quality held by our editors. We both work on our two-month issue cycle and I think I receive slightly more significant downtime (by which I mean time without a bunch of stacked deadlines), though of course for us downtime just means “What can I take up now?”

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

There are a few possible answers to this question. It’s hard to identify the single most urgent need, but in theory the third position would lighten the load overall so that those needs could be addressed by whoever makes the most sense. I see, perhaps, three main directions for that position to go.

The first is a generalized assistant type of position, who would take on more clerical and administrative work—data entry, mail opening and sorting, mailing out issues, writing and mailing cheques, calling donors for updated credit card info. Since these are tasks both of us perform, it could free us up to work on some bigger-picture and long-term projects.

The second is an editorial assistant. This person would have to be absolutely top-notch, completely reliable, and very independent. Otherwise any workload off the managing editor’s shoulders would be immediately undone by their having to revisit material and otherwise manage the assistant. I do think that the work of reviewing pitches and writing rejections in particular would relieve a lot of looming pressure on the managing editor.

The third is in the world of those bigger-picture projects mentioned above—someone with an enthusiasm for outreach: pitching advertisers and following up, researching promotional strategies and best practices and then taking on those promotions, executing our social media according to a consistent strategy, and other fundraising and growth work. The only downside to this position would be the degree of specialization and the intensity of the work clashing with the part-time and low-pay nature of the job—it might be difficult to find the right person on those terms.

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

Despite the pressure and the constant struggles of the magazine, this is the best job I’ve ever had. I’m able to work on a project I care about and believe in, a rare and precious work situation. I find the financial and database work very satisfying. I love speaking with subscribers and donors when they get in touch. When I’m able to work in design—whether it’s laying out a couple of articles in the issue, creating ads for ad swaps with other publications, or making our subscription insert cards—I feel particularly fortunate to have the job I do. The best feeling is receiving the first physical copies of the magazine, knowing that soon all that hard work will be in the hands of our readers.

1. **What do you find the most frustrating about the job? How would you improve it?**

I am deeply invested in *Newstar* and it is endlessly frustrating to not be able to do more to take care of it or to provide solutions to its problems. When we are running ragged to complete only the essential tasks of producing the magazine, it is crushing to look at disappointing revenue numbers, our low contributor pay rates, and our outdated web presence—and to feel helpless to address those deficiencies. I also have moments of performance frustration when I don’t feel that I have the tools for a particular task—advertising pitches and donor appeal letters come to mind. It isn’t that I can’t do these tasks; they just take a lot of research (e.g., reading fundraising and ad sales best practices and guides, looking over other publications’ material, and referencing *Newstar’s* previous efforts). When it’s that daunting, it’s easy to instead move on to the next pressing administrative or financial task that I’m good at. In short, the pressure is always high, and it can breed a lot of guilt and disappointment when I’m unable to do everything.

Improving these conditions comes down to finding the funds for necessary updates (e.g., a better website and paying our writers and artists fairly), paid staff hours in the form of a third team member, and placing a higher priority on professional development.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Side by side comparison of time use**  **Percentage of time spent on job description duties** | | | |
| **Publisher job description** | **Estimated percentage of time** | **Managing Editor job description** | **Estimated percentage of time** |
| Financial | 25 | Editorial | 40 |
| Circulation | 35 | Design/Art Direction | 20 |
| Revenue generation | 10 | Website | 15 |
| Administration | 25 | Marketing and promotions | 20 |
| Board relations and volunteer coordination | 5 | Fundraising | 5 |
| Total | 100 | Total | 100 |

Appendix C: Collective Agreement (Selected Clauses)

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) 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 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 per 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 year 3 of the Agreement. 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 time of 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)