"Grid" Lock: A Preliminary Case Study of a Management Initiative at the *Winston-Salem Journal*

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As daily U.S. newspapers have faced increasing competition, they have experienced falling circulation and declining household penetration. In an effort to cope with the adverse changes, some newspapers have sought the advice of consultants who have advised such administered changes as total quality management and similar managed workplace transformations. While such changes have succeeded in other workplace environments, such as manufacturing, they have faced resistance in professional settings, such as newsrooms at daily newspapers.

One newsroom that faced a similar administrative change was the *Winston-Salem Journal,* where the North Carolina daily in 1995 adopted an efficiency "grid" for newsroom professionals that was rejected in early 1996. A preliminary survey of the professional news staff at the *Journal* two years after the efficiency initiative was announced found that news professionals there remained strongly resistant to business-administered changes in newsroom routines and professional norms, and they strongly adhered to traditional views about the separation of business and news departments. The study also found worthy of further study suggests that some newsroom professionals view staff cuts that coincide with administrative changes as falling within the purview of business administrators and as unrelated to professional norms and values and work routines.

INTRODUCTION

A widely adopted means of organizational change in the United States during the past two decades has been "total quality management" (TQM), an administrative form of transformation that also has been described by other terms, such as "continuous improvement" and the like (Aldrich, forthcoming)[1]. Although considerable scholarly attention has been paid to TQM applications in business-organization settings in general, little study has been devoted to TQM transformation efforts and effects at U.S. daily newspapers. A preliminary examination of one such attempt at a North Carolina daily newspaper is the focus of this study.

Newspapers are worth studying in this context because they occupy a unique position on the boundaries between public life and private enterprise in the United States. The industry's combination of public fiduciary in an information (or intellectual) market and private vendor in a commercial (mainly advertising) market has been profitable for established newspaper organizations (Lacy, Sohn, and Wicks, 1993).

[1.] In Chapter 6, Aldrich (forthcoming) notes that organizational transformations such as total quality management programs have been heavily researched over the past few decades.

Many daily newspapers have been in existence for more than a century in an industry that is the nation's oldest news medium, and many have come to dominate and monopolize their geographical market areas. Newspaper organizations have enjoyed distinctive formal legitimation by constitutional (First Amendment) and other institutional means –the landmark 1964 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in New York Times vs. Sullivan, for example, which finally solidified newspapers' unique public-service and government-watchdog roles (Studer-Ellis, 1995; see also Gillmor, Barron, Simon, and Terry, 1990).

Despite its advantages of age, size and legitimacy, the newspaper industry has recorded declines in several key performance areas, including circulation and readership. Still, daily newspapers on average have enjoyed profit margins two to three times higher than the average for companies listed among the Fortune 500 (Morton, 1996; see also Kovach, 1996). Their profitability, however, has not prevented many U.S. daily newspapers from seeking to improve their financial performance by adopting business-management initiatives, such as total quality management and "re-engineered" workplaces, that have successfully produced efficiencies in various other business-organization settings, primarily manufacturing.

2. See also Tim Jones (1996, p. 43), who writes that public trading tries to make newspapers' productivity measurable «like steel production and cardboard-box making.» But newspaper work is labor-intensive and not easily measured. And attempts to measure it have been counter-productive, the author concludes.

Such initiatives have been transferred to service-sector and professional organizations. However, these initiatives have met resistance among some workers and have produced mixed managerial results (Morton, 1996)[2]. Yet, adoptions of TQM-style management initiatives have persisted at business organizations.

Among the key elements of total-quality-management initiatives are detailed quantitative measurements of work routines. Successful implementation of TQM initiatives requires "metamorphosis" and "total change" (Reger, Gustafson, DeMarie, and Mullane, 1994). These initiatives have been widely applied in American business organizations, but not all implementations have been successful (Reger et al., 1994; see also Sitkin, Sutcliffe and Schroeder, 1994).

Some studies have suggested that TQM initiatives are a result of institutional isomorphism –imitative processes, such as those that fueled the business-merger wave that began in the 1980s (Haunschild, 1993). Large organizations have tended to choose from a small group of consulting firms, which spread a few organizational models –such as TQM– far afield «like Johnny Appleseeds» (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 152; see also Shepard, 1996). Other studies have suggested that TQM is another in a series of management fads marketed as panaceas applicable to all organizations (Sitkin et al., 1994).

Transferring TQM's manufacturing prescriptions to service industries, particularly where work is nonroutine –such as research and development– may be problematic. Obstacles to implementing TQM may arise where beliefs about organizational identity are ignored. Organizational identity is the set of beliefs that organizational members hold and use to describe what is «central, distinctive and enduring» about an organization (Reger et al., 1994, p. 568). Because identity is deeply embedded in organizational culture, it can present an inertial hindrance to organizational changes that are perceived as threats to identity.

JOURNALISTS' NORMS, PROFESSIONALISM

A study of the relationship between newsroom policy changes and job satisfaction among reporters has shown that newsroom professionals have resisted changes in their job routines and craft norms where they perceive the changes to be business-oriented. «Journalists are happier when they are about the business of journalism than when they are about the business of business,» the study concluded (Stamm and Underwood, 1993, p. 538). The newsroom-management initiatives have sparked vigorous debate among journalists, as well, some of whom have warned that the "corporatization of journalism" is the broader issue behind the business-side influence on news-side practices (Roberts, 1996). Others who have studied the changes have concluded that corporatism has produced improvements in journalism at daily newspapers under corporate-group ownership (Demers, 1993; 1997). TQM management initiatives have met resistance arising out of internal tensions rooted in professionalism. In newspaper organizations journalists have viewed such transformations, particularly modifications in routines of news-gathering and changes in communities of practice, as threatening to professional autonomy and organizational legitimacy (Stamm and Underwood, 1993; see also Hansen, Neuzil and Ward, 1997). Professionalization is a process in which beginners are gradually socialized into professional patterns of behavior and attitudes by procedures both formal and informal (Windahl and Rosengren, 1978). Autonomy is the collective effort of occupational groups to define the conditions and methods of their work and to control the production of producers (Larson, 1977). Autonomy is an important correlate of professionalism among journalists. A 1992 survey of journalists, for example, found that most rated autonomy as "very important" to their jobs (Matthews, 1996).

Journalistic professionalism, autonomy and norms also comprise skepticism that could tend to tilt journalists toward a view that management may interfere with and risk organizational legitimacy with its conflicting commercial interests (McEnally, 1985; see also Starbuck, 1983). Thus, where newspaper-organization managers bring commercial concerns into closer proximity with perceived boundaries of news-gathering, then conflicts with journalists' professional norms are likely to arise. Recent changes in newspaper management, including increased bureaucratization and tighter editing controls, have raised concerns about perceived assaults on newsroom professionalism and autonomy (Stamm and Underwood, 1993).

Such management controls as total-quality-management initiatives have been the focus of study for their general application to the sociology of organizations (Stamm and Underwood, 1993; see also Reger et al., 1994). But little study has been devoted to TQM transformation efforts, their use in combination with other management initiatives (such as restructuring, re-engineering and downsizing –or staff reductions) and their effects at newspaper organizations in the United States.

For U.S. daily newspapers, the literature on organizational change suggests that:
– perceived radical change in established practices and norms is more likely to be resisted than incremental change that affects news professionals at daily newspaper organizations;
– professionalism among journalists presents a barrier to successful implementation of organizational change.
Those suggestions, drawn from the literature, form the focus of this preliminary case study of the *Winston-Salem Journal*.

THE *WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL*

The *Journal,* a daily newspaper owned by the Media General group, operates in the Piedmont region of North Carolina in a growing market which by comparison to average U.S. daily-newspaper performance in recent decades has been promising. Between 1980 and 1996, population in the Winston-Salem market increased 11 percent. Circulation of the Sunday edition of the *Journal* during the same period increased by 10 percent[3]. An annual listing of the parent company's 30-week stock price, as listed on the American Stock Exchange, has fluctuated between $17 per share and $59. The most recent 30-week average for 1997 is about $30, unchanged from its 1980 listing.

In summer 1995, the *Journal* initiated some of the elements of the total-quality approach to business management. The *Journal*'s approach may have been unique. In keeping with total-quality-management principles that encourage quantitative measurement of production inputs and outputs, the *Journal* mandated limits on length and time spent writing newspaper stories. Under guidelines presented in the form of a grid that was likened to a restaurant menu, the *Journal* initiative ordered its reporters during a 40-hour work week to produce exactly 13 stories of varying lengths chosen from three columns, depending on a story's complexity, that specified how much time a reporter should spend to write a story, down to the minute (Effron, 1996; see also Shepard, 1996). The initiative was abandoned by early 1996.

The grid initiative received considerable attention in the trade press (Effron, 1996; see also Davis, 1995; Shepard, 1996). Less emphasis was given to the context in which the grid appeared. At the *Journal* the introduction of the grid followed by about a year an effort that began to restructure the paper's news operations. Among the restructuring initiatives was a move to downsize staff and to change newsroom management. By the time of the grid initiative, about 10 percent of the news staff had departed, for reasons that ranged from being encouraged by early-retirement inducements to becoming discouraged by changes at the *Journal.* Turnover of older staff members and their replacement with younger newcomers has continued since then[4].

This development may be significant since research has suggested that resistance to organizational transformation may be overcome

3. Figures were drawn from annual yearbooks published by *Editor & Publisher.*

4. Confidential interviews between the author and *Journal* staff members. On downsizing, see also Alex Jones (1996), who writes that newspapers have been able to squeeze news budgets because they feel they face no real competition in that area.

through turnover among organization members. That is, where members of resisting professional subunits leave transformation-inclined organizations and are replaced by newcomers to the organization or to the profession, then the organizations are more likely to successfully adopt administrative changes and transformations such as TQM and the like (March, 1991).

As noted, trade publication articles have described the grid initiative at the *Journal,* but no scholarly study has been published that examines the origins of the *Journal* initiative and its effects on the paper's newsroom professionals. This study attempts to supply such an examination. Its research questions are:

– did *Winston-Salem Journal* management tailor its initiative to the particular circumstances of the newsroom?;

– has the initiative made the *Journal* newsroom staff more or less inclined to change in organizational structure?;

– has the initiative made the *Journal* newsroom staff more or less inclined to change in professional norms?

METHOD

To evaluate effects on perceived professionalism and craft norms and routines, a telephone survey of news professionals at the *Winston-Salem Journal* was conducted in the fall of 1997, more than two years after the paper unsuccessfully initiated the grid. Respondents, including senior staff members and new organization members, were surveyed about the grid and the downsizing in an effort to gauge differences in attitudes between cohorts and effects, including effects of staff turnover[5]. Respondents were asked 21 substantive questions and six personal-demographic questions. All but one of the questions were multiple-choice to facilitate analysis (Dillman, 1978).

The response rate was below what social science researchers generally regard as reasonable from which to draw conclusions (Wimmer and Dominick, 1997). But given this study's preliminary approach and its pretest and case-study focus, the rate –and the relatively small sample size– is basically sound and acceptable. It should be noted that several potential respondents declined to participate after expressing discomfort over the prospect of discussing issues involving personal job security.

FINDINGS

Preliminary analysis of the respondents' personal information yielded the following profile of the participating news professionals at the *Winston-Salem Journal:*

– their average age is 32.75 years;

– their average numbers of years' schooling is 16.58;

– their average number of years of professional experience in the

[5]. The study employed a purposive sample. In October 1997, all 29 newsroom professionals –reporters and managing editors– were mailed letters and consent forms that described the topics that the study intended to address. Of those who received consent forms, 12 consented to be interviewed. All were promised confidentiality. Nine of the interviews were conducted in late November and early December by telephone. The remaining three were either on assignment or vacation, and phone interviews were tentatively scheduled for the second week of December. A copy of the questionnaire is included in the Appendix.

newspaper business is 9.2;
– their average number of years worked at the Journal is 6;
Preliminary analysis of the responses to substantive questions produced the following findings:
– most respondents who were working at the *Journal* in 1995 expressed opposition to the grid initiative;
– all respondents said they would oppose the grid if it were revived today;
– most attributed the failure of the grid initiative to opposition by newsroom professionals such as themselves;
– most attributed the grid initiative to the business side of the newspaper organization;
– most viewed strict segregation of the news and business sides of the newspaper as a good tradition worth preserving;
– most said the grid represented a major transformation in core professional values;
– most said the grid initiative –and its failure– produced little or no change in their work routines today;
– most said the grid initiative had a moderate or substantial adverse impact on the newspaper's standing within the industry.

DISCUSSION

The foregoing preliminary findings suggest that professionalism is an influential force within the *Journal* news organization. News-professional respondents expressed belief that their opposition to an initiative they perceived as harmful (several said «ridiculous»; one said «laughable»; another said «hateful») and adversely transforming succeeded in stopping the initiative. This finding appears to support the literature that suggests TQM-style transformations in U.S. newspaper organizations such as the *Winston-Salem Journal* will face resistance among news professionals who perceive the changes as threatening to the organization's legitimacy and that these news professionals will constrain initiatives perceived to be delegitimizing.

The preliminary findings also appear to support the suggestion that organizational structure and processes should be coordinated with situational requirements if changes in core functions are to succeed in newspaper settings. As one reporter complained, «They tried to treat us like factory workers.» Another criticized the *Journal*'s consultants' «treatment of news as a widget.» Thus, transformation efforts that are perceived as radical and that do not account for news reporters' strongly traditional sense of professionalism and autonomy appear likely to fail in such circumstances as the *Journal*'s.

Thus, at least from the perspective of the news staff at the *Journal* in this preliminary analysis, the newspaper's management did not tailor its initiative to the particular circumstances of the newsroom, including the paper's organizational structure and the news staff's professional norms. The *Journal* initiative apparently has not made the newspa-

per's newsroom staff more inclined to changes in core functions organizational structure, and the initiative apparently has not made the *Journal* newsroom staff more inclined to change in professional norms. This preliminary analysis suggests areas for additional study. For example, the situational requirements for the grid initiative at the *Journal* included the precursor downsizing initiative. Preliminary analysis suggests that most respondents viewed the earlier staff cuts (representing 10 percent of the news staff, according to one respondent) as unrelated to the later grid initiative. If final analysis bears this out, then this finding may represent an area for additional research. That is, news professionals may recognize staff-size reductions as falling within the purview of management, though the reductions may coincide with management's cost-conscious initiatives to apply efficiencies to news professionals' work routines. If so, then news professionals may accept staff cuts as a business imperative but reject efficiencies applied to core work routines and norms of news professionals as out of bounds for management. It may be worthy of additional study to examine whether news professionals' perceived boundaries and cores have changed over recent decades. If change has occurred, it could be a significant development in terms of core professional values if news professionals are ceding boundary areas to business-management members of the organization.

The question of whether radical change is more likely to be rejected than incremental change also is worth further study. While most respondents in the preliminary analysis strongly objected to the grid initiative as radical, most also expressed the view that the initiative was the brainchild of a consultant who lacked experience in dealing with newspaper professionals and who therefore lacked institutional isomorphism. That raises the question of whether news professionals may be receptive to change if proposed by consultants who know newspapers and their norms and who help initiate change. It may also suggest that news professional may be more receptive to management-initiated changes that are perceived to be more incremental, more tailored to newsroom situational requirements and less radical.

The issue of whether turnover affects professional norms is a question worth further study, as older professionals leave the profession and as environmental pressure to change and to adapt persists among newspaper organizations. (As one respondent said, new *Journal* staff members are largely ignorant of what preceded their arrival and that the newcomers «don't feel the same disappointment» as veterans.) However, preliminary analysis of the *Journal* respondents' surveys suggests that there is no difference among age groups and cohorts in their expressed devotion to core professional norms. For example, all but one respondent expressed support for the concept of "church and state" –the strict separation of business and news functions at the newspaper. Further, all respondents expressed a belief that the newspaper's response to environmental change would have been different had its ownership been local and independent instead of out-of-state and group-owned.

The *Journal*'s experience may be unique for its radical attempt at change. No other daily paper has gone so far as the *Journal* in attempting to alter core newsroom values by attempting to impose an efficiency grid. Additional study of similar but less radical and more incremental change at other newspapers would help establish benchmarks of professionalism where it faces management-initiated change.

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APPENDIX:
WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL QUESTIONNAIRE

I want to ask you about the so-called "church-and-state" wall that traditionally has separated the business and the news sides of the daily newspaper business. Do you think that tradition is:

    a good one
    one that newspapers need to adjust to survive these days
    a bad tradition
    not sure

How do you see that wall between the business and news sides at the *Winston-Salem Journal?* Do you think:

    the wall is present and unchanged at the paper
    the wall has been raised
    the wall has been lowered
    the wall has been removed
    not sure

Journal management said restructuring –including downsizing and the consultants' grid– were adopted to improve news quality. How do you think the quality of the news content in the Journal has changed? Has it:

    improved
    declined
    unchanged
    not sure

Were you working at the *Journal* when the grid was adopted, when downsizing was going on?

    yes
    no

If you were working at the *Journal* during the restructuring, what was your reaction? Were you:
> opposed
> supportive
> unsure
> don't know

Based on what you know or have heard, which part of the newspaper was most responsible for bringing about the changes?
> news side
> business side
> both
> neither

What effect do you think the changes have had on the news department at the *Journal?*
> substantial
> moderate
> minimal
> no effect
> don't know

What effect do you think the 1995 changes had on other departments that work at the *Journal?*
> substantial
> moderate
> minimal
> no effect
> don't know

Why do you think the consultant's grid was scrapped? Was it due to:
> newsroom opposition
> business management opposition
> both
> neither
> don't know

If the grid were re-imposed today, what would your reaction be?
> welcome the grid
> wait and see
> oppose the grid
> don't know

What kind of change do you think the grid represented for news professionals at the *Journal?*
> big change
> moderate change
> minor change
> no change
> don't know

What effect do you think downsizing of the *Journal'*s news staff had on the their reaction to the grid initiative?
> major effect
> moderate effect
> minor effect
> no effect
> don't know

Based on what you know or have heard, why do you think the grid and other changes were initiated at the *Journal?*
> (open ended)

Whether you were working at the *Journal* in 1995 or not, what effect do you think the 1995 changes have had on the way you perform your job now?
> substantial effect
> moderate effect
> minimal effect
> no effect
> don't know

What effect do you think the 1995 changes have had on the newspaper's standing in the community –among readers, among advertisers?
> substantial
> moderate
> minimal
> no effect
> don't know

What effect do you think the 1995 changes have had on the newspaper's standing in the industry?
> substantial
> moderate
> minimal
> no effect
> don't know

I want to ask you about corporate group ownership of the newspaper. Do you think it would make a difference if the *Journal* were independently and locally owned instead of owned by a corporate group?
> yes
> no

Do you plan to stay in the daily newspaper business?
> yes
> no
> don't know

How do you view the future of daily newspapers?
> newspapers will thrive
> newspapers will survive
> newspapers will wither and die
> don't know

Date of birth

Place of birth

Gender

Education
> years of schooling
> college degree?
> college major

Work experience (years in newspapers, news media)

When did you start working at the *Journal* (month, year)?