

Memo: We're not a happy team at *The Advertiser*

Some folk at the Adelaide Advertiser seem less than happy. Fresh from the Crikey fax machine (well it did come from Adelaide) this morning was the following

Morale on the newsfloor has reach a very low point. Reporters are feeling anxious and full of doubt about their future at The Advertiser. Individuals have been pushed to the brink and the overall situation is close to becoming an occupational health and safety issue.

We think it is important to document these issues as clearly as possible, in writing, and present them to management so that management and staff can work together to improve the situation.

The issues are:

1. There has been an increasing amount of abusive and bullying behaviour towards journalists. Several people have been publicly brought to tears. Many have also complained of lengthy, condescending lectures. There have been regular threats of firing, usually phrased as "If you cannot do x, don't bother coming in tomorrow". It is unacceptable.

Management must commit to creating constructive relationships with its reporting staff. Any necessary criticism should be succinct and to the point. If there is a serious issue that needs to be addressed, this should not be done in front of colleagues. If there is a problem with an individual's performance, this should be dealt with on an individual basis to help people perform at their best.

2. Reporters feel there is a lack of reasonable direction and leadership from management. We are wasting too much time on stories that are not being used. It has become increasingly difficult to comprehend much of management's instructions. There are many conflicting instructions, blanket bans on certain words and subjects, and a lack of trust in the reporter to choose what to focus on. One ongoing conflict is that reporters are told to ignore press releases, stories from politicians, anything that has been on radio, but reporters are still being severely reprimanded if those stories are not covered. We also need to know whether we have to cover off on every single story within our rounds ever day, or whether we should choose the important ones then focus on exclusives. We need clearer communication about what management wants. We need early, clear direction that also incorporates flexibility when stories change throughout the day. We need to feel confident that when circumstances beyond our control change the direction of a story, we will not be verbally abused or blamed for that. ***Management often dictates an editorial line it wants reporters to take that is in conflict with what our contacts say. Much of a day can be wasted trying to find one person to say what management wants them to say. This is not reporting, it is fabricating news.***
3. Workloads have become unrealistic and individually impossible to uphold. While reporters understand that daily news takes precedence, other duties — special projects, liftouts, magazine work, etc. — are not being taken into account at all. They are reporting to: the chief of staff, the pictorial editor, online, section editors, the deputy chief of staff, the Sunday chief of staff, the editor, the 'top desk', and so on. All these people have different priorities, deadlines and demands and do not communicate these to each other, putting the reporter in an impossible position. We can manage our own time, but we cannot manage having so many different bosses who all want us to work to their own deadlines. We need to be able to tell the newsdesk how much 'non-news' work we have and or that to be decently taken into account. This is not to be construed as whingeing. This needs open discussion as

to how much time people need to complete their 'extra' work, and therefore how much time they have to spend on news.

4. Reporters understand that journalism has never been a 'nine till five' job. They are happy to work long and hard to make sure the job is done. However, the nature of the job has changed so that the majority of it is "churnalism" — sitting in front of a computer all day typing out stories, as opposed to getting on the road, meeting people, working closely with a photographer, etc. Many reporters feel pressured to never leave their desks, even to meet contacts. Many people — because they feel overtime is no longer allowed — are now doing their extra work from home. This is often unspoken but it should be recognised that this is happening more and more.

We think there needs to be discussion about what is expected of us. We think it is unfair, unhealthy, and unproductive to expect us to be in early, work late, eat lunch at our desks, and not leave the office. We think that with better workload management, less wastage of time and more trust we should be able to be both flexible and more productive.

These are the main points we wish to make. Side issues we want to point out include:

- We feel management does not respect us at all. We hear often that conferences and meetings often include bitching about journalists, blaming them for everything that is going wrong. Morale suffers deeply because of this.
- Reporters' self confidence has also been battered by extensive re-writing of copy, to the point where it is unrecognisable. Changes seem to be made for the sake of change and nothing else, so that individual writing style is lost.
- More direction and forward planning is needed from the newsdesk. If reporters are not producing the stories that management feels are worthy, they need to give us story ideas or suggestions for lines to follow.
- The news diary appears to be an attempt at forward planning but it is fundamentally flawed. Story ideas people put in there the previous day then appear on the newlist, despite the fact more stories may have cropped up in the meantime. The reporter is, again, put in an impossible position and is being denied the ability to manage their own workload. This is not an effective planning tool.

To summarise: We love our jobs. We want to do them well. We understand this will always be a stressful environment, but that cannot be a blanket excuse for the politics, the workloads, and the abuse. This needs to change and we want management to work with us to make that change happen. We honestly believe that if there is cultural change staff will be happier, will work more effectively, and the paper will improve as a result.