Culture, Creativity and Convergence: Managing Journalists in a Changing Information Workplace

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Abstract

This article examines the state of management in Convergence today and poses questions and potential answers for overcoming cultural problems that exist between newspaper and television newsrooms. The article scrutinizes the seeming abyss between these expected media partners and examines cultural implications through literature in organizational psychology, organizational communications and general business management practices.

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Introduction

Convergence is among the most significant expressions of change in media management today. From the standpoint of convergence alone, it is likely that media managers are in the midst of a period that may well place them at the brink of organizational revolution. Pavlik, (1998, p.134) describes convergence as ‘...the coming together of all forms of mediated communications in an electronic, digital form, driven by computers and enabled by network technology.’

Technology certainly is driving convergence, but it is the people charged with carrying out this melding process who present some of the greatest challenges to management. A primary focus of this melding today is in the field of journalism. Here convergence technology enables the interaction between and the placement of shared information on multiple media platforms. Generally, this convergence revolves around print, television and internet media gathering and reporting information in a multi-platformed environment. While convergence also may include magazines, radio and other media entities, the primary focus of news media organizations has been on bringing the traditional daily news platforms (newspapers and television) as well the Internet into a single work group.

From a global perspective, media managers are faced not only with revolutionary changes in the process of creating, packaging and delivering content; they also are faced with marketplace chaos resulting from collapsing ownership and value shifting from new owners. Additionally, they face the perplexing problem of trying to communicate those challenges to distant and often distracted owners. It is part war, part race to see who, in the changing world of information delivery, will win. This war/race is being waged on two fronts, the technological front which has received a great deal of attention and the provider front where managers and journalists face significant changes in how they must do their work to survive. Each front is challenged by a series of advances that are creating changes in how information is processed and distributed. At the human level media managers must confront existing cultures, traditions and conventions, while overcoming a frantic climate of uncertainty. Simultaneously these managers must sound a call to action to competitively engage in this historic technological battle of change.

This article deals with several issues on the second battlefront of convergence where the human elements are meeting the technological revolution in a global mix characterized as chaotic by some and unworkable by others. What are the major management challenges in culture, climate, and creativity as they are integrated into the evolving workplace? More specifically, what recommendations can be made now to ease this transition and how might those recommendations best be implemented?

To begin this process, it is necessary to examine traditional management, organizational communications and organizational psychology literature. And...
while each provides direction in this transitional period, none provides a stand alone backdrop. Of particular usefulness in this analysis is an examination of corporate mergers where once competitive companies are brought together as a single organization and asked to work together. Management considerations relating to media personnel, primarily journalists, will be addressed.

**Traditional Media In Change**

A crucial focal point for examination begins with the journalist (here the term is used holistically across media). Journalists sit at the fulcrum of the advancing battle between people and technology and therefore provide an excellent point of reference in global media management issues. Journalists, defined in this case as individuals who purvey information to audiences through print, broadcast and the Internet/Web, are at a crossroads. They are tasked with moving the information environment from traditional platforms to a technologically changed environment of convergence. The acquisition of information is a fundamental first step for journalists. Intrinsic to that, according to Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 105) is the gatekeeper function where journalists and editors must “winnow down a larger number of potential messages to a few.” This gate-keeping function is one of several activities that separate the profession from the public. While web journalism is still in its infancy, traditional journalism training has focused on providing specific yet significantly different skills to print and broadcast journalists. In fact, since the explosion of broadcast journalism programs in universities there has been a distinct divergence in training from print reporters. Much of that change is a reflection of the profession, where an emphasis on consultants, image and ratings has pushed broadcast news programs into new directions. The changes resulted in a shift by broadcast educators from an emphasis on training that provided audiences dense content to an emphasis on techniques where viewers received simplified information with strong and often emotional performances from broadcast reporters. Now, nearly 30 years later, those training techniques are considered standard and have given us more than a generation of broadcasters who emphasize action rather than content.

Print media reporter training has remained largely unchanged. They have been trained in the art and science of information gathering, the inverted pyramid (though sometimes denigrated today) and have placed emphasis on depth content while remaining literary where possible. Broadcasters have been trained to emphasize the visual aspects of their stories, to shorthand the details and bring the story’s ‘essence’ to the fore quickly.

The advent of the Internet has added an additional layer to the global aspects of the media. The Internet, coupled with current experiments in convergence journalism are putting today’s reporters and editors in a new and sometimes frightening environment. Owners mandating convergence while continuing to emphasize cost cutting and work force downsizing in a changing workplace also will be discussed. However, it is important to first examine the conditions that are leading to a dissonant atmosphere.

**Media Management**

Most media management literature takes its cues from general business management structures. The thought is and has been that managing people differs little in its transition from one business typology to another. However, some literature suggests that highly creative people are more receptive to change through proactive mechanisms rather than through tactics encountered in traditional business models. From team building to leadership to interaction from managers, creative people seem to work better in an environment where those managers seem actively engaged in understanding the creative process at work.

In Media Management, A casebook approach (Sohn et al 1999), the authors recognize that team building is an important activity in creating positive work strategies in media organizations. The authors discuss the three stages of group development, orientation, dissatisfaction, and finally resolution.

Powers and Lacy (1992) modeled four groups of factors involving job satisfaction among television news employees. Those factors included leadership, individual factors, market factors, and organizational factors. And each influences how journalists perceive the success of their organization and the goals that are embodied in successful workplaces.

Powers and Lacy noted that the most important factor for job satisfaction was tied to leadership behavior. In newsrooms where news directors took a human relations approach and developed positive relationships with employees there was a higher sense of job satisfaction.

Kellebrew (1993, Bales, 1988) using SYMLOG to evaluate the relationship between newsroom managers and reporters in both print and television newsrooms found that reporters held their managers and editors in higher esteem in instances where those managers worried about the satisfaction of their workers. The implication in that study was that the concern for employees showed through in the actions and activities of the manager.

Redmond and Trager (1998, p. 66) point out that “Human nuances and individual perceptions of reality ebb and flow within the interactions of the social beings of which groups are composed. Media organizations
are even more so because of the combination of mechanistic and professional aspects to the activity...as well as the inherent difficulty of managing creative people."

Zavonia and Reichert (2000) examined the issues of workflow and its impact on the evolving environment of visual journalists in the converged workplace. They examined the website created by a joint venture between the The Dallas Morning News and The Fort Worth Star Telegram. The authors report that while research has examined the technological and educational factors in converged platforms, little has been done about workflow or decision-making. They found that the majority of activity in online publications is done without clear communications from hardcopy counterparts. In the instances where communication and decisions were shared, the authors termed those activities as anomalies.

If we are to believe, as Zavonia and Reichert point out, that a merged/converged environment is coming, then their study points to the likelihood of serious problems in the converged workplace in the future. How to best understand and plan for those problems, while preparing the next generation of journalists for this new workplace is intensely important.

Management & Mergers

Studies of recent merger activity may help in examining potential conflicts in managing convergence in the newly evolving media workplace. Chan-Olmsted (1998) defines mergers as a combination of two corporations in which only one corporation survives. Instances of consolidation occur according to Chan-Olmsted when two corporations join to form a completely new company.

It is noteworthy to understand that mass media, whether buying, creating its own, or entering into cross-platform agreements with other media, are fundamentally moving in a direction that fosters merger-like conditions. In most merger cases, uncertainty creates a volatile work environment as employees and managers seek to understand their positions in these new organizations. Often workers create barriers to insulate themselves from change as work place practices are closely scrutinized. Examining research in this area will assist in determining which issues are applicable to the mass media and help discover if they are important barriers to ownership and convergence issues.

In The Human Side of Mergers and Acquisitions author Thomas Legare (1998) differentiates between organizational "fits" and "mis-fits." Legare points out that not every member of an organization is poised to carry out a new mission. This is not a performance issue, but a readiness issue. Some people simply hesitate when change is presented to them abruptly. Yet, Legare reports that the ultimate success of reorganization (or as in most media cases: integration) rests with the people.

Legare (1998, p. 33) writes, "If these human resources issues are not resolved, they can result in the turnover of key people, people refusing assignments, performance drops and morale problems." According to Legare one of the most common causes of these transitional problems lies in the lack of adequate integration planning which he says creates an "analytical" vacuum that will result in conflicts, and frequently seemingly irresolvable dilemmas.

Argyris (1993) suggests that organizations create their own defensive routine. Legare (1998, p. 38) explains that this is a "skillful action that inhibits individuals, groups, intergroups and organizations from suffering embarrassment or threat and at the same time prevents individuals from reducing the causes of the embarrassment or threat." In other words, when change enters the workplace, finding ways to practically instill new organizational activity may reach a standstill.

The organization and its workers reach a standoff as both sides stage ways to save face and protect themselves.

Lowe (1998) suggests that organizations use default remodeling as a way to bring organization-to-organization goals into compliance. Criteria in default remodeling requires developing one of three relationship phases in the reorganization of a workplace. According to Lowe relationships may be cultivated, terminated or simply neglected. The approach taken is based on management’s perception of the value of a particular employee. Unfortunately, many of the actions in this scenario are covert as well as overt.

Instituting default remodeling would be problematic in the media workplace, particularly among journalists who are well-known for high levels of skepticism. Journalists displaced by management through covert methods rarely keep quiet. Other journalists, whom the organization believes are useful, would generally see and understand the activity underway and believe that they too are sliding down the same slippery slope. In some instances, the techniques could lead employees who are considered valuable to vacate their jobs rapidly. And it may send them to competitors, an obviously counterproductive action in media where "personality" is as important as information.

Another approach to understanding how to deal with cultural differences comes through understanding three areas of human psychology: the unconscious, psychological transference, and human defense mechanisms. It should be noted that Freud was the first to explicate the notion of the unconscious mind. Unlike the subconscious, where one’s deepest notions are buried, the unconscious is constantly alert, but individuals rarely notice it. The unconscious mind has a direct influence on the behavior of individuals and in some instances will help move through change while in other situations set up
roadblocks. All of this depends on the individual’s background and experience with change. If change was good once, the unconscious is likely to help create a positive atmosphere for any current changes. Bad experiences may send employees off looking for ways to sabotage the changes or at least distance themselves from change.

Regardless of their place within an organization, employees generally expect to feel safe in their work. Rules and specific plans for the future help create a sense of understanding (thus safety) in individuals. Changing the rules and the workplace conditions may overwhelm expectations of safety, creating a higher level of dissatisfaction and anxiety in workers.

Simply put, defense mechanisms tend to be activated by individuals when they enter periods of anxiety and uncertainty (and today’s environment seems a good fit). People often resort to making decisions based on perceptions rather than facts because coping with change is difficult. These perceptions lead to the acceptance (or sometimes generation) of information from sources that may not be accurate which in turn leads the individual to act in ways that may be counterproductive to both the organizational goals and their own job safety (Schein, 1997). In other words, individuals who believe they are protecting themselves actually may be acting in ways that are instead placing their jobs at risk, all because of their inappropriate perception of organizational change.

**Organizational Culture**

If culture is a determinant, it must be examined at other levels. Defining organizational culture has been an ongoing exercise for at least the last forty years. Researchers have scrutinized culture from a variety of perspectives, but literature from three areas: traditional management, organizational psychology, and organizational communications are helpful in this discussion. Traditional management literature tends to discuss culture in organizational terms with descriptions of overarching themes and attributes and their contributions to organizational understanding. Organizational psychology generally views cultural actions from the perspective of the individual and a great deal has been written about organization-person fit. In these studies researchers examine how the individual contributes to or accepts the organization’s culture. Organizational communications literature often runs the gamut, placing perspectives on the unit of need and at a specific level of analysis (i.e., individual, group, organization). Regardless of the perspective, they are keyed into the interrelationship between the organization’s culture and the individual, only the view shifts.

Every organization is its own creation of perceptions, values and hierarchy while each also has its own formal and informal sense of identity. What Kurt Lewin (1947) described as group and inter-group “life space” controls the organization’s ability to deal with issues of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Where dissatisfaction cannot be attributed to others, Argyris (1990) suggests that the members are predisposed to either covering up the situation or bypassing it altogether. He notes there is evidence that cultural incompatibility is the greatest cause of reduced performance and non-responsiveness to organizational goals.

Still other management researchers have examined cultural contexts in other ways. Berry (1983) identified the process of acculturation. His examination dealt with how immigrants settled into the cultures of their new societies. He developed four modes of acculturation: integration, assimilation, separation, and deculturation. Nahavandi and Malekzadeh (1988) took Berry’s work and molded it toward merging organizations. The authors identified integration as the process of two organizations seeking to work together while preserving their own cultures. They noted that this often led to structural assimilation, but did little to assist in cultural or behavioral assimilation. Assimilation was identified as a unilateral process in which one group willingly adopts the identity and culture of the other. The adopting group’s culture simply disappears. In separation, one group or organization attempts to preserve its own culture and practices by remaining apart from the other members of the organization. In these instances, there is minimal communication and the groups tend to continue to operate independently. Finally, there is deculturation, which involves losing cultural and psychological contact with both one’s group and the other group. In instances where this happens, the individuals involved will remain outcasts from both groups.

Appelbaum, et al (2000) adapted a version of Berry’s 1983 model to show how culture influences the behaviors of workers. The model provides two components, the level of attractiveness felt by one group for the other and the embedded value of the group’s own culture. Berry showed that in instances of high attractiveness and where the second organization held its own values highly, the merger led to integration. Where the second group held the first attractive, but also had a low opinion of its own values, the mergers ended in assimilation. Conversely, when the second organization found the first organization unattractive, but held its own values high, there was a great deal of separation. And in the worst of scenarios, organizations that found the first organization unattractive and held its own values in low esteem found themselves in a situation of deculturation.

Some see organizations as entities dependent upon their socially constructed individual belief system. In this view, organizations are the result of the coming together of various meanings to produce what is seen. Under a
socially constructed umbrella, media organizations could be defined as organizations assembled from the need of those in the organization to create and distribute messages informing others of the actions of those who are observed. Organizational culture could be broadly defined as everything that constitutes "organizational life." Weber (1947, p. 5) said, "That man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun... culture is those webs."

Three specific areas require examination in this context: values, structure and organizational climate/openness. Values can be defined as either enduring or transitory in organizations. Values drive all behavior. Sullivan, et al (2002, p.248) report that values "can be thought of as the principles by which both individuals and organisations live." Rokeach (1973, p. 5) defined values as "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of control."

Structure as part of organizational culture tends to be those artifacts that are more formal in their nature. It is the behavior and nature of human action within an organization. Structure may also show itself through organizational hierarchy and the emphasis on central or decentralized decision-making. The degree of centralization often is a component of organizational climate.

Organizational climate is defined by Poole and McPhee (1983, p. 195) as the "spirit of the organization." It is the atmosphere surrounding the activities of the organization. Most of us understand the notion of climate. It is the organizational climate that influences the behavior, though rarely the beliefs of individual employees and managers. Organizational climate is based on factors like safety, ease of training, realistic expectations of workers and openness to change and criticism. Generally, climate is viewed at the surface. A high level of awareness by individuals of their organization’s operation and how each individual fits into that organization is essential. Where awareness is low, the organizational climate is often reflected in a constrained atmosphere, the result of uncertainty by organizational members. Factors of change and organizational climate are intrinsically linked.

If media organizations and their respective journalists are to integrate and work well in the converged environment, some level of understanding between the groups is needed. But it may be unrealistic to expect current cultures to be changed simply by ordering them to do so. Values, perceived realities and structure all conspire to jeoparidize any move towards convergence by media companies.

**The Changing Workplace**

Change, by its nature, puts the expectations of safety and awareness at a disadvantage. Schein (1993, 1997, 1999) explains that the anxiety created by change leads employees to set up defenses that are difficult to overcome. According to his research, employees will deflect through one of three defenses:

1) They will fail to hear the management message in the first place;
2) They will deny that the message applies; and
3) They will attempt to rationalize how leaders do not understand the situation.

Schein believes the anxiety created through change can only be addressed by substituting a second higher level of anxiety. However, the second anxiety is based on helping employees to move toward returning to a sense of safety and equilibrium within the organization. Emphasis is placed on opportunities for training and practice, while support is given even when errors are made. The approach also encourages the implementation of rewards when employees move into the newly created realm, rewarding innovation and understanding that errors are part of the learning process.

The degree to which an organization embraces openness to change is likely an outcome of the interrelationship between values, structure and climate. In instances where organizations have been open in the past and where organizational members feel there is a continuation of accurate and reliable information and actions, it is likely there will be a greater degree of acceptance to change.

Still, much of Schein’s resulting approach needs a bit of manipulation to work. Journalists, trained to have both a skeptical and creative nature, tend to have learned not to trust organizations where change is required, but the benefits of change are unclear. Rewards that come only in a belated fashion are looked upon with suspicion. Requirements for retraining that are met with only tacit management approval will be rebuffed. And this does not help in bringing the divergent cultures of print and broadcast newsrooms to a common ground.

Understanding how these concepts fit into the changing journalistic workplace is extremely important. Reporters, editors and the supervisors charged with making convergence or "new media" journalism a reality are finding a great deal of dissonance in the workplace today. Organizations and people unwilling, uncertain or just plain fearful of change may soon be left behind. Regardless of the systems employed by management for inducing change, it is likely that convergence journalism will be disruptive to the process of collecting and presenting news and information.

**Newsroom Preparation**

The tension resulting from these unanswered questions raises the complexity of group/organizational integration. Each of these is a major threat to successfully meeting the challenges of change. Managers who are ill-prepared
to cope with the stress of change in the move to a converged news environment will increase the level of stress among employees who are being asked to work in a new cross platform environment.

While eliminating stress is likely impossible, improving management readiness will reduce the power of stress in the transition phase. Readiness is an issue of training, but not training in the traditional sense. While managers and employees must be trained and made comfortable in their new platforms, they must also be trained in working under new conditions.

Most news organizations proceeding with technological convergence have examined the issue of management and employee readiness at superficial levels. The selection criteria used to identify cross platform managers and workers have frequently focused on singling out people who are talented in one area and pressing them into service in the cross platform environment. The thinking has been that creative people, who write well, should be capable of adapting their talents to multiple platforms. While this is partially true, proceeding with convergence and using talent as the primary criteria may actually undermine the process. The training process should therefore identify managers and employees who are not only flexible and competent in cross platform reporting/writing/presentation, but who are interested as well.

Of serious concern are the differences in structural and relational functions. Where the structural differences are fundamental, say a heavily hierarchy-dominated organization versus a functionally open and team-oriented organization, the ability to overcome these problems will be difficult. Structure dictates how the organizations will work together. If there is a perception in the membership of one group that the other group is too rigid (i.e., a heavily traditional environment) or too lax in behavior control (as with a team-based or circular management system) neither group will respect the other. Attempts to incorporate the dominant management tradition for both will generally prove disruptive to all. There is some indication that adopting a new management style that encompasses neither of the previous styles functions well. Unfortunately, most of the managers in a new organization will come from the existing organizations, which will preclude full adoption of a new style.

The age of the organizations is likely to play into the ability to create a new organizational culture as well. There is also the perception of age. Newspapers tend to think of themselves as enduring providers of information. In most instances, community newspapers are able to trace their publication dates back more than 100 years. Television stations are the “new kids” in the media picture. Few are over 50 years of age and many are only 25 to 35 years old. This tends to skew the view of newspaper editors and reporters toward an attitude that “we were here first,” and “we do it best.” These cultural definitions are embraced in both the value and structure of the newspaper industry. In one contentious meeting of television and newspaper editorial staffs, one television news manager bluntly accused his newspaper partners of trying to undermine convergence efforts. There was little evidence to show that either media outlet was working against the project, but the frustrations poured out over the managerial decision-making process that is traditionally slower and more layered in the newspaper environment. Decisions simply take longer to make at newspapers (Media General, 2000).

Discussion

A key component of change and the integration of diverse units in the media could lie in reorienting creativity among news professionals. Creativity, as pointed out earlier, is a function of journalism regardless of the platform from which it is practiced. Some current and past efforts aimed at creating an environment that is open and transcends existing cultures have failed (or have sputtered endlessly). All of these efforts have hinged on bringing convergence into the current workplace.

During the 1980’s when mature businesses began to feel the first pangs of long term neglect, the companies found that the cultures existing in their organizations continued to pull towards the legacies created by the past rather than moving forward with potentially beneficial prospects for the future. Many of these organizations simply ceased to exist. A few looked at the dynamics of their organizations, identified individuals who were capable, competent and innovative and created new ventures for these people.

At least a dozen companies from diverse industries literally recreated themselves by moving “off campus” to develop new mini-organizations that could be successful without interference from existing cultures. Some news organizations have done this, but more need to look at this approach. Where offsite development of new endeavors is possible, media organizations should look to create new, converged sites to build an audience and then bring the products back to the existing environment.

The 1980’s spawned a cultural shift in the industries of many nations, leading to the creation of incubators and small startups that could be controlled by the company, but allowed to develop and expand on their own. These incubator sites also created a fertile training ground that allowed the workers, once retrained, to be placed in the older organization to foster internal change.

One of the key activities in the United States today is the attempt by media companies to move cross-ownership into small markets. While the thinking has not specifically been applied to
turning these small activities into incubator or training areas, it would be logical to do so. Media in the United States has a long standing tradition of using its smaller holdings to feed talented individuals into its larger systems. Network television has used its owned and operated stations to develop talented anchors and reporters since the early 1970’s. Newspaper groups have brought along talented reporters and photographers by allowing them to learn their industry in smaller markets and move into larger markets.

If convergence is to be culturally acceptable, without facing the division and antipathy seen in the large, entrenched and culturally intractable large markets, small market development makes sense. It should be investigated vigorously.

The difficulty with this process, however, is that it takes time. Most media companies don’t have time and should approach convergence from both ends of the spectrum. How to best create new environments aimed at accepting change remains a question that needs to be answered quickly. Adapting the creativity factor and overcoming journalistic skepticism are possible, but manipulation should be avoided at all costs.

As Redmond and Trager (1998, p. 67-68) point out, “We all look at things differently... A person’s values and experiences frame a kind of selective process. Whatever conflicts is often discarded, while that which supports those values and previous experiences is absorbed and reinforces.” For the journalist, who balances creativity and overcoming journalistic skepticism are possible, but manipulation should be avoided at all costs.

Regardless of approach, individuals who are identified must be specifically and thoroughly trained for the convergence activity. A number of convergence operations have been undertaken in the United States, but few have dealt with training convergence journalists adequately and they generally have failed to make appropriate investments in the people who will lead the convergence revolution.

The organization(s) also must undertake a well-designed plan of action to foster understanding among all employees and managers. This activity should be planned to discuss the new multi-platform delivery systems from both a positive and negative vantage point. Reporters are well-trained in misspeak and will understand when actions and words are at odds with one another.

Ongoing communication is essential for everyone working in the cross platform environments. Value and attitude discrepancies will pose serious risks to the undertaking if communications are not complete, accurate and forthcoming. Corporate myths regarding the competing platforms should be discovered and either exorcised from the lexicon or marginalized by consistent and frequent information to all employee groups.

Finally, journalists and their managers must understand that convergence is here to stay. Anyone who believes that “old school” journalism thinking will suffice for the 21st century is sadly mistaken. What does need to be understood is that convergence is neither an end all or be all, it is simply the next step. Owners who view convergence only from the perspective of creating a more efficient operation likely misunderstand the nature and the power of this emerging tool of information.

The fate of this focus may be illustrated in an example provided by Karl Weick (1983). He reports on an experiment where flies and bees are placed in a glass jar. The bottom of the jar is then placed against a window toward the sunlight. The flies, skittering and flying about all eventually escape. The bees, in the single minded vision go towards the light at the bottom of the jar. All eventually die. Media owners must guard against a single vision, or risk as Weick (1983, p. 29) points out “…sharing one vision of a breakthrough, only to discover that our persistence and single-mindedness doom us to the same disappointments experienced by bees bunched at the bottom of a bottle.”

References


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