

Newspaper management fails to tell the story right

by Michael_Kinsman

A healthy workplace requires that mutual respect exist between management and the individuals doing the work.

Productivity, efficiency and profitability depend on that respect.

Yet, sometimes, mutual respect is forgotten.

That seems to be what happened at the Orange County Register when the newspaper's editor circulated a memo in early August that layoffs were imminent.

The memo documents the business challenges the Southern California newspaper is having in hanging on to readers and advertising dollars. It reflects the changing business climate industrywide, with the Register candidly reporting that revenue is down 14 percent from a year ago and profits have fallen 38 percent.

This is bad news. And, it certainly calls for some sort of management solution.

"None of this is easy," Editor Ken Brusic wrote in a memo to staffers, announcing potential layoffs. "But the truth is, as we see revenue continue to fall, especially in print, our company needs to take strong action to regain some balance."

The newspaper's strategy for doing that is befuddling.

Brusic told his staff that layoffs would probably occur within the week. He called them necessary to the survival of the newspaper.

"The publisher and executive team have requested that we not talk about specific number of people involved here or throughout the company," he wrote.

He also requested that workers not speculate, compile lists or engage in gossip about who might be laid off.

His position is an affront to every employee of his newspaper. Management is trying to sugarcoat layoffs by not 'fessing up to whether it is 10 people who will be laid off or 200.

And, then it is asking people who might be affected - every member of the staff - to sit by idly and obediently while management discharges some employees.

This is disrespectful to the people who work for the Register. Their livelihoods are being put at jeopardy and management is asking them to take a sedative until the dust clears.

The economics of this situation are clear: a business downturn is going to cost some people their jobs.

The newspaper's management needs to understand how their actions affect the remaining as well as the displaced workers. It should clearly reveal how deep its layoffs will be and accommodate the fears and anxiety of people who think they might lose their jobs.

That's mutual respect in an unfortunate situation. Yet, the newspaper's management apparently doesn't subscribe to that.

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