

Blueprints for responsible journalism, fairness

A dilemma that most editors eventually face is how to handle material submitted for publication that involves a difference of opinion, personal attack, personal vendetta, or is morally offensive. All too often, the editor must make a decision on the disposition of such material without any guidance or support. This is indeed unfortunate and has caused more than one good editor to step down because of the heartache and agony that can erupt as a result of such a dilemma. Is there a way to prepare for such a predicament in order to avoid problems before they occur? Yes! The best way to prepare is the adoption of an Editorial Policy (with membership approval) that specifies what type of material will, or will not be accepted for publication.

First, some background. Editors are entrusted with the responsibility and privilege of taking care of a valuable piece of property — the union publication. This valuable piece of property does not belong to any one individual. It belongs to the entire membership. Therefore, extreme care must be taken by the editor to ensure that the paper serves all members of the union. A union publication should not be used as a forum for an individual's personal agenda, or personal vendettas. Rather, it should be used to educate, inform and further the goals and objectives of the union.

This doesn't mean that disagreements or differences of opinion within the union (which aren't personal in nature) cannot be published. When this situation occurs, the editor must remember that the union publication must remain an objective forum for the membership. All sides of a disagreement have to be heard regardless of the editor's personal feelings on the subject. The union paper should provide readers with the opportunity to view both sides of an issue and form their own

opinions. To reject or alter an article because the editor does not agree with the writer is not only censorship, it will tear down the credibility of the editor, the publication and the union itself.

However, this should not be interpreted to mean that every article submitted for publication must be automatically published. There are many factors to consider and that's why guidelines should be established by the membership.

Establish an Editorial Policy

Local and state organizations should have an Editorial Policy in place that addresses the issue of what type of articles will, or will not be accepted, how questionable articles submitted for publication will be handled, and how much authority the editor has to determine the disposition of such articles. (The editor's duties should also be included in the constitution of the organization.) Once an Editorial Policy is drafted, it should be presented at a union meeting for approval. The publication belongs to the membership and therefore the members should be responsible for establishing the Editorial Policy. Upon approval, it is then the duty of the editor to administer the policy as adopted by the membership.

Once established, the Editorial Policy should be included in each issue of the paper. The normal location for this information is in the "masthead" of the publication usually found on page 2.

The wording in an Editorial Policy depends upon what the members feel is in the best interests of their organization and how encompassing they want it to be. Following are some examples:

- The editor reserves the right to determine whether material submitted shall be printed and reserves the right to edit as needed; for space, libelous statements, or personal unwarranted attacks.
- Articles that are libelous or defamatory will not be published. Articles submitted should deal with issues rather than personalities.
- The editor shall be responsible for the editing of all material submitted to (*name of publication*) pertaining to libel, spelling, grammar, violations of federal and state laws and regulations, length, etc. At no time shall the editor alter the intent or direction of a contributor's article. Articles may also be presented to the Editorial Policy Committee if deemed necessary. Should any conflict arise, all reasonable effort should be made to discuss the problem with the contributing writer.
- Articles for publication may be presented to the Editorial Policy Committee for review if deemed necessary. All submissions are subject to editing. In accordance with the constitution and bylaws of the local (*state organization*) no article will be published that demeans or attacks another member.
- The editor shall submit an article to the Editorial Policy Committee that, in his or her opinion, pertains to any of the following items: (The Editorial Policy Committee shall be responsible for determining if the article is printed) (a) libel, (b) conflicts with federal laws and regulations, (c) violations of the

integrity and moral principles of the union, (d) personal or demeaning attacks, (e) articles that are critical of an officer in a negative and non-constructive manner. If the article is accepted, the editor shall offer an opportunity for response from the officer being criticized, in the same issue of the paper.

In addition to the Editorial Policy itself, the following wording should be included with the policy: "Opinions expressed by the writers of articles in this paper are those of the individuals and not necessarily those of the editor or the (*name of local or state organization*). Articles and letters to the editor should be typewritten, double-spaced and must be signed, although names will be withheld upon request. Material submitted anonymously will not be published."

Editorial Policy Committee

No matter how extensive an Editorial Policy may be, it can't possibly cover every conceivable situation that could arise. Therefore, another matter to consider is establishing an Editorial Policy Committee, (no matter if the Editorial Policy requires one or not.) The purpose of this committee is to assist the editor with administering the Editorial Policy as approved by the membership. Such a committee is a tremendous asset to the editor, especially when the editor receives material and is unsure of whether or not it should be printed.

Some items this committee would be responsible for include:

- Reviewing questionable material submitted for publication involving: libel, defamation of character, information that cannot be verified, possible conflicts with the union's constitution, federal regulations, or possible conflicts with the moral/ethical standards of the union.

- Determining the disposition of articles which could be considered irresponsible criticism or unsubstantiated charges.
- To determine the disposition of articles which may have been written only for the intent of pursuing a personal conflict.

Those suggested to serve on this committee are: editor, associate editor, president and such other members of the executive board and/or rank and file members as deemed necessary.

Again, any policy or procedure that is established should be approved at a membership meeting. The paper belongs to the members; therefore they should participate in decisions regarding its administration. Used properly, such a process is fair, equitable and will make the duties and life of the editor much more pleasant.

Equal treatment

How should an editor handle a difference of opinion; for example, on a particular issue? Assuming the article is not a personal attack and remembering that the paper does belong to all members, the article should be published. However, the next question is: How can an editor be fair to all concerned and at the same time avoid a long-running confrontation back and forth in the paper?

The answer is to contact the person who is on the opposing side (or the person who is the object of the constructive criticism) and provide an opportunity for a response. The editor should not hand the article over to the person who will be writing the opposing view and let them rip it apart. Remember, it is the responsibility of the editor to treat both sides fairly.

It is strongly suggested to print both sides of the story in the same issue, preferably side by side. This will allow each side to state their case and the readers to view both sides of

the issue and form their own opinions. If only one side is permitted to state their case and the opposing view isn't published until the next issue (which may be a month or two away) the situation could erupt into bitter disagreements and get way out of hand.

Following is suggested wording for use in the paper on the page containing the opposing viewpoints in order to avoid a long-running confrontation, is fair to all concerned, and upholds the principles of ethical journalism.

"Editor's note: In the interest of responsible journalism and objective reporting, both parties involved in this matter have been given the opportunity to respond in this issue of *(name of paper)*. This practice permits our readers to view both sides and form their own opinions. Since each party was given an equal opportunity to state their case, this matter is hereby closed."

This statement could be modified slightly in the event it was decided to allow feedback in the next issue from readers. Delete the last sentence in the above paragraph and insert the following: "The next issue of *(name of paper)* will accept letters to the editor concerning this issue after which time the matter is closed."

Such a policy is fair to all concerned; no censorship and each party has an equal opportunity to state their views. After that, the matter is closed.

This procedure should not be confused with differences that occur between the union and management. It applies to union members only. The paper belongs to union members, not management. Therefore management shouldn't have access or input regarding the contents of a union publication unless invited by the union to comment on an issue.

Fair solution

It's not possible to anticipate every possible problem or situation that an editor will encounter. It must be pointed out that these are only suggestions. Each publication is

autonomous and therefore is free to establish their own policies and procedures. However, if these suggestions are implemented and applied properly, they will provide a solution in most cases and at the same time be fair to the "owners" of the union publication—the membership.