

Picky Proofreader? Or Winning Writing Coach? The Choice is Yours!

Strategies for Editing Other People's Writing

The ancient Chinese proverb tells us, *“If you give a man a fish, he will eat well for a day; if you teach him how to fish, he will have nourishment for a lifetime.”* Notwithstanding the blatant gender bias, (somehow the he/she technique would destroy the essence of the message), the spirit of the proverb holds true for managers charged with the responsibility of coaching and developing their people. For those of us who edit our employees' or colleagues' documents, the fish analogy is a good one.

Let me take you on a trip to Minneapolis and introduce you to Bill Sampson, Director of Marketing for a Fortune 1000 company. Early one morning last Fall, one of Bill's product managers, Kathy Morgan, dropped a draft report on to Bill's desk. The report was an important one and Kathy had worked

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late the previous night to complete it. The report contained an analysis of the market performance of the company's top product. First quarter sales of the product were down and some immediate changes in marketing strategy were necessary.

Kathy had worked hard for several days writing the report which set out several recommendations on the steps needed to rescue the ailing product. The report was destined for the CEO's desk by late that same afternoon. This document had to be **RIGHT**. After all, this was a serious issue and

Bill wanted to show the top brass that his department was on top of the problem.

Bill went to work on the report right away. He topped up his coffee mug and closed his door. Then, with red pen in hand, he started ripping through the document. Oops ... a semi-colon in the wrong place in

line 6; gee, that long sentence in the third paragraph doesn't get the point across; uh oh! ... inconsistent use of acronym top of page 2 (a crime punishable by death). And so on and so on.

Bill found that Kathy had made some good recommendations in her report. But he doubted the CEO would agree to the one about adding more sales reps. Also, he thought the CEO would want more detail about how the recommendations would be implemented. The clock was ticking. And this report needed SERIOUS work!

Bill buzzed his assistant on the intercom. "Jill, call Kathy and tell her I'll work on the Product D report. Hold my calls ... I need to get this report into shape". Jill heard a tinge of frustration in Bill's voice. Two hours later, Bill emerged from his office easing the stress from his shoulders. "Jill, run a spell check on this report and send it up to the Chief. Send Kathy a copy."

So the story had a happy ending. The CEO received the report on time. He approved most of Kathy's recommendations. Everyone was feeling good that a plan was in place and things were happening. Bill glowed when the CEO complimented him

on his good work.

But the story does have a darker side. Back in her office, Kathy was licking her wounds. Having read Bill's version of the report, she saw how he improved it. He had made it more concise and had added some good statistics. And, yes, he had fixed up a few pieces of doubtful grammar. She felt somewhat miffed that Bill had changed a number of her words and phrases. Also, he had chosen not to include her recommendation about repackaging the product. Too bad ... Kathy had been proud of her idea.

Nevertheless, she had to admit that Bill had done a great job fixing up her report.

Tired from her late night writing effort, Kathy found herself plunging into some strongly negative self-talk. "I never was any good at English", "I hate writing" and "Why didn't he just write it himself in the first place?" ... were just some of the thoughts floating through Kathy's mind.

Later that day, Kathy joined Bill for lunch in the cafeteria. "Guess I didn't do an overly brilliant job on that report," muttered Kathy. "You sure had to change a lot of it."

"Don't worry about it", assured Bill. "At least you

gave me something to get started with. You'll do better next time. Put it down to a learning experience".

But was it a learning experience? Or did we just witness a text book example of ineffective coaching skills? Did Kathy learn anything about how to fish?

Come on readers. Let's admit it. We have all, at sometime, fallen into the same trap as Bill. In so doing, we have missed the opportunity to elevate the writing skills of our people through constructive coaching.

Here are some strategies that Bill ... indeed all of us ... might use the next time we are faced with the task of editing someone else's writing:

STRATEGY #1. Start with the Big Picture

Start by simply reading the report from start to finish. No red pens. No highlighters. If you must write, limit yourself to pencil notes in the margin. Don't worry, you'll have time to do the slash and burn stuff later.

Try to grasp the big picture message and the key points the writer is making. Stay focused on the readers and ask the all-important

question: Does this report answer the questions the readers must have answers to in order to make a decision?

STRATEGY #2. Read for Clarity

Read the report a second time. Check that the writer has expressed the points and ideas in a clear and concise style.

At the sentence level, has the writer used high impact nouns and active verbs? Does each paragraph have a strong label (or topic) sentence so that the readers will be able to follow the main themes? Has the writer used enough transition words to connect the key ideas?

Has the report been divided into manageable sections with descriptive headings that will help a busy reader scan the document quickly?

STRATEGY #3. Avoid Blood ... Use Dialogue

The fastest way to demotivate a writer is to pepper their work with scores, slashes and inserts but no explanations. Resist the temptation to “play school teacher”. Instead, try to arrange a sit-down-across-the-desk session or at least a telephone session (with both

parties looking at the draft).

If the writer and editor have an opportunity to dialogue, the editing process can be less painful. The writer can explain why she included certain facts or why she chose certain words over others. It is important to hear the writer’s point of view. After all, by the time the report reaches your desk, the writer has already “lived” with the material for several days or sometimes weeks.

STRATEGY #4. My Word versus Your Word ... A Recipe for Disaster

Resist the temptation to insist that all your suggestions and changes be included. Cut the writer a little slack and try to leave him or her with a sense of ownership of the report. Egos are often on the line in the editing process and an editor who is too picky can cause tempers to flare.

Arguments over the best word to use... when any one of several words would suffice... can become heated. Remember, as a manager, you are in this editing business for the long term. Be sure not to simply win battles at the expense of long term victory. Your goal is to grow an employee who wants to write

and feels good about producing well-written documents.

Of course, you will sometimes have to insist that the writer make changes. But save these firm demands for the important issues of content or for serious problems of style which must be changed if the report is to be successful.

STRATEGY #5. Don't Sweat the Commas

People have been known to come to blows over obscure rules of punctuation that often do not make any difference to the quality of the finished product. Interpersonal war zones have been created over the correct positioning of a semi-colon.

The rules of punctuation are among the most ambiguous and confusing in the universe. Show me a “rule” and I’ll find you at least one source that supports the rule and one that contradicts it.

Try to agree on a few basic punctuation conventions. Then lighten up. Provided the “wrong” punctuation has not detracted from the meaning the writer wants to convey, let it go. You have bigger issues to deal with.

STRATEGY #6.

Let the Writer Revise

Whenever time allows, try to let the writer rework the piece rather than rewriting it yourself. While the latter course may be expedient in the short-term, you will be doing nothing to improve the writer's future performance.

STRATEGY #7.

Accentuate the Positive

The very word "edit" carries

immediate connotations of "correction". Yet we know that employees will almost always perform better when their managers point out the things they are doing right rather than the things they are doing wrong.

This principle holds true for the world of editing. By giving an employee some recognition for a well-stated point, a well-supported recommendation or a particularly clear piece of writing, you will be going a long way to improving long

term writing performance.

The Last Word...

Coaching our employees is among the toughest tasks we face as managers. Time pressures and lack of training time conspire against us. Yet if we can force ourselves to move beyond the "red pencil" approach to editing, we will build stronger skills in those we manage.

Think about it! And by the way ... good fishing! +

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