

the creative relationship

by monica moses

to succeed in today's newsroom, a visual journalist needs strong technical and craft skills. But just as important are strong people skills. How well you listen, learn, collaborate and share your knowledge can make or break your career. The quality of your creative relationships can determine whether you grow and advance at your newspaper or whether you struggle and stagnate.

Probably your most important relationship is with your supervisor, your visual editor. If you're a supervisor, you also have critical relationships with your staff. These relationships — creative relationships, editing relationships — have many pitfalls. And they can have a direct impact on morale of the newsroom and the quality of the newspaper, not to mention turnover. Many visual journalists quit their jobs because they dislike their bosses. Many visual editors leave because they are fed up with one or two staffers.

If a co-worker gets on your nerves, drives you crazy and pushes your buttons, step back and ask yourself why. Then try to see the person behind the behavior — the well-intentioned, perhaps vulnerable person. Often, trying relationships can become fruitful and even fun with just a little understanding and diplomacy on your part.

We learn more from the difficult people in our lives. So on the following pages are five difficult bosses and five difficult staffers you may encounter in your newsroom and in your career. You'll find some theories about their motivations as well as tips for dealing more effectively with each. You may see a glimpse of yourself, your boss or a member of your staff.

It's a fact of life: You can't choose your boss. And if you're a boss, you're unlikely to choose most of your staff. (It's rare to be able to clean house and start over.) But you *can* choose how you are in your relationships.

is your visual editor one of these?

the vicarious designer (photographer)

Overbearing. Takes your pages or photos and makes them his. Has a hard time appreciating others' solutions. **Cause:** May be a rookie. May not see that his role is to help you do good work, not to do work for you. May envy your assignments. **Cure:** Be as active as he is in the relationship. Good-naturedly refuse to be taken over. Come to *him* with ideas. Show him options for every page and picture. Take the opportunity to learn all you can from this (probably technically skilled) visual editor.



the absentee parent

Unavailable. Gives you next to no feedback. **Cause:** May be overwhelmed, may feel too busy with his own work to guide yours. May not be getting much direction from *his* boss; may not see his role is to be your coach. May lack confidence to size up visuals quickly and say something useful. **Cure:** If you can't flag him down, leave proofs for him. If you seek his feedback, you compliment him, building his confidence and your relationship. If all else fails, get feedback wherever you can.

premature evaluator

Overanxious. Happens by when you are in the beginning stages of a project and has a violent reaction. Horns in on your creative process. **Cause:** May be getting heat from her bosses. May feel stretched, not able to take time to cultivate staffers. **Cure:** Yield. If someone is inclined to be controlling, you make it worse if you resist; you strengthen her resolve to control you. Instead, hear her out and respect her fears. Negotiate the timing of her editing, telling her your first work is often not your best work. Show her your work before you're too far along.



demolition expert

Insensitive. Orders sweeping changes to your work on deadline. **Cause:** May have high standards but is preoccupied. Not available to see your work till the last, inconvenient minute. **Cure:** Interview him off deadline. Ask him to explain his visual ideals and peeves. Talk through work with him as early as possible. If you can't get his attention, leave proofs, making a note of what you think he might object to. Also note when you need to hear back, leaving time for changes.



the great sphinx

Inscrutable. May have a great eye, great visual instincts but is not very articulate about the work. Says "I don't think that works" or "That's not sophisticated enough" when she reviews your pages or photos. **Cause:** Strong right brain, where spatial skills like drawing, design reside. Sometimes so focused on visual judgments that she can't fully access left brain, where analysis and communication originate. **Cure:** Interview her. Show her tearsheets and annuals, asking questions till you begin to see visuals through her eyes.

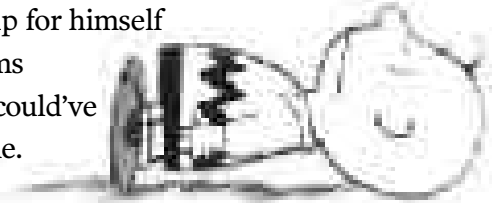


any of these visual staffers in your shop?



stealth designer (photographer) Likes to slip weird stuff into the paper. Makes side deals, going around you whenever possible. **Cause:** Pride. Needs to put his mark on things, hates giving up control. Feels inadequate asking for help. Flies solo even when it hurts his work. **Cure:** Confront him about not being collaborative; it makes trust impossible. Then, appeal to his pride. Tell him you'll be his silent partner in greatness, slipping him software tips, new annuals. And pair him with another staffer on a project, so he begins to see the benefits of creative collaboration.

the pushover Weak-willed. Lets co-workers dictate visuals and blow deadlines, much to the detriment of his work. **Cause:** Fears confrontation. Doesn't know how to stand up for himself (and for visual journalism) without being unpleasant. **Cure:** Do post-mortems of pages that suffered from his poor negotiation skills. Help him see how he could've managed competing interests. Arm him with specific phrases to use next time. Also: Ask yourself if you've laid the necessary groundwork in the newsroom for your staff to say no to unreasonable demands. Do they know you will back them up?



rebel without a cause Feels the need to fight everything. Dislikes style, dictates from on high, limits of any kind. Has a hard time collaborating, especially with the boss. **Cause:** Hates authority. **Cure:** Refuse to get involved in a power struggle. If he pushes you, do not push back. Simply and matter-of-factly ask for what you need from him in his work. Always talk visual merits so you don't seem authoritarian or capricious. Find things to like about his work or approach, to help change the dynamic between you.

the artiste Consistently places art above journalism. Sees a device in an annual and wants to use it at the earliest opportunity, whether or not it works with the story. Resists making changes for news. Doesn't read the paper. **Cause:** May not be confident in her ability to roll with news. May not appreciate the rhythms of good stories. **Cure:** Inventory her skills; pair her for a time with somebody with poise in the face of breaking news. Also, light the fire of journalism beneath her. Involve her in animated story conferences. Get her talking about current events.



the great defender Can't take criticism. Has a thousand defenses, a thousand reasons why something went wrong (none his fault). **Cause:** Lacks confidence. Probably beats himself up; your criticism feels like overkill. **Cure:** Talk with him. Often. And not just about work. Don't limit your conversations to negative feedback. Pick his brain about visual issues. Expand your partnership so he doesn't hate to see you coming. Ask other managers who work with him to tell you when he overcomes a hurdle to do good work, so you can give him credit.