Media Studies and Film Department

THE NEW SCHOOL

CREATIVE CASEY \*

Too Creative To Fire, Too Insubordinate To Keep

Casey Connover was the most creative reporter at WMEE-TV, an ABC affiliate in a large market. She had won five Emmys in her twelve years as reporter for WMEE-TV's top-rated “Eyewitness News” (more than twice as many as any other reporter, some of whom had been there longer). She always came to the morning meeting with twice as many ideas as anyone else, including the other reporters, the Assignment Editor, the Executive Producer, the Assistant News

Director, and the News Director (when he attended the meetings). She not only had more ideas, but they were usually excellent ideas – ones that the other people in the meeting would smile when they heard and slap themselves on the forehead and say, "why didn't I

think of that?"

Casey's story ideas poured out of her mouth like an idea fountain, idea after idea: good ones, silly ones, brilliant ones, very funny ones, complicated ones, impossible ones, weird ones, insightful ones, and ones that had historical context and shed clear light on obtuse, complex issues. The biggest problem the Executive Producer (EP), who usually ran the meetings, had was turning off Casey's idea fountain and getting on with the day's news coverage.

The culture in the newsroom was to encourage Casey to give her ideas first (for however long the EP let her talk), then for the EP to ask which one Casey wanted to do. Casey would ponder for a few moments and then ask what shooters were available. She would then make her decision based on who was the best shooter available and what he or she was best at shooting. She knew all of the shooters intimately and their corresponding strengths, likes, and talents.

Sometimes she would pass up a very good idea for another one that matched the talents of a particular shooter.

The videographers loved Casey. When they were assigned to do a story with her, they smiled broadly and seemed to grow an inch taller that day – it was their feather of pride. They all did their best work for her, out of pride, yes, but also because they knew they stood a good chance of getting an award, and, thus, the possibility for higher pay. The shooters also liked Casey because she didn't play favorites. She took who was available and fit her story to the shooters, and they all knew she tried to work with all the videographers so she could get to know them all. She also went out of her way to work with and help new shooters and train them.

Casey was no dummy; she knew how to get great video.

As much pleasure as Casey was for the shooters to work with, she was equally as difficult for management to work with. The news director (ND) had a nickname for Casey he used regularly with his assistant news director and general manager (GM), "Pain-In-The-Ass

Casey." In fact, the ND rarely referred to Casey without using this pejorative moniker.

In middle of the May sweeps, the ND finally had it with Casey. The straw that broke his patience was when a package Casey did ran in a Friday late newscast (the highest rated newscast on the station and in the market, by far). WMEE-TV was finishing up a week-long series that Friday on the city's water system with a final segment on the animals in the sewers (snakes, eels, baby alligators, little turtles, etc.). It was a spectacular finale to a hard-hitting investigative series on how the city's water department was falling down on its duty to keep the water system up to proper, acceptable standards. Casey was supposed to have done a sidebar package that followed the last series segment – a story that showed the effects of the water problem on an average city family.

Because Casey was so reliable and such a good reporter, no one checked her package carefully before it went on the air. Her story was a sendup of the week-long series. It was an outrageously funny package that ended with a scene from the movie "The Neverending Story" in which a gigantic mountain of muck and slime raises from a swamp and reveals itself to be a turtle. Casey signed off her package, deadpan, with the line, "reporting live from Fantasia, this is Casey Connover for Eyewitness News."

After it ran, “Eyewitness News” was up for grabs. The director in the control room was laughing so hard, he cut to the wrong anchor, who was laughing so hard, she had to wave off the shot.

Even the usually stoic, professional, mature, lead, male anchor showed a twinge of a smile as he saved the day saying cryptically, "Well, our Casey's done it again," as the director cut to a commercial two minutes early.

The telephones in the newsroom lit up like fake computers in movies do. People were calling to say they loved the story. No one mentioned the series, all people on the phones and in the newsroom could talk about was Casey's funny story that made fun of the series. The point of the series was lost – buried in a large, moving mountain of muck and slime.

Casey and a group of her friends, including several shooters, watched the newscast at Casey's home. When the story was over, they all gave each other high fives. In the WMEE-TV's GM's home, where he was watching with the ND and several friends, there weren't any high fives.

The following Monday morning, the GM, the ND, the assistant ND, and a lawyer met to discuss the Casey problem. The ND wanted to fire Casey immediately for insubordination, and the lawyer said that he thought the termination would stick because of an insubordination clause in Casey's standard station contract. The GM non-committal.

The general manager knew Casey had won a number of Emmys and that the corporate news director and president of the company used her work as examples of creative reporting for other stations in the group, so he didn't want to look bad or too draconian with headquarters, although he was a little upset with Casey doing her own thing in this situation.

The assistant ND made an appeal for Casey saying that in reality the series had been overplayed and oversensationalized, and that Casey had merely reflected what others in the newsroom and, probably the more intelligent, audience members were thinking. Even if it might have been inappropriate (and she didn't think it was – she thought it showed the station had some humanity and a sense of humor), that Casey had to be allowed some slack in order for her to have an outlet for her creativity.

The ND disagreed vehemently. He said that the assistant ND was siding with Casey because she was a female, and that Casey could no longer have a different set of rules. He said that other reporters in the newsroom were complaining, that the situation was hurting morale, and he stood firm on wanting to fire Casey immediately.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

While the incidents in this case are not factual, they do represent a composite of actual events and operating practices in some newsrooms. This case was prepared to use as a teaching tool.

ASSIGNMENT

1. Do you think Casey should be: a) fired immediately, b) suspended and reprimanded 3) or what?
2. Whichever option you choose, support it with several rational (as opposed to emotional) arguments.
3. What are the long-term implications of each option?

\*This case was prepared by Charles Warner.