

The Downward Spiral

The Journal of Free Press Employees
En Garde for Nine Weeks

FYI: MBO

"MBO, standing for Management By Objectives, is a program for managers in all divisions dating back to 1977 at the Free Press and at most Knight-Ridder papers. It involves about 120 people, who, at the end of the year, can receive a percentage of their base salary for successfully completing stated goals by specified dates."

— Dave Lawrence, The Friendly Fast Facts, Nov. 19, 1986

Hey, Free Press folk! Ever puzzle over sudden shifts in focus at Michigan's Great Morning Tradition? Ever wonder why yesterday editors were screaming for big front-page stories, and today they're starving for briefs? Ever long to find out why, suddenly, the Freep gets all hot to publish stories about "youth"?

It may just have something to do with managers' paychecks — MBOs.

Dave Lawrence explained the idea behind this company-sponsored management brainwashing program in a 1986 Friendly Fast Facts, except one thing was missing: A real, current MBO list that might help the grunts who fill this paper with daily guts and gore to better understand the often asinine and sometimes risky assignments they are given.

Now, for the first time, you have in your hands the genuine article — an actual MBO written by a Free Press editor and approved by higher managers. The editor stands to collect a hefty bonus if he/she achieves a good number of MBO points by year's end.

Be sure of this: You aren't seeing this because management wanted you to know the pecuniary motives behind their news

assignments. You're getting this peek at an MBO list only because some people are tired of taking personal risks so others can reap fat Christmas bonuses.

We have no wish to single out the particular manager. But we don't like a system that manipulates some people, at times placing them in danger, so that a select few can profit.

And we're wondering if, from a journalistic standpoint, a management by objectives plan that pays for certain kinds of stories wouldn't better be called NBS — News By Subjectives.

How can an editor be objective about story selection when he or she knows that some topics are more likely than others to put a jingle in his/her piggy bank?

Ever wonder where this year's heroic Free Press crusade against crack cocaine came from? Next time an editor orders you to hang out in some dangerous crack neighborhood, shoot pictures of drug deals, or go to murder scenes in rough neighborhoods and talk to people who may well be the killers, just ask yourself: How many points will this assignment add to your editor's end-of-year MBO total?

A photographer was beaten and robbed of his cameras during the 24-hour crack project. Thanks to the photog and dozens of people like him, though, some editors will collect fat bonuses.

And what if a reporter had turned up evidence that the "drug menace" was not all it's been cracked up to be? Would some cash-hungry editor have squelched the story for fear it would endanger his/her bonus?

But if you're starting to think maybe this MBO system might be putting an artificial spin on the news, please relax. We simply don't do that. Our executive editor, Heath Meriwether, ... Continued over

ALBERT and the PIRATES

by Garland Tobler and Simon Wrench

In his opulent offices, newspaper magnate Albert H. Ratman, Jr. dreams of HIS LAST FRONTIER.

Golly, it's great to have that DETROIT JOINT OPERATING AGREEMENT under my belt. Ha-ha. I feel so good about our monopoly, and what we're doing from the standpoint of money. But, I am DEPRESSED! A newspaper titan needs new worlds to conquer!

A middle-aged, TOMCAT enters...

Mr. Ratman, sir, two more of our newspapers won Pulitzers!

Gosh, how boring, Jimmie. Everyone gets Pulitzers but me. Hmmm. Maybe that's my NEXT CHALLENGE! JIMMIE!

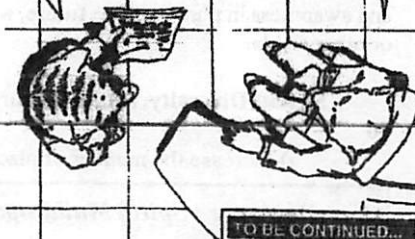
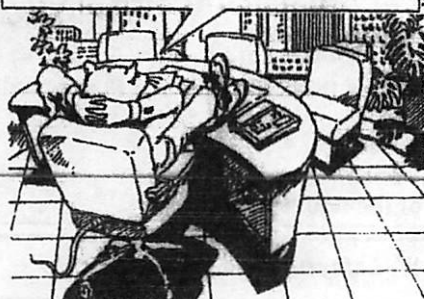
Chief?

Why don't they give out a Pulitzer for publishers?

Those awards are for writers, sir, photographers, you know, the rabble who do our work for us.

Why do we let them COP ALL THE GLORY?

Well, chief, because we cop all the money.



TO BE CONTINUED...

From front . . .

says it is "unethical" to "influence the news."

Note: certain portions of this MBO are deleted since the intention is to not expose any particular editor — just the system.
April 14, 1989

TO: —
FROM: —
RE: 1989 MBO

All plans and actions must be executed fully and to the satisfaction of . . . for points to be awarded. Completion Date: Dec. 31. Possible Points: 25.

1. Leadership & Staff Development

a) Develop by July 15 a mission statement for the . . . with staff involvement and staff support enlisted through individual and small-group staff meetings. (3 of the 20 points)

b) Get editors and reporters "cross-fertilized" through exchange programs with other departments, such as . . .-copy desk.

d) Attend at least 5 planning meetings total in TWWL, sports and business (with brief report to be submitted at year's end.)

e) Participate in a words/graphics summit and make it possible for others to do so.

f) Complete written and verbal evaluations of all staffers who report to me; contribute to others as helpful. As part of this process, I will make sure staff members explain all Getting It Straights to the managing editor in writing. For staff members with high numbers of corrections, I will personally talk to them and develop a plan to reduce these errors. I will also make corrections a part of each staff member's evaluation.

2. Customer Satisfaction Dec. 31 15

a) Let's make sure we're covering the issues that matter to people as part of our goal of becoming essential, *especially in the suburbs*. As part of this goal of making the Free Press the primary source of information about relevant issues, I will survey a group of readers and a group of non-readers about what is the most pressing issue facing their community today, and ask what information they need or would like on that subject, then translate those responses into stories.

3. Community Involvement Dec. 31 10

a) Participate in "Meet The Editor" nights; make at least six treks into the community to listen and learn.

b) Establish a system of community days for . . . staff. On such days, the staffer will be required to be away from the building on a pre-approved exploration for story ideas or to make news contacts. With list of participants submitted at year's end.

4. Reaching Young People Dec. 31 5

a) Increase our count of . . . stories about young people who may be role models, especially during the summer when we have to be more enterprising because we don't have school to hang our hook on; the hope is that more young people will read the paper if they are reading about young people like themselves.

b) Make at least two speaking engagements in the latter part of the year to young audiences, focused on the need for reading and awareness in pursuit of the future, whether in communications or other fields.

5. Staff Diversity, Multi-Culturalism, Pluralism Dec. 31

10

a) Increase the number of black and female . . . reporters

and editors, through both hiring and training; at least 25 percent will be minority. (5 of 10 points)

b) I will work to produce several stories that address specific issues in the minority community; this will include planning and executing . . . , plus at least four distinctive profiles of minority newsmakers, with a special emphasis on making sure that our religion coverage in the minority community improves. (5 of 10 points)

6. Content Dec. 31 15

a) Coordinate year-long coverage of "the crack menace," including at least three mini-projects on crack house ownership, drug-proofing kids for the summer and drugs in the suburbs; also . . . a project on Detroit in 2010 with/without drugs.

b) Organize and coordinate . . . coverage.

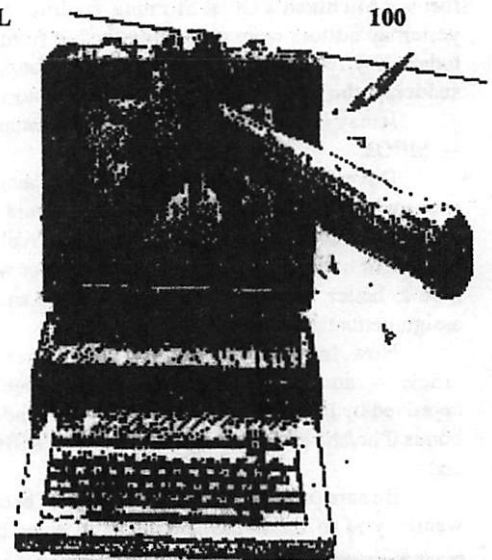
7. Budget Dec. 31 15

The . . . will meet its overtime, travel and business expense budgets quarterly (2 pts. each quarter) and for the year (2 pts.) for a total of 10 points.

8. Deadlines Dec. 31 10

The . . . meet copy flow and deadlines at least 66% of the time. I will work with . . . on a monitoring system to track our results.

TOTAL 100



QUIZ:

When may an interview subject deem his comments off the record — after making them? Apparently, when the subject is Michigan football coach Bo Schembechler.

To whom does this line in a Free Press media critique refer?

- A) Bill Bonds
- B) Mitch Albom
- C) Both of the above...



Jennie bucks up FP Troops

Knight-Ridder honcho Jennie Buckner breezed into Detroit just before Christmas and tried to bolster flagging Free Press morale with cheery promises of pie in some uncharted sky.

Because of intense interest in what Jennie said, The Downward Spiral presents the full, unedited text of this K-R factotum's doomed attempt at blowing up the punctured Free Press balloon:

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Well, we fess up. Yes, Jennie did say some actual words. We didn't really transcribe them because we couldn't figure out what, if anything, they meant.

Here are some free samples. Anybody who knows how to decode this gibberish, please write TDS :

"There's a special soft spot in my heart for the Free Press."

"Many a time I said, "God! I don't know if I could do as well."

"You've taught a lot of people around the circuit what grace under fire means."

"People around the circuit have really noticed."

"I really like the New Free Press."

"I am absolutely convinced you are going to get the good times you deserve."

As a postscript to Jennie's bucknerisms, FP writer John Lippert commented, "If it's so nice, how come we all feel so shitty?"



ANIMAL FARM

Pigs is pigs, and sports copy aides are sports copy aides, except at the Free Press, where some are more equal than others.

In its new contract, the Guild negotiated hefty pay raises for sports copy aides, a category that includes the copy folk in sports but also (previously) the zonies who put out Knight-Ridder's beloved Friends sections. The sports types got their increase - they are about the only people who really made out in the new contract - but the company said, "Whoops! You lowly zoneheads are getting too big a raise!" and refused to pay. Instead, the Free Press unilaterally and post-contract reclassified the zones as general clerks, meaning their raise was about half what the others got. Yes, they made less than general clerks.

The Guild, bless its wimpy little heart, has filed a grievance to make the company live up to its bargain.

Among the issues involved:

- Sports copy aides of both varieties, in contrast to the copy people of movie myth whose main duty is to fetch coffee for the "real" reporters, are big contributors to the Free Press and probably ought to be rated as copy editors/reporters anyway.

The copy aides in sports shovel an incredible amount of "stuff" on deadline, and catch flack if they don't know how to spell the name of the right winger on the checking line of the Vancouver Canucks. Some of the "suits" at the Free Press would need a week in Miami to recover after one prep night in the shoes of a sports copy aide.

- The zonies are responsible for filling a Friends section a week, sifting through up to 100 letters and phone calls a day, and converting that to copy. They also have to placate irate parents who want to know why we can't use a full report of their yuppie larvae's first step, and are expected to have an intimate knowledge of their territories. Trust us, they understand the metro area better than many MBO-types, who know the best seats in Tiger Stadium and the Palace, where to park in Ann Arbor, the current property values in the Grosse Pointes — and little else about southeast Michigan.

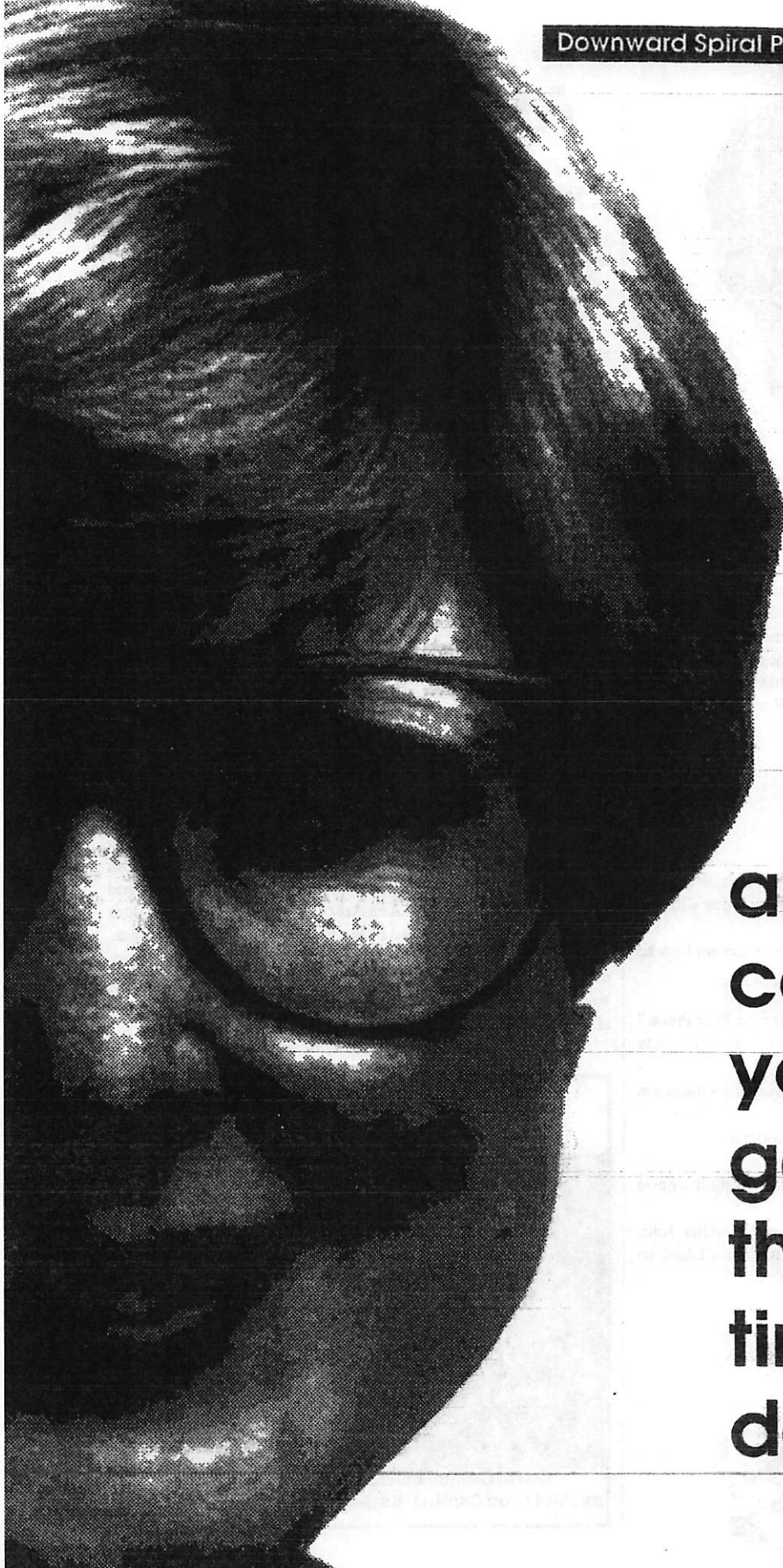
Both men and women work as copy aides in the male-dominated sports department. (We'd call it a bi-sexual staff, but we don't know anything about their personal lives.) All the Friends aides may be women, but they have families to feed too.

Like we said, pigs is pigs.

SCOOP! of the month



David Crumm blew away the competition with his exclusive on Cardinal Eddle's promo. Way to go, Dave.



**"I am
absolutely
convinced
you are
going to get
the good
times you
deserve."**

Jennie Buckner,
Vice-president for news,
Knight-Ridder, Inc.