

REPAIRING

Bad Author-Editor Relationships

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In a previous article (“Soften the Blow,” September/October *Intercom*), I described techniques that editors can use to build a productive and possibly even friendly working relationship with authors.

That advice has served me well in the past, but sometimes you inherit a situation in which an author has already been poisoned against editors by a previous editor’s mistakes, or in which the author is under enormous stress and your editing becomes the final straw. Sometimes you create the problem yourself, either accidentally or because you lose your temper and say something regrettable. Sometimes you face a combination of these factors.

In my first job as a professional editor, I was asked to edit a manuscript by an author who was known to be difficult even under normal circumstances. These circumstances were far from normal: The author was working hard to complete his doctorate at a university that was a difficult six-hour drive from our mutual workplace. At the same time, he was trying to fulfill his regular work responsibilities. And to make matters worse, his wife was constantly on his case about the fact that she never saw him anymore. My editing (not nearly as good or as tactful as it is now, many years later) was the straw that broke this particular camel’s back, and the author gave me an earful I’ll not soon forget.

Yet half a dozen years later, the author had become a good workplace friend, and eagerly sought out my editorial as-

sistance even when it wasn't formally required by our employer's policy. You can't always turn a situation around this dramatically, but there are ways to try to repair the relationship.

Don't Add Fuel to the Fire

Resist the temptation to blame authors, even if they're truly responsible for the problem. Meeting force with force only adds to the author's stress and provokes an emotional response that fuels the fire. Even attempting to defend or justify your position can appear oppositional, and will often evoke a hostile response. Similarly, efforts to compliment an author's work or say something blandly positive, in plain denial of a difficult situation, may further enrage the author, particularly if they feel that you're condescending to them. Instead, look for ways to defuse some of that emotion and open a dialogue that involves more than venting.

Accept Your Responsibility

Don't be quick to accept blame for something that isn't your fault. That being said, in most problems that arise between two people, both have contributed to the problem. If you're at least partially responsible, start by admitting your share of the responsibility: "Look, we both know that we're not getting along well. I haven't helped, and I'm sorry about that." At first glance, this approach may seem to be absolving the author of responsibility, but shouldering the blame accomplishes a very different result: It removes fuel from the fire (by not even hinting that the author is to blame) and offers the author a chance to apologize in return.

Try to Move On

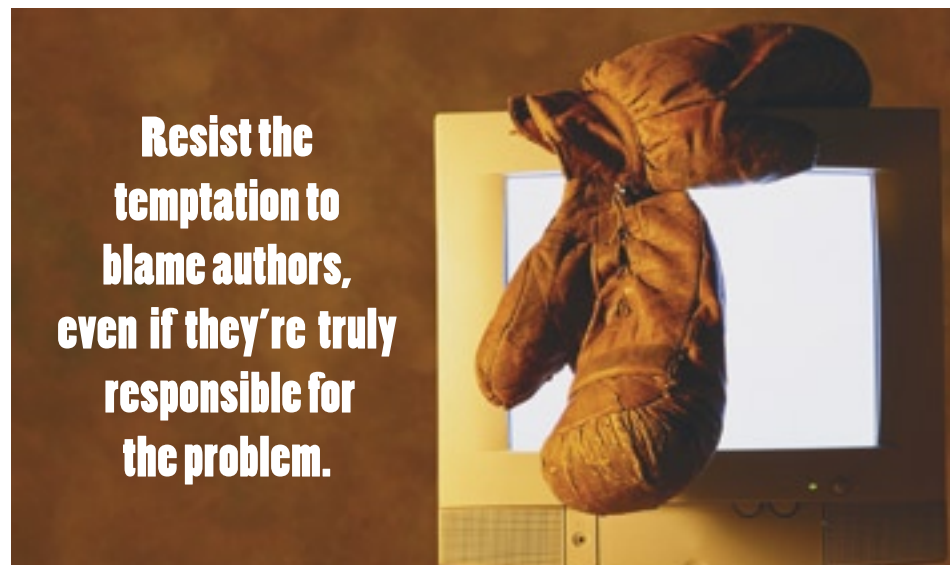
Of course, authors may not apologize, particularly if they're really stressed or mad at you, but at this point, an apology isn't the important thing: What's important is trying to move on. Begin by offering an opportunity to make the situation less tense: "We agree that this situation isn't helping either of us. From your point of view, what can I do to make things better *for you*?"

Feuds continue long past the point at

which the original insult has been forgotten because nobody is willing to admit they messed up, take responsibility for the mistake, atone for it, and ask the other party to help prevent the problem from reoccurring. Even if the author clearly wronged you, this fact should be less important than improving the future relationship. To get to this point, you have to accept that the pleasure of getting revenge or forcing the author to acknowledge that you're right is transitory. A mutually respectful and possibly even friendly working relationship is a long-term reward, so it's usually worth eating a little crow in the short term.

author is the one you need to mollify (in the original sense of the word—to *soften* resistance), you can't begin repairing the relationship until you demonstrate that you understand the author's problems and truly want to help solve them.

It may seem like I'm encouraging you to ignore more serious problems—and that's true, in part. But the payoff from solving the author's problems is that you immediately become an ally in a situation that is difficult and stressful for the author, too. Because deeds are more important than words to most people, this approach offers concrete proof that you're serious about making things bet-



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By no means am I suggesting that you accept an ongoing stream of abuse, or allow a truly toxic author to run roughshod over you. Later in this article, I'll suggest what you can do in such situations.

Think Triage

The French term *triage* means "sorting," and, in the context of this article, sorting based on priority or importance. When there are more problems than you can deal with simultaneously, focus on the problems whose solutions will provide the greatest payoff. Ask the author which problems are most serious *for them*. These problems may not be particularly serious in the larger scheme of things, and may be relatively minor priorities for you, but they're clearly important to the author. And, since the

ter. Ask the author, "We have to find a way to get your manuscripts edited that works for you. How can we do this in a way that you can live with? What changes would you like to see in the way I interact with you?"

This approach has two clear benefits. First, changing the way you're working reduces the number of things you'll have to fight with authors about, and eases the tension enough that you can begin a true dialogue. Second, authors immediately see the payoff from cooperation, at which point their self-interest will help convince them to continue to cooperate. If that collaboration becomes painless and productive, and makes it easier for them to publish their work, they'll be grateful for your help

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and far more willing to listen to you when it comes time to work on other problems. At that point, you can ask the logical follow-up question: “Here are *my* goals for the editing process. How *can you* help me achieve my goals?”

But what if the author has no intention of repairing your relationship despite these efforts?

Enlist an Ally

Some authors have no intention of cooperating, and insist on their right to produce consistently shoddy work simply because they feel they can get away with it. In most cases, you have no authority to insist that an author fix this problem, and that’s doubly so if the author works in a different department and has a different manager. You can gain the informal authority to insist on changes only once an author has learned to respect your advice.

In this situation, you need to obtain formal authority. The author may still not respect you or your advice, but at least they’ll have to listen. If the author’s manager agrees that there’s a problem, the manager is the best person to insist on a change. One way to do so is to take advantage of a powerful dynamic that resembles the “good cop/bad cop” trick you often see on TV police shows. In this approach, the “bad cop” makes it clear that they’re intent on hurting the criminal as much as they can get away with, while the “good cop” plays the sympathetic person who gains the criminal’s confidence and persuades them to confess.

On the surface, this tactic might seem to be an inappropriate “mind game” to play with a co-worker, but that objection misses the point: It’s the manager’s role to report a problem to their employee and insist that it be solved, and when the problem relates to writing quality, it’s your role to help authors solve a problem. That’s the real dynamic you’re striving to produce. Here’s how the good cop/bad cop play works in practice:

The manager meets with the author, explains the specific problems that must be solved, and makes it clear that the author’s performance appraisal will suffer if the problem isn’t solved quickly. The problems must be defined objectively

so that everyone understands them and the author can act upon them.

At that point, the manager asks the author to seek your help. That’s your opportunity to become the *solution* to a serious problem rather than *being* the problem. Consider an approach like this: “Your boss has identified the following problems with your writing. I can make those problems go away. *From your perspective*, how can I do this in the least painful way possible?”

In an ideal situation, your work will be sufficiently compelling that the author truly begins to appreciate your efforts. At that point, you can begin working together effectively. But sometimes authors will only grow more enraged, particularly if they sense your role in the good cop/bad cop game. Unfortunately, one common response to fear (here, the fear of receiving a poor performance appraisal or even losing a job) is to transform the emotion into anger and seek a safe target for that anger. Since this particular problem involves editing, you’re the obvious target. What then?

Bring in the Big Guns

Sometimes you truly can’t find a non-adversarial way to persuade an author to work with you. Sometimes the manager lacks the courage to confront an employee—a problem reported by distraught technical communicators roughly every couple of months in discussions in the techwrl community (www.techwrl.com). In that case, you need to seek more powerful allies. Doing so should be a last resort, since going around managers calls their competence into question and risks turning them into enemies. And you’re not likely to get the manager’s permission to involve others in the dispute: From the manager’s perspective, involving others compromises the manager’s ability to supervise the author.

In large companies, your strongest ally may be the Personnel or Human Resources (HR) department. Most HR departments have at least one person who is trained in mediation or the resolution of workplace conflicts, and this person can help you find solutions you missed. Even if these individuals are no more expert than you are, their distance and

impartiality lets them mediate effectively. Moreover, it’s often their department’s responsibility to solve such problems, and it’s appropriate to ask them to do so. At a minimum, you can expect such intervention to control an abusive author, even if it doesn’t solve the real problem.

If your company lacks such expertise, you may need to go over the head of the manager who is refusing to take responsibility for solving the problem. That manager’s manager has a clear interest in solving the problem, has the authority to do so, and is sufficiently remote from the author that there is no relationship to preserve. The main downside to this approach is that higher-level managers may (as once happened to me) be so remote from the situation and so obsessed with other concerns that they have no time to discover the facts of the case and instead impose a Solomonic solution: punishing both you and the author. But if the situation has degraded to the point at which you require this level of intervention, your only other alternative may be to seek employment elsewhere.

Blessed Are the Peacemakers

The ethical response in any conflict is to seek a way to resolve it while causing as little pain as possible. Being a peacemaker may mean that you’ll need to accept some pain yourself, in the hope that your sacrifice will have salutary long-term results. When you can’t solve the problem as a peacemaker, you do have other alternatives, though these alternatives are progressively more difficult and uncomfortable for all concerned. The reward if you succeed is the one I recounted at the start of this article: a friendly, satisfying working relationship. 🍌

SUGGESTED READINGS

Hart, G. “Dealing With Difficult Employees in the Technical Communication Workplace.” www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/employment/articles/difficultheemployees.html, 2002.

—. “Soften the Blow: Taking the Sting out of Editorial and Other Reviews.” *Intercom*, vol. 52, no. 8, September/October 2005.

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