Does the New York Times Know How to Fire Someone?

by Ben W. Heineman, Jr. | 4:49 PM May 16, 2014

As media observers explore every angle of Jill Abramson’s unceremonious sacking from the New York Times, one key Management 101 question is whether she was given a fair chance to address the management issues that, according to *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger, Jr, led him to dismiss her.

On the day after Abramson was fired, officials at the *Times* countered reports that she had angered Sulzberger with demands to increase her salary – which she alleged was lower than her male predecessor’s — reemphasizing that the real problems were her leadership style and newsroom management. Said Sulzberger in a letter to staff: “The reason — the only reason—for the decision was concerns I had about some aspects of Jill’s management of our newsroom, which I had previously made clear to her, both face-to-face and in my annual assessment.”

But how much time was Abramson given to address those concerns? She was only three years into her tenure as executive editor. By most accounts, she was an outstanding journalist and a talented editor with a strong sense of journalistic integrity and independence. Yet her tenure was far shorter than most *Times* executive editors (and her summary dismissal far more abrupt).

Being a leader of any organization “ain’t beanbag.” Hard decisions are made, sometimes quickly. The troops often complain about the general. Not every decision works out. Words giving orders or making decisions aren’t always warm and cuddly. This is pretty standard stuff in a big organization staffed by grown-ups.

So what were the issues with Abramson’s management style, in Sulzberger’s view, that justified terminating her? Why were they considered a firing offense? And, most importantly, was Abramson ever given the time and resources to address them? This is not the only question in this story, but it is a key one.

Some media reports have noted that Abramson had hired a consultant to improve her management style; when was that coaching started? Were there improvement milestones she failed to meet? When was Sulzberger’s annual assessment written, and what did it say? Ken Auletta at The New Yorker has published an email from Times CEO Mark Thompson sent on April 28, just a couple of weeks before Abramson was fired, in which he recounted praising her performance to a new recruit and said he hoped Abramson would stay on for years. What happened in those two weeks to change his mind?
In many organizations, top leaders have issues that emerge from 360-degree reviews or other systematic (and fair-minded) assessments. Often, boards or senior executives try to be clear about areas where a leader needs to improve. Assuming that leader has other very positive qualities (clearly so in Abramson’s case), he or she is then given a real opportunity over a reasonable period of time to address those issues, customarily with some guidance or assistance. And given that Abramson had worked for the paper for 14 years before her promotion to Editor, it would seem unlikely that her flaws — everyone has some — would be totally unknown to her bosses.

If the *Times* and Sulzberger want to make “management” the issue, then they have an obligation not to hide behind a vague sentence or phrase — or a non-disparagement agreement — but to explain what the problems were and whether Abramson was given a fair chance to correct them. At this point, with the expected media scrum — and with important issues very much in the public eye — Abramson shouldn’t be complicit in the silence.

This is a big story about an important event at a national institution: The firing of one of the most senior leaders in journalism. The *Times* would never let another major institution off the hook with such a cursory account of its reasoning.