# Evidence of Esteem: Cultivating a Culture of Respect for Our Profession

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Throughout a career in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) journal management that has found me overseeing publications in 7 medical subspecialties, I have taken great pride and professional nourishment in developing an evidence-based approach to the management of journals across a spectrum that encompasses everything from best practices in peer review to 5-year budget projections. The expertise I've honed has come not just from experience, but also from research gleaned through policy documents issued by the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME),[1] recommendations made by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE),[2] and of course, articles published in the pages of *Science Editor*.

But still—after 19 years—respect from editors (particularly those who hold a terminal medical degree) isn't always forthcoming.

Before I outline the ways in which I think we might work together to transform that somewhat discouraging reality, I'd like to briefly share with you how I came to write this article and why I feel a sense of urgency that we expand the level of support we are providing to one another on this front.

## Once and Future Colleagues

I've had the recent privilege of joining a Council of Science Editors (CSE) task force on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). One of our missions is to consider how we might attract candidates with different racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender perspectives to our profession. Another is to develop a course on DEI for journal editors and staff. In the course of casual conversation at one of our recent meetings, a task force member commented that it was important to properly train our editorial board members on DEI so that they can converse with authors about it, because doctors prefer to hear constructive feedback about their research from "an equal." We all laughed momentarily at the truism

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and moved on. However, as the conversation continued, I found myself unsettled and asked my colleagues if we could return, at least momentarily, to discuss this idea that has proven endemic to our profession: the need to send in someone with an equivalent degree to the author's when discussing matters related to their research, even if those matters are editorial in nature. (If I had a nickel for each time I've told an editor-in-chief, "This author would take the news better coming from you," then drafted an email in my own words and asked for it to be sent over his [most often, his] signature, I'd be a rich woman.)

As we begin to consider how we can dedicate ourselves to expanding opportunities for new metaphorical voices in our profession to enrich our work, we are also obligated to consider how the power differential between those of us who operate the editorial office and those engaged in peer review might be magnified by intersectional politics. To be quite frank, we owe it to our current and future Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, biracial, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer colleagues to mitigate— insofar as possible—an inherent paucity of respect for our role, so that it does not double (or triple) the work they must already do when they enter traditionally White, cisgendered spaces.

## Imbalances of Power

With that hopeful charge in mind, I began to research how other colleagues have handled this. Of course, I Googled. I

searched PubMed and the *Science Editor* archives. I called friends both inside our profession and those who work at academic institutions in other roles. What I found first was an overwhelming amount of information on "managing up" (and naturally, "leaning in"). But, since I've found myself so far writing a candid account, let me be so again: No amount of being pleasant to work with, anticipating and adjusting to your boss' communication style, cultivating "followership,"[3] or maintaining general professionalism[4] will neutralize the inherent power imbalance. As a deeply unfortunate op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*[5] showed, those imbalances and biases exist even among those with terminal degrees. I currently manage an osteopathic medical publication, and we frequently discuss both patient and colleague biases against DOs (whose training is equivalent with MDs). Even amongst medical specialties there is a tacit hierarchy—and certainly, gender bias has been well-documented amongst academic medical faculty.[6]

## Perceptions of Importance

As if gender or racial bias and education/degree bias weren't enough, there is a perception in some spheres that editorial offices (and the staff who operate them) are unnecessary or extraneous.[7,8] In a 2018 *Scholarly Kitchen* blog post entitled, "A Curious Blindness Among Peer Review Initiatives,"[7] Tim Vines noted, "The common refrain is that academics should take back control of peer review…which carries the heavy implication that journal staff and publishers add literally nothing to the process because volunteer reviewers and editors do all of the work." Seven years before, in a prescient blog post (also from *Scholarly Kitchen*),[8] Phil Davis opined about the launch of *eLife*, an Open Access journal that boasted at the time of employing no professional editors: "The tag line 'by scientists, for scientists' may seem familiar. It was used for years to promote Faculty of 1000 services. It evokes the revolutionary call to action to take back science and return it to its rightful place, which, if you've read your history of science, is in the hands of a small group of [W]hite aristocratic gentleman scholars. Professional editors may enter through the servants' entrance." (It should be noted that *eLife* now employs editorial office staff.[9]) Amongst you, my friends and colleagues reading this perspective article, are professional editors of the kind Mr Davis mentioned (both copyeditors and developmental editors, freelance and otherwise), editorial assistants and managing editors, experts in medicine, physics, life sciences, engineering, and more. Some of us consider ourselves editors in the truest sense of the word; some of us consider publication management our bailiwick. Regardless, the struggles are the same.

So what hope do we have for cultivating—*establishing*—a culture of respect from our authors and editors with advanced or terminal degrees who may consider us helpful but extraneous?

It might not surprise you to hear a medical editor propose this: our esteem is in the evidence.

## Evidence-Based Editorial Management

Editors and authors often come to us with a great deal of proficiency in their subject area but little-to-none in publishing or peer review. That means that when it comes to the job of editing an article or managing a journal publication, *we* are the experts. Contrary to an assumption I've noticed amongst novice physician editors across my career, what we do is not nebulous, undefined, or opinion-based—it's precise, with its own set of best practices. This is subjective, of course, but they seem to think of their work as science and ours as art. Part of respect is understanding; to me, it is crucial that we help authors and editors understand that our profession is guided by a set of principles and processes just as theirs is. (This is one of the reasons training in publishing is critical for editors-in-chief, if not entire editorial boards, but that is a topic beyond the scope of this article.) Part of this mission will involve communicating amongst ourselves and gathering that knowledge in a single place for clear dissemination and free use by our colleagues—especially our young colleagues and the diverse candidates we hope to recruit to work alongside us.

To that end, I'd like to call for three things:

*Confident communication support.* First, I'd like to encourage CSE to consider expanding the training currently offered in certain short courses (specifically the Advanced Short Course on Publication Management) about communication confidence; it should feature more prominently in both that course and others for early-career employees. It's an important part of our profession and will help mitigate the anxiety some editorial office staff might feel when they are interacting with authors and editors. For equity purposes, a short, written, and free set of "tips" on confident communication, which would be accessible to colleagues at all levels, could also do wonders. During my research for this article, I consulted with Vicki Abelson, Certified Professional Coach and founder of The Defined Leader. She referred me back to "Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High," a book I've had on my shelf for a decade. Vicki also suggested applying the following framework to conversations when we need to make confident assertions about editorial processes or ethics: "First, begin by sharing the facts. Tell your story—the story of why change is necessary. Put a focus on separating facts from stories; facts are the things we can see, hear, and observe, while stories are assumptions we make based on those facts. When data is absent, we make inferences (and often negative ones)." She also suggests focusing on mutual purpose, cultivating agreement with our authors and editors

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about shared goals and values (i.e., successful, accurate, timely, ethical publication of research). For our profession, facts and data are at the heart of *what* we publish, but they are also at the heart of best practices in *how* we publish. As one small example, there is a reason Clarivate strongly prefers a self-citation rate below 20% for journals indexed in the *Journal Citation Report*.[10] Armed with this data, young colleagues can confidently approach their editorial board members when decisions are being made about journal content that might violate that guideline, especially if the journal hasn't yet gained (but is applying for) an Impact Factor. Let's begin to collect and share data like that more freely.

*Guides for best practices.* Second and inextricable from the first, I call for CSE to develop a full complement of resource material to support best practices in publication management. While some information is available, of course—through our own organizations and others like WAME or ICMJE—it often relates to policies or codes of ethics for editors-in-chief or editorial boards, rather than covering the practicalities of how to set up and successfully run an editorial office. While we oversee publications in different subject areas, there are significant commonalities. *What's the best way to recruit new, active editorial board members when your board has become stale? What questions do you use on your reviewer form that help maximize rigorousness and thoroughness in their reviews? Further, how do you train new reviewers? What data do you use to identify high-impact articles and authors for solicitation? Is there a "best practice" for how to divide the work amongst employees in the editorial office?* Even when a journal has a professional publisher to lean on for production advice, running an editorial office requires a specific level of expertise in project management that necessitates an understanding of how certain decisions influence other areas of journal operations, so we must turn inward as we establish—again, based on evidence—our own guiding documents.

*Salary and work environment research.* Third, especially in light of our strong desire to recruit and retain more colleagues from more diverse backgrounds, I'd like to call for research *about our roles* to be shared amongst us. I happened into my first editorial role in 2002 through kismet rather than intention; I frankly wasn't even aware of scholarly journal work as a potential professional path. If we hope to recruit new members to our work, we must be able to share data with them about average salaries, the percentage of us who work with associations or societies and those of us who work in a publisher-employed or freelance model, how many of us who have additional degrees and certifications that

benefit our editorial work, what our original undergraduate studies entailed, and more. In my opinion, our profession has suffered as a result of secrecy around this data, likely for the innocuous reason that we sometimes see ourselves as more disparate (because of the subjects we edit) than homogenous. I've been told that CSE is exploring the option of creating a task force through its professional development committee to conduct a salary study, and I look forward to progress on this front.

In short, DEI in editorial work is a worthy and necessary cause that cannot wait, and we are also simultaneously obligated to ensure that members of our profession—novice and expert alike—have the tools they need to command respect in a challenging environment. Isn't it time?

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