The Managing Editor's Role When an Editor is Being Investigated

**Best practices for the editorial office:** Be proactive and put these in place *now*. It’s like writing a will or creating a family emergency kit: we don’t want to think about it and it’s easy to put off in the busyness of daily life, but putting a plan in place now will save a lot of headaches if an editor investigation should occur. An editor investigation is a stressful time for a journal and has the potential to become a crisis. Having previously agreed-upon procedures in place will give you piece of mind now and something to guide you should you ever need it.

**Getting started:**

- Find out if there are currently guidelines or procedures in place to follow in the event of an investigation.

- Educate yourself on how journal conflicts of interest (COI) are identified and documented. The editorial office (EO) may not be responsible for collecting COI forms or documentation, but it is valuable to know the process and make sure that the documents are up to date and on file. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has the following resources to educate yourself on identifying COI’s:
  - [Discussion/guidance document on handling competing interests](#)
  - [A Short Guide to Ethical Editing for New Editors](#)

- Ensure you have policies in place for potential ethical issues, such as how to process a paper when an editor submits to the journal, or how an editor should proceed if they find themselves working on a paper that has a potential COI. If you do not have these policies already, then begin drafting them and make sure they are reviewed and approved by the editorial board (EB) / publications committee.

- Identify a potential arbitrator (past EB member or editor, board of directors (BOD) member or past BOD member [if society journal], or a member of the journal community or staff member who is not directly involved or invested in the day-to-day of the journal) who could step in to handle the investigation should one arise.
Create a procedures document/folder, and/or add this procedure to your general policies and procedures document, describing how your journal will proceed in the event of an editor investigation. The arbitrator should participate in the drafting of the procedures. The arbitrator, EB, BOD (if applicable), and EO should all review and approve.

- Update these documents on a regular basis (every 12-24 months).
- Include a version number and date last updated in the footer of each document.
- See Appendix for questions that will help you create a procedures document tailored to your particular journal.
- The final document should be written in a simple and clear format and should identify the solutions to the questions asked.

Encourage editors to seek relevant ongoing training through industry resources (i.e.: COPE, ISMTE, CSE, ICMJE). Make sure editors are aware of the journal policies about conflicts of interest and other ethical dilemmas. Look for opportunities to discretely discuss journal policies around ethical issues with individual editors during day-to-day operations to raise awareness.

During the investigation:

- Keep detailed records of all communications. Remember to remain professional in all communications, as you never know when an email may be used in an investigation.
- Save all communications that cause red flags in a special folder so that in the event of an investigation, information can be easily found.
- Seek advice from trusted colleagues, like other managing editors (MEs), ISMTE contacts, your supervisor, and/or your journal publisher.
- Understand the importance of discretion: Refrain from sharing any of the case details with outside individuals.
- Remain neutral: Remember that the ME is on the journal’s side. This can be difficult as we may have strong feelings about the editor being investigated. It is imperative that your feelings toward the editor (good or bad) do not interfere with the investigation in any way.
- Provide all requested information.
- Make the process timely, confidential, and well documented.
Follow the procedures document and use this to settle any disputes over how the investigation is being handled.

After an investigation:

- Once the decision has been made, regardless of outcome, the managing editor should take steps to first stabilize the journal and then move the journal forward with as little disruption as possible. Remember, you are on the journal’s side and must consider what is best for the journal.

- If an editor was let go, there will be a transition period. There may be upset feelings, and emotions may be running high. See yourself as the eye of the storm - remain calm and continue to steadily manage the journal’s operations.

- If an editor was let go, you will probably now need to train a new interim editor and begin the process of selecting a new permanent editor. The procedures document you created earlier will now come in handy to help with the selection of an interim / permanent editor and guide you in what your role in this process will be.

- Appropriately archive all information. Consider writing up your experience (without providing any specific journal information) for an EON article or presenting it at an ISMTE meeting. In the future, other managing editors will find value in learning from your experience.
Appendix.

Questions for journal staff to consider:

Take the time now to consider answers to the questions, and then create a procedures document based on those answers.

- Who will be the arbitrator should an investigation occur?
- Who else will be involved in the investigation? (Example: Society Board of Directors, etc.)
- Who should not be involved in the investigation?
- What (if any) are grounds for immediate dismissal of an editor?
- If the editorial board is asked to vote, how will that be done?
- If an editor is asked to step down, how will an interim editor be identified?
  - Will it automatically be the “next in line” (for example, an associate editor [AE] stepping up as interim editor-in-chief [EIC])?
- If an editor is asked to step down, how will this change be communicated to the journal readership?
- Will the editor be expected to continue his or her role with the journal during the investigation, or will it be suspended?
  - If suspended, how will his or her absence be handled in terms of the daily workload of the journal?
- What should the managing editor (ME) do if the investigated editor is trying to engage directly with the ME about the case?
  - Is the ME allowed to speak to the investigated editor directly about the case, or should there be a policy in place that the ME cannot engage directly with the investigated editor?
- If a Society journal, what resources does the Society have? Legal, arbitrators, etc.?

Put your role in writing: The guidelines that you as ME will follow should an investigation occur should also be documented so that all involved will understand what you can and cannot do. Remember: Remain neutral, practice discretion, provide all documentation requested, keep the details confidential, etc.