



Newsroom Leadership

The news business is notorious for promoting well-qualified journalists into leadership positions with little or no formal training. “I was handed three sheets of ‘important contacts’ from the previous news director and given a set of keys,” one news director says, describing an experience that is all too typical.

As many news managers and their staffs have discovered, just being good at one’s craft does not necessarily prepare someone well for a leadership position. Management consultant Peter Drucker says there may be such a thing as a born leader, but there certainly aren’t enough of them. The good news is that leadership can be learned and leaders can improve if they’ll just invest the time.

Why bother? Effective leaders make everyone around them more productive. They create a healthy newsroom atmosphere in which everyone can contribute and grow. And plenty of evidence suggests that good leaders have more successful careers.

News directors need to understand the difference between management and leadership — and develop the skills to be good at both.

Leadership vs. Management

Becoming a manager requires nothing more than the right title and job description, but neither makes you a *good* manager, let alone a *leader*. “You have conferred power because you have a title,” says associate news director Janice Gin of KTVU-TV in Oakland, CA. “To have influence is much more difficult.”

Managers and leaders both have influence but in different ways. “Managing is processes,” says former news director Marci Burdick, now senior vice president of Schurz Communications. “Leadership is seeing the big picture and creating an environment where employees can excel.”

Another way to look at it is that managers are about the *business*, while leaders are about the *people*. News directors need to be concerned

with both. As a manager, the news director *establishes systems and procedures* to support and produce the best possible journalism. As a leader, the news director *inspires and motivates the staff* to get the job done. “To lead is to set direction and establish a vision,” says Harvey Nagler, vice president of CBS Radio News. “Leadership is giving up power and empowering the people who work for you to take responsibility. People are your most vital asset to success, and we as leaders must always keep that in mind.”

For many news managers, that sounds easier than it is. In their previous roles as reporters, producers, assignment managers and photojournalists, they may have become accustomed to doing everything themselves. They often had to when no one else was around to help. Delegating responsibility to others does not come naturally, but it’s a critical skill for news managers. “Trying to do it all, every job in the shop, alienates and offends,” says Hearst-Argyle vice president of news Fred Young. “It stifles other people.”

Leaders also refrain from solving every problem in the newsroom. Instead, they help others learn how to solve problems themselves and leave them to it. “When I first started, one of my big deals was to prove I could make a decision,” says News 8 Austin news director Kevin Benz. “All that does is remove decision-making from the rest of the newsroom.” Now he encourages people to take chances and try something new. “People should not fear they’ll be berated or written up for making a mistake,” Benz says.

LEADERS ARE

Visionaries
they see the big picture
and set direction.

Ethical
they establish values
and earn trust.

Optimists
they look for the
positive.

Learners
they never stop
growing.

Risk taking is not just accepted by strong leaders, it’s encouraged. “Otherwise, you’ll be the same as everyone else,” says Andy Still, news director at WYFF-TV in Greenville, SC. “You can’t be better without taking risks.”

Good leaders clearly identify objectives and hold themselves and others accountable for meeting them. That requires communicating newsroom goals with everyone, inside and outside the department, and doing it often. “People

get crossways if the objectives are gray,” Burdick says.

Communication is central, veteran news managers agree—and not just from the top down. Leaders need to listen at least as much as they talk and probably more. “To have an impact on an organization, you have to know the people as individuals,” says NPR managing editor Bill Marimow, former editor of *The Baltimore Sun*. “You have to know their hopes, their fears and their skills.”

Leadership Style

Volumes have been written about leadership styles, and most of them come to the same conclusion: There is no single “right way” that fits all circumstances. “My style is still evolving,” says Mark Miller, news director at WBAL-AM in Baltimore, a job he’s held since 1990. A strong believer in coaching in the newsroom, Miller says he sees his role as “charting a general course and making sure everyone knows what direction we’re going in, then letting them do their jobs.”



“You do not lead by hitting people over the head—that’s assault, not leadership.”

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER



Section 1

Former news director Jill Geisler, now head of the leadership and management group at The Poynter Institute, has identified seven typical newsroom leadership styles that she has observed. Her list notes both their pluses and minuses:

- **Commandant** Decisive, top-down autocrat who may manage by fear
- **Parent** Caring problem solver who takes concerns too personally
- **Team Captain** Strong teamwork advocate who may not pay enough attention to individuals
- **Coach** Good listener who works one-on-one to help staffers grow
- **Expert** Highly skilled journalist who may be too hands-on
- **Buddy** More of a peer than a boss who is good at fostering collegiality but may struggle with tough personnel decisions
- **Remote Controller** Isolated and distant administrator (manages by memos)

Geisler says that every manager has a style that is most natural to him or her. Good leaders, she says, learn to alter their styles to suit different situations and individuals. “The three key elements to having real influence on others are competence, integrity and empathy,” Geisler says.

When she first became a manager at age 21, Burdick says, “I thought [Gen. George] Patton was the model of a successful manager.” She now admits she had a lot to learn—and the biggest lesson was that people matter most. “I found my comfort zone where my No. 1 motivation was helping people succeed. If people succeed, the product succeeds.”

That requires taking a long-term view, which isn’t easy in the deadline-driven, results-oriented business of journalism. But KTVU-TV’s

Geisler counsels patience. “Create wins, for your staff and yourself,” she says, even if progress comes in baby steps. “Find opportunities to feel successful.”

Focusing on people also means recognizing that people have lives outside of work. “If things are going on that can affect their performance, they need to know they can come to you and say what’s going on,” says Janet Evans of KRLD-AM in Arlington, TX. That doesn’t mean acting as “newsroom parent,” however. Experienced managers say it’s important to be compassionate, but it’s not healthy to be too involved in the staff’s personal problems.

Nor is it healthy to be too remote. News directors need to get out of their offices and into the newsroom, says Young of Hearst-Argyle. Too many news directors spend their days tied up in meetings, issuing memos, having little to do directly with the people and product of the newsroom. Staying connected is critical, says Evans. “You’ll see problems before they become huge, and you’ll find opportunities you would otherwise miss.”

Multiple strategies can help to keep a news director connected, especially in larger newsrooms:

- **Participate** Be there for morning meetings and post-show debriefs. Use these opportunities to share news philosophy and reinforce the vision.
- **Ask for updates** Make sure you are kept in the loop on special projects, sweeps plans, and morning and weekend coverage ideas by requesting written updates.
- **Vary your schedule** Show up occasionally at 4 a.m. to see how the overnight staff is doing. Drop in over the weekend, too
- **Support middle managers** Offer training, mentoring and feedback. Cultivate the newsroom’s future leaders.



“Managing means you get through the day. Leading means you empower others.”

BARBARA COCHRAN, PRESIDENT, RTNDA AND RTNDF

Motivating Employees

The first step to motivating employees is getting to know them individually. “Find out people’s passions, what gets them jazzed up,” says Evans. For some on the staff, it may be the challenge of a different assignment or an opportunity to try something new. Giving employees some say over their work and encouraging them to exceed their own expectations can work wonders. “People will work harder if they know you care about their success,” says Susana Schuler, vice president/corporate news director of Nexstar Broadcasting Group. Listen to your employees’ aspirations and help them progress.

“My job is not to get everyone to be as good as the best employee but to close the gap between performance and potential,” Marimow says. The way he sees it, if each person on a staff of 20 can perform 20 percent better, that’s the equivalent of four new hires. In a time of shrinking budgets and increasing demands, that’s nothing to sneeze at.

LEADERS SHARE POWER

Seek Input

Include your staff in setting goals for the newsroom

Delegate

Make everyone in charge of something

Support

Help your staff solve their own problems

Communicate

Often, with everyone

Recognizing and rewarding good work is one way to get more of it. Rewards can run the gamut from food to free tickets to sporting events to special training opportunities. “If I owned the station, I’d have \$50 gift certificates to include with a note,” says Marimow. But praise alone can work wonders. Knowing each staff member and what works best for them enables a manager to provide the right kind of motivation. Some people thrive on public praise, but others may prefer a private email.

In many newsrooms, however, some staffers simply cannot be motivated. Harvey Nagler of CBS Radio News says, “Up to 20 percent of the people won’t do what you want them to do.” Rather than fretting or expending huge amounts of energy on those staffers, Nagler counsels putting them in positions where they will do no harm if you cannot let them go. “You may need to isolate those people who infect the operation and hinder success,” he says.

“New” Newsroom Managers

Ask veteran news managers what they wish they’d known when they started out, and the list is long. Says Burdick: “I wish I had been more comfortable that I didn’t need to know everything—that I could use the brainpower of everyone around me and would not be considered less of a manager for it.” Lee Giles, who retired in 2003 after 35 years as a news director at WISH-TV in Indianapolis, has a different regret: “I wish I had been more decisive about resolving conflict. I let it go on longer than I should have.”

New managers in every industry make similar errors, according to business

consultants. Scholar and author Warren Bennis, who founded the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business, calls the first leadership experience “an agonizing education.” Among the most common mistakes:

- **Acting too fast**
- **Failing to communicate clearly**
- **Not delegating enough**
- **Continuing to identify with the troops**



Section 1

Former news director Scott Libin, now at The Poynter Institute, says he had to force himself to observe and listen when he first moved into management. “You have to overcome the tendency to want to make a splash immediately,” he says.

“People watch so closely the first decisions. One of the biggest decisions you make is where to start.”

To figure out where to start, WTSP-TV news director Lane Michaelsen met one-on-one with every member of the news staff during his first few weeks on the job in Tampa, FL. “People thought I was going to tell them what they needed to know,” he says with a laugh. Instead, he listened and learned what needed to be done. Michaelsen admits it’s not easy to go slow. Television stations expect results tomorrow. But his advice is to do nothing for at least 60 days. “If you start with ‘We’re going to do *this*,’ you are setting yourself up to fail.”

New managers also have to learn to communicate carefully and fully. Evans of KRLD-AM says she’s a rapid-fire emailer and had to teach herself when not to push “send.” Emails don’t convey context and can easily be misconstrued. Now, Evans says, she tries to recognize when she should deliver a message in person, “so they see what’s going on behind it.”

General manager Ric Harris of WEWS-TV in Cleveland says that new managers often are unaware of

LEADERSHIP VALUES

Take risks

Embody hope

Stay connected

Show compassion

Paul Lewis says that’s a lesson he learned the hard way as news director at WTIC-TV in Hartford, CT. A simple comment—“This sounds interesting. Check it out.”—was interpreted to mean, “Let’s do it.” Now, Lewis says, he’s careful to say either, “This story is worth doing,” or “Somebody make a call and tell me if this is a story.”

Many first-time news directors have trouble

letting go of their previous jobs. Former reporters want to rewrite scripts. Exec-producers want to tweak the rundown. It’s natural to gravitate to what you’re good at, but veteran managers advise against it. “Accept that people will not do it as well as you would have done it the first time,” says Nagler of CBS Radio News. “With guidance from you, they will get better.”

A manager who is too involved with daily details may not consider the needs of the newsroom as a whole. “Remember to think globally,” says KIVU-TV associate news director Gin. “It’s not about your segment, show or task any more.”

Fledgling news directors who are promoted from within often struggle to redefine their relationships with longtime colleagues. “I made the mistake of thinking I

EFFECTIVE LEADERS

Ask what needs to be done

Ask what is right for the enterprise

Develop action plans

Take responsibility for decisions

Make sure they are understood

Focus on opportunities rather than problems

Run productive meetings

Think and say “we” instead of “I”

PETER DRUCKER

could be everybody's friend," says Evans. Among other things, Evans learned to stop by social occasions and then leave. "People will have different discussions when you are around," she says.

Managing veteran journalists can pose a challenge, especially for first-time news directors. Experienced staffers concerned about the change may be cynical. It may help to consider the newsroom from the veterans' perspective. Benz of News 8 Austin believes long-timers often are fearful when a new news director arrives. "They want to be valued and respected, too," he says. "They want you to ask them for their help, and they want to feel a part of the team." Benz suggests using the veterans as mentors and tapping into their experience. At the same time, he says, veterans want to be challenged and crave constructive feedback. They are also concerned about quality of the product and want the news director to hold them and the newsroom to high standards.

All new managers need help, but they may not know where to find it. Here are some suggestions for first-time or relatively new managers:

- **Join an association** Many associations like RTNDA provide low-cost training and publications with guidance for newsroom leaders. Attend regional or national meetings to network with other news managers. Make a personal investment in your own success, and make yourself more valuable.

MOTIVATION METHODS

Share control

Provide lots of encouragement

Set reachable goals

Celebrate and reward successes

LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

Honest

Forward-looking

Inspiring

Competent

Fair

Supportive

BENNIS, MASON & MITROFF

- **Find a mentor** Ask a good leader to advise you. You may find a peer in a similar market, a corporate news executive, or even someone in another business. It's the leadership qualities that matter most.
- **Learn about leadership** Consult industry sources and read books about leadership. Be sure to ask your boss for plenty of feedback on your performance.
- **Work on your weaknesses** Are you disorganized? Can't read a spreadsheet? Take a class to hone your skills. These problems can get in the way of your success.

Michaelsen, a former photojournalist, says the best advice he got upon becoming a news director came from a general manager in his station group who told him not to forget where he came from. "Who you are and what skills you have got you the job," Michaelsen says. In his case, that didn't mean his ability to shoot steady, sequenced video. It meant his ability to negotiate—a skill he used daily on the street in gaining access to shoot stories—which he now draws on as a news director working with other department heads.

WBAL-AM news director Miller, a former reporter, says it also pays to learn new skills. He advises aspiring news directors to take an accounting course—especially if they're one of those people who can't balance their own checkbooks. "Unless you do budgets well, you can't ask for things that will make your newsroom better."