

# LEARNING the ropes

BUDGETS AND PEOPLE



**Ask news directors the biggest problems they faced when they were new on the job and two things come up more often than any others: understanding the budget and learning to manage personnel. Here's some advice on how to deal with those issues.**

## BUDGETS

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"Because budgets are unknown, we make them way more than they are," says Joyce Reed of Griffin Communication. "So the question is, if I'm scared of it, how do I overcome that? What skills do I need? Where can I go get those?"

### Get smart

"Unless you do budgets well, you can't ask for things that will make your newsroom better," says Mark Miller, news director at WBAL-AM in Baltimore, MD. Teach yourself the software your station uses for budgeting. Take an online tutorial, or see if a local community college offers finance workshops for non-finance managers. Decipher the acronyms and learn the vocabulary as you would a foreign language. (See the "Budget Basics" glossary on page 41)

### Ask questions

Don't be afraid to ask questions to learn what you need to know. Sit down with the finance director or sales manager and learn your way around the numbers. Ask another news director in your group to walk you through the corporate budgeting system. Some companies "zero base" the budget every year, while others allow for a percentage increase across the board. Find out how flexible the budget is. Can you move funds from one category to another or from one line to another? How does your company handle open positions and overtime? Can you use any funds you save for other purposes?

## Connect costs to performance

Every dollar in your budget should be directly connected to the work that needs to be done. Find out exactly where the money goes so you can justify the need for it. If you're asked to cut costs, you should be able to spell out what that would mean in terms of reduced news coverage.

## Follow the money

Make sure you see all of the newsroom bills, even if you don't have to sign them. Know the codes used by accounting so you can spot problems or errors. Review all contracts for newsroom staff. Find out what people are being paid, when their contracts are up for renewal, and whether they have exit clauses. The more you can anticipate what your needs are going to be, the better you can deal with them.

## PEOPLE

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"The biggest mistake new managers make is they don't know how to talk to their employees," says KVOA news director Kathleen Choyal. "They don't know how to hold people's feet to the fire without making it personal."

## Communicate, communicate, communicate

Don't assume everyone likes to get information the way you do. Some people only want the big picture, but others will want every detail spelled out. Share information with the staff in lots of different ways. Write memos, hold meetings, talk one-on-one, share examples and demonstrate what you want them to do.

## Listen closely

When problems arise, keep an open mind and investigate the situation the way you would a news story. Remain calm, and don't make any decisions when you're mad or annoyed, advises KVOA's Choyal. Ask lots of questions of everyone involved, even if you think you already know the answers. "If you don't ask, you may not find out until you discipline somebody, and now you have to backtrack," she says.

“A budget is an incredible tool...You can get around roadblocks by showing how an investment now can lead to savings down the line.”

Scott Picken, News Director • KIVI-TV • Boise, ID

### Role play

Find someone you can role play with before you have a difficult conversation. It could be your GM or a mentor at another station—anyone who’s willing to walk you through it ahead of time so you can anticipate reactions and have your responses prepared. (For more tips on having difficult conversations, see RTNDF’s *Ready, Set, Lead: The Resource Guide for News Managers*.)

### Motivate and manage the team

Learn what motivates each member of your staff, whether it’s recognition, more challenging work or more responsibility, and find ways to tap into that motivation. Pay special attention to your management team. Did anyone apply for the news director’s job and not get it, or does anyone aspire to become a news director? “Most of the time, I’ve been able to identify what they need to learn and help them learn it,” says WHBQ’s Ken Jobe. “Give them a big block of something to do, so they aren’t just seen as the guy in waiting because that doesn’t build respect.”

### Understand hiring and firing

“Hiring is not just going out and finding the best person and offering them a job,” says KAKE news director Dave Grant. Work with human resources to learn the legal issues you have to deal with and what paperwork is required, whether you’re bringing someone new on board or asking someone to leave. Building a file is tedious, time-consuming and essential. If you’re going to create an opening, have a solution in the works. (See “Recruiting,” page 15, for more suggestions on hiring.)