

BEST advice



We asked dozens of news directors for their keys to success in the first 90 days at a new job, and beyond. Here's a collection of their best advice.

Take it slowly

Former news director Lane Michaelsen, now a corporate vice president at Gannett Broadcasting, says his best advice is to do nothing for at least 60 days. "Give yourself time; don't feel like you have to fix something day one," advises WBZ's Angie Kucharski. "Give yourself time to get in, learn the room, learn the people and listen for a while."

Offer a clean slate

Give your staff a fresh start. Even if you've moved up from within the station, make sure everyone knows it's a new beginning, for you and for them. Then be sure you live up to your word.

Set priorities

In consultation with the general manager, decide what you want to accomplish and when. Write down your short- and long-term goals and schedule action. Create a manageable checklist of 20 items at most, and if you add something, remove something. "Break those long-term things out into small winnable things that are visible to the newsroom to show that you're making progress but not trying to get all those things done in two days," says WBZ's Kucharski. Report back to the GM as goals are achieved. (See "Timeline," page 31)

Stay in touch with the news

It sounds obvious, but it's not always easy: You have to stay connected to the news product. Protect the time to attend editorial meetings and watch newscasts. "If you don't do that, it won't take long for you to get lost," says Kathy Williams, news director at Houston's KRIV-TV. WDSU's Anzio Williams says he lets other department heads know what his day is like so they'll respect his time. "I let them know that five o'clock is not a good time to come down and talk about some project they're working on or what's not going well for them."

“News directors who are successful have three things in common: They attend the morning meeting and the afternoon meeting, and they watch their newscasts. How basic and simple is that?”

Rob Mennie, Vice President • Gannett Broadcasting

Fix what you can, fast

While you'll probably want to hold off on making major changes, you may be able to do some things quickly that will set a positive tone. News director Scott Picken of KIVI-TV in Boise, ID, calls it "30 fixes in 30 days." He asked the staff to tell him everything that needed work, picked the easiest problems to solve, made a list that he shared with the newsroom, and checked things off as they were accomplished. "People see progress and get on board," he says.

Ask for a honeymoon gift

See if your GM will put up some money for much-needed hardware or equipment to help you win your staff's support quickly. Bob Morford, news director at WCPO-TV in Cincinnati, OH, always asks for a "honeymoon gift" to improve the equipment situation. "The bonus for that is huge," he says. "The quality of the product gets better, and photographers will talk positively about you as they drive reporters around."

Find a mentor

Don't think you're supposed to have all the answers. Join an association, get some leadership training, and network like mad. Find a peer in a similar market, a former boss or even someone in another business you can contact with questions or brainstorm with. "Walk in the door with a couple of [mentors] in your back pocket, or you'll make mistakes you don't have to make," says Kathy Williams.

Be positive

When you critique a newscast, either at a post-mortem meeting or in writing, talk mostly about what went right. "I believe in having big meetings to talk about what went right, what was good today," says Anzio Williams. "It is easy to talk about what went wrong and who's at fault. It's harder and more rewarding to call people around and talk about what went right, with specifics too. The more you are specific, the more they are going to be able to repeat it."

Have fun

Celebrate victories in a big way. "The ice cream truck is only a phone call away," says Anzio Williams. His station also bought a video game at a charity auction. "It's sitting in the garage, and we can go play it to relieve stress."