



## Section 2

# Managing Up (and sideways)

**N**ews managers can become so focused on the product and the people in the newsroom that they forget to look *up*. That's a mistake—because relationships outside the newsroom, with the general manager and other department heads, are critically important to a news leader's long-term success. Managing those relationships takes time and effort, but veteran news directors say it's well worth the investment.

### Managing the Boss

Lee Giles, who served 35 years as news director at WISH-TV in Indianapolis under seven different general managers, understood the importance of managing up. "One GM said the secret to my longevity was that I was adaptable," he says. "I adapted to *their* styles." What Giles was actually doing was managing his bosses—figuring out how best to work with them so he could be a better advocate for the news department. But he also clearly understood his role. "I always

remembered that they were the boss and their word was final."

Tension between journalism and business values is almost unavoidable in commercial broadcasting, and it often manifests itself in a bumpy relationship between the news director and general manager. "There is disagreement over doing what is right for the viewers vs. what is right for the bottom line," said one news director at an RTNDF brainstorming meeting. In an ideal situation, participants agreed, the GM and news director are a mutually respectful team. "In the real world, however, the corporate bosses are putting a lot of pressure on the GM," another news director said. At the same time, "All the departments are fighting for the GM's attention, love and money. It's one big fat war zone."

Understanding that situation can help a news director build a better relationship with the general manager. "Respect the pressure [GMs] are under from their bosses," says News 8 Austin news director Kevin Benz. "Everybody answers to

somebody, and it affects their decision-making.”

To do a good job of managing the boss, you need to know that person as an individual—just as you need to know your staff in order to lead them well. “Managing is not about you,” says Janice Gin, associate news director of KTVU-TV in Oakland, CA.

## WHAT THE BOSS EXPECTS

No surprises

Respect

Honesty

Support

Solutions

scheduled meeting every week, but go more often so there are no surprises,” he says.

Be sensitive about the boss’s time. Know what he or she is working on, and know the difference between “got a minute” and “got an hour” conversations. But find the time to speak to your boss in person at

least once a week. “There is no substitute for face-to-face time,” says Benz.

Learning *what* to tell the boss is just as important as figuring out *how* to communicate it. “Ask yourself: If I were the GM, what would I want to know about content, personnel and strategy?” advises former news director Marci Burdick, now senior vice president of Schurz Communications. While Burdick belongs to the “school of no surprises,” she says that doesn’t mean she wants to know every detail or every development every day. “Know what rises to the level of a surprise that you need to notify the boss about,” she advises.

When you need to tell the boss about a bad decision or outcome, make sure the conversation includes lessons learned and steps to keep problems from recurring. General managers say they don’t appreciate it when an employee holds back information or spins a situation to avoid accepting responsibility.

Not all potential surprises are bad ones. Don’t forget to let the general manager know about good things happening in the newsroom, too. “Bosses need information,” Burdick says. “That’s not sucking up. There’s nothing wrong with sharing information that makes you look good.”

Angie Kucharski, recently promoted from news director to station manger and vice


## Communication First

Communication is essential to a good relationship between the news director and the general manager. That sounds simple, but it’s not. To make things go smoothly, a news director first needs to know how and when to best communicate with the boss. “Understand each other’s style of communication—who you are and who the person is that you are talking to,” says Ric Harris, general manager at WEWS-TV in Cleveland. “Before we can lead the team, we need to know how to communicate with each other.”

Does the boss prefer email, written memos, phone calls or personal visits? Does the preferred method depend on the timing and topic? What are the best times to speak with the boss—what day of the week or time of day? Is your boss a “drop by” person, or should you make an appointment? How do your needs fit with whatever else the boss is working on?

Some of the answers may be obvious. A closed-door boss is unlikely to welcome drop-by visits. When you’re just starting out with a new boss, there’s nothing wrong with asking directly. But stay flexible. The boss’s preferences may change depending on the context.

WTSP-TV news director Lane Michaelsen in Tampa, FL, believes it’s important to see the general manager in person every day. “Have a



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president of news at KCNC-TV in Denver, advises news directors to “know what decisions the boss wants to be involved in—especially with regard to hiring, discipline and termination.” In most cases, your boss will always want to be included on important personnel issues and decisions. “When it comes to recruiting or interviewing, ask your boss which candidates he or she would like to meet.” Although the new hire may report directly to you, they are joining the bigger team that your boss leads.

Pulling your boss into things such as employee contract renewals also can be a win-win. In Kucharski’s previous job as news director, she tried to make sure her general manager always knew when she was ready to sign contract renewals with employees. “When I could, I tried to include the GM, so we could both take an opportunity to thank the employee for their commitment to our team.” Her team appreciated the effort, and the general manager appreciated being included.

Bosses also need people who disagree with them privately. “I value open, honest conversation,” Cleveland GM Harris says. “All of us have a blind side. I want people to shed light on my blind side.”

When you come out of the office, support the boss. “Never make the boss look bad; never second-guess the boss in public,” Burdick says. Watch your language, too, says Hearst-Argyle Television vice president of news Fred Young. Referring to the boss as “they” and the newsroom as “we” sends the wrong message. Michaelsen agrees. “Part of the news director’s responsibility is to make sure the staff respects the GM,” he says.

NPR managing editor Bill Marimow says that in dealing with a new boss, you have to play it by ear and trust your

instincts, at least at first. He believes that a good relationship between news manager and boss is based on some universal principles:

- **Communication** Communicate one-on-one—in writing and in person—and tailor the communication style to your boss’ preference
- **Openness** Ask your boss whether there are unresolved issues you need to discuss
- **Respect** Agree that if you disagree, you will be reasonable and thoughtful
- **Trust** Live up to the letter and spirit of every commitment you make
- **Information** Understand the relationship of the business side to the journalism, and ask for training to understand it better
- **Candor** Provide constructive, candid, even job-imperiling criticism when something is wrong
- **Integrity** Be prepared that you might lose your job if you manage with integrity

Retired television news executive Lee Giles, who now teaches at the Indiana University School of Journalism, says he learned a valuable lesson from one general manager: “You gotta know when to go to the mat.” He did just that when a GM pressured him to fire one of his most aggressive reporters, someone who had angered the governor. “Even though he sounded rude, he asked the right questions,” says Giles. “I

didn’t like the approach, either, but I wouldn’t fire him because he was doing his job.” Giles felt sure he was going to lose his job for taking that stand, but in the end the GM eased off.

The budget is a common source of tension between the general manager and news director. As Benz of News 8 Austin points out, “Newsrooms feel abused because they’re looked at as spending all the

### MANAGING THE BOSS

Touch base daily

Know what the boss is working on

Be sensitive about the boss’s time

Disagree in private; support in public

Give positive reinforcement



## “Recognize that all the departments contribute to the success of the station.”

SUSANA SCHULER, CORPORATE NEWS DIRECTOR FOR NEXSTAR

money.” News directors should remember that the general manager has two primary responsibilities: protecting the license of the station and increasing the bottom line.

Former news director Paul Dughi, now general manager of KNDO-TV in Yakima, WA, and KNDU-TV in Kennewick, WA, says knowing the business side is critically important. News directors should stay on top of the budget every day and be adept at forecasting expenses. While he knows the pressure news directors are under to show quick results, his advice is to take a longer-term view and pre-sell your needs. “If you need a new live truck, complain about it often so the GM knows it’s an issue, not a reaction to something that just happened.”

### The Importance of a Strategic Plan

News managers are often so preoccupied with immediate issues and deadlines that they lose sight of their ultimate objectives. That’s why strategic planning is crucial to leadership. The station’s plan should be visionary and conceptual, yet realistic and attainable. A good plan will serve as a framework for decisions, provide a basis for more detailed planning, and stimulate change. It can also help the general manager and news director to strengthen their working relationship because it sets out a shared vision and common long-term goals.

If your station lacks a strategic plan, you might want to invest the time in the formal process to create one, with input

from all department heads. A manageable and memorable plan can establish a station culture that supports the overall mission. To make sure it is not just a piece of paper or a set of empty slogans, follow up in ways that ensure the plan is implemented:

- **Share** Make sure everyone knows the *plan*, then post a summary and share it with new employees.
- **Evaluate** Do a progress check regularly, at least every 18 months.
- **Revisit** Look at the plan frequently to remember what you said you were going to do. If changes are needed, make them.
- **Encourage diverse ideas** Thinking differently can help achieve shared goals.

### Working Across Departments

At many if not most stations, news is the 800-pound gorilla. It’s the station’s identity and its biggest moneymaker. It’s also the station’s biggest spender. Those basic facts can cause strain

between the newsroom and other departments. News managers also tend to be demanding and impatient, which can make other department heads frustrated and resentful.

“Recognize that all the departments contribute to the success of the station,” says Susana Schuler, vice president and corporate news director for Nexstar Broadcasting Group. “Sometimes other department’s priorities may come first.” Young of Hearst-Argyle says news directors also need to remember that every

### BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS DEPARTMENTS

Get to know people as individuals

Agree on priorities

Compromise when necessary

Offer help and ask for help

Keep working on the relationship; you are never “done”



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station is part of a bigger company. “TV is a business; there is a bottom line,” he says. “We can’t be where we are without a sales department.”

Harris of WEWS-TV believes it’s his role as GM to make sure department heads see each other every day and interact. Instead of holding a strategic meeting once a week, he now convenes a daily department-heads meeting. Meeting regularly allows the leadership team to agree on priorities, decide on the day’s plan, and discuss what it takes to accomplish the plan. Department heads also raise problems from the day before and act immediately to fix them. Harris calls it a model of daily teamwork that has a positive ripple effect on everyone in the station.

If effective teamwork is not the standard in your newsroom, veteran managers say you’ll need to begin building relationships with other departments on your own. “The relationships you have with other department heads are the key to whether you have a smooth ride as news director,” Schuler says. “Deal with department heads like you’re working a beat. Don’t expect them to know how to deal with you.” Get to know the other department heads one-on-one, just as you would with your own staff or your general manager,

### FOSTERING TEAMWORK WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS

Promote collaboration among department heads

Understand the functions, opportunities, challenges and goals of each department

Advocate for news, and educate other departments about news issues

Be willing to take a back seat and let other managers lead

Participate actively in station initiatives that do not include news

Communicate problems early—no surprises

Stay focused on the product; forget about the politics

Schuler says. “Develop partnerships. Make the investment. They appreciate it.”

To build a strong working relationship with other department heads, from the sales manager to the chief engineer, both sides must agree on priorities, goals and some basic principles:

- **Respect** Recognize that each department has goals, priorities and other considerations.
- **Ethics** Agree that there are journalistic lines that cannot be crossed.
- **Understanding** Understand each other’s roles and stresses. Create and support cross-learning opportunities so news employees get a better grounding in the business side and sales people can understand journalism ethics.
- **Communication** Hold regular face-to-face conversations. Share each department’s criteria for success, and jointly celebrate wins. Don’t make or tolerate negative references about other departments.
- **Effort** When problems arise, try to solve them together before asking the general manager to intervene.



**“Avoid victories over superiors.”**

BALTASAR GRACIAN, SPANISH JESUIT PHILOSOPHER AND WRITER 1601-58

Keeping other departments in the loop is essential. “Make them feel part of the mission, part of the news operation,” says Giles. Let sales know you are doing a story that will affect a client even though you are continuing with the story.

Burdick of Schurz Communications says news directors also need to ask what they can do to make things go more smoothly. “Recognize that other departments cannot turn on a dime,” she says. “One of the news director’s goals should be to make the other department head a success.” Among her favorite questions: What can we do to help you? How can we be more efficient?

When things go wrong, asking questions first can avoid misunderstandings and lead to simple solutions. When Scott Libin was news director at KSTP-TV in St. Paul, MN, newscast audio problems were an issue almost daily.

## **AVOIDING DISSENT FROM YOUR BOSS AND OTHER DEPARTMENT HEADS**

**Bring issues to the table quickly; don’t let them fester**

**Look at issues from the other’s perspective**

**Understand and appreciate different roles and priorities**

**Agree to disagree, but show a unified front**

**Envision outcomes, not obstacles; avoid negative thinking**

**Be willing to ask for help**

Instead of assuming technical incompetence, he asked engineering what was going on and learned that the newsroom was the source of the problem. Anchors and reporters were showing up late on the set and trying to do mic checks at 30 seconds to air. The rigid guidelines Libin instituted for pre-show mic checks not only solved the problem they also sent a message to engineering that the news director cared about their issues.

It takes time to build relationships, Schuler says, so news directors need to be patient. There are times, however, when all the patience in the world won’t pay off. “Make sure, if you’re going to get ugly with

another department head, that the general manager is on board,” she advises. “And recognize the GM has the ultimate call and you may lose.”