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ADVICE FOR THE NEWLY NAMED NEWS DIRECTOR

Radio Television Digital News Foundation
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Advice for the Newly Named News Director is a handbook to help not only those in their first news director job but also those news directors changing stations or markets.

It's well known that local news directors stay in the same job for only about two years on average. Many first-time news directors seek advice from those who are more experienced or from others in their station group. But, up to now, that has been a more informal process, with tips passed along by word of mouth. *INCOMING! Advice for the Newly Named News Director* is based on advice from your peers and seeks to capture many of the lessons learned and best practices.

This handbook is not meant to be read in one sitting or necessarily from front to back. Instead, use it as a guide as you consider accepting that news director job and as you face the leadership challenges ahead.

This handbook was produced through the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation's *News Leadership Project*, which aims to provide local news managers with specialized training through resources and seminars. We believe that developing your leadership skills will not only help your staff be more productive, cohesive and positive but also will ultimately help *you* succeed in your own career as a news manager.

RTNDF hopes this resource will help you make an easier transition, whether it's your first news director job or your tenth. We encourage you to contact RTNDF if you desire additional information about our news leadership offerings. We also are interested in hearing your feedback on how you used this handbook.

Kathleen Graham

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kathleen Graham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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For more information about the McCormick Tribune Foundation's journalism initiatives, visit www.mccormicktribune.org or contact: Clark Bell, journalism program director, phone: 312.222.3507, email: clarkbell@mccormicktribune.org and Mark Hallett, senior program officer, phone: 312.222.5882, email: mhallett@mccormicktribune.org.

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BEFORE YOU say yes



You want to be a news director or move to a bigger market, but is the job you're considering the right one for you? If you're thinking about making a move, you have to do your homework. Learn as much as you possibly can before you sign on.

Get to know the station

Before you even agree to an interview, get an aircheck and watch the station's newscasts. Then track down people you trust who know the station and the market, and get the lay of the land. What's the position, image and brand of the station you're considering? If the station isn't number one, which station is and why? If you're looking at a job that's publicly posted, you might even want to call the station's current and former news directors to learn more. By all means, check what's been said about the station on the Internet, but consider the source and make sure you verify the information.

Investigate the company

If a publicly held company owns the station, check financial statements and annual reports to get a sense of the corporation's profitability and philosophy. Find out how long previous news directors and general managers have stayed at the station, why they left and where they went. Check out GMs by calling news directors who have worked for them in other markets and learn what you can about corporate expectations. "If the company expects you to turn the Titanic around by November and it's September, you're never going to be successful," one news director warns.

Consider your motivation

How does the job you're considering fit with your passions and abilities? At a dominant number-one station, the news director's job often is to "play defense" to keep it on top and to maintain its successful culture. Does that sound like it plays to your strengths? If you're a person who likes to change things and rebuild, you might be more interested in a station that's in second or third place.

“As a reporter I always felt that what I found on the streets was not reflected on the air. I always said my news directors didn’t have a clue what they were doing, so that’s why I wanted to be a news director.”

Esteban Creste • Telemundo • Chicago, IL

Understand the job

Check the station’s research philosophy and its relationship with consultants, which can directly affect how you do your job. Find out what your specific duties will be, especially in radio, says KDKA news director Marshall Adams. Will you be anchoring as well as supervising? Can you hire and fire, or does that authority rest with someone else, like the program director? One news director was surprised to discover it was his job to make sure the news cars had regular oil changes!

Envision the challenges

Learn as much as you can about staffing and salaries in the newsroom. You should be able to find out how the station compares to the rest of the market, on average. Are salaries at the top, middle or bottom of the scale? You might learn that some people are paid minimum wage, and they come and go all the time. Knowing that in advance helps you envision some of the challenges you may face in recruiting and training staff.

Interview the general manager

Your success will depend to a large degree on your relationship with the general manager. “If you don’t get along with your GM, you’re going to be out the door fast,” says one veteran news director. Use your job interview to make sure you understand the GM’s goals for the news department, and how they mesh with the goals of other departments. Then find out how upper management will support you to accomplish those goals. What can you spend money on, and what can you change?

Protect yourself

Make sure you’ll be offered a contract that will give you some financial security. If the GM who’s hiring you leaves, it’s entirely possible that his or her replacement will want to change news directors. One news director says it’s important to be clear up front that if that happens, “you’re not going to pitch me out the door, you’re going to pay me for the next year.”

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS you might want to ask THE GENERAL MANAGER

- ▶ **What's** your opinion of the news department?
- ▶ **Why** are you interested in hiring me?
- ▶ **How** long do you plan to stay at the station, and what are your future plans?
- ▶ **How** do sales and news interact, and what happens if there's a conflict?
- ▶ **What** is the capital budget, and what's the current state of equipment?
- ▶ **What** continuing education is provided for staff, including me?
- ▶ **How** am I going to know if you're upset with me?
- ▶ **How** will I know if you think we've had a good day?
- ▶ **How** do we celebrate victories?



GETTING TO know you

One of the most important tasks facing a newly named news director is to get to know the staff. It takes time, but it's well worth the investment to get to know your employees as individuals.

Reserve judgment

Some news directors suggest getting a list of the staff ahead of time and contacting people who know them to get a sense of what they're like. Others want to know as little as possible beforehand. Either way, it's important to go in with an open mind. "The best piece of advice I could give a new news director is not to allow the general manager or other department heads to tell you about the people you're going to be working with," says Anzio Williams of WDSU-TV in New Orleans. "If they want, they can write you a letter to tell you what you're going to run into, you seal it up and open it after 30 days." Clear Channel's senior vice president of news Steve Minium goes even further: "Don't look at the personnel files for the first six months," he advises.

Ask good questions

Consider using a written survey to collect information from everyone in the newsroom. Some news directors do this anonymously, on the assumption that people will be more candid; others ask for names so they can follow up on specific issues. Ask how they would define their jobs, what they like and dislike, what challenges they face, and what their goals are. Assess the culture of the newsroom by asking what they're proudest of and why things are done the way they are. (See "Newsroom Surveys" on page 39)

Meet one-on-one

In the first few weeks, meet separately with every member of the staff for at least 20 minutes each. Take people out of the office for a longer chat over coffee or lunch, if possible. Get to know them as individuals by asking what they do outside of work. "I asked if I could take notes so I could remember things about them—background, interests—so I could get a sense of the diversity of life experiences we had in the newsroom," says WBZ's Angie Kucharski. Find out why they work at the station and

what motivates them. Let them get to know you, as well. “In a lot of newsrooms that change hands, there’s this shroud of mystery. ‘Who is this guy? What’s he about?’” says Adam Bradshaw, news director at KVVU-TV in Las Vegas. “The first thing in the door I start meeting with people out in the newsroom, not in my office. People in the newsroom want to see you and hear you.”

Meet as a group

Let them talk about the issues that matter to them. Listen more than you talk. Find out what they’re proudest of and acknowledge the station’s history. If you’ve done a newsroom survey, plan to hold another meeting to review some of the problems that surfaced. Meet at the station and keep it businesslike. Don’t go out drinking or socialize with the staff. “They need that time to talk about you behind your back,” one news director says.

Make the rounds

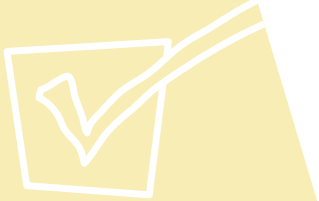
Expose yourself to every work group and every department in the station over the first couple of months. Sit on the assignment desk and in the booth, ride in a live truck, and work every shift—morning, evening and weekend. Part of that is just learning the systems, says veteran news director Geoff Roth. “You can’t fix what’s broken if you don’t know what’s broken.” Show them you know how to work, and you’re not afraid to roll up your sleeves right beside them. Visit with engineering, promotions, sales and human resources, as well.

Be accessible

Walk and talk in the newsroom at least twice a day, with no agenda in mind. Keep your door open and encourage people to drop in. Some news directors say a dish of candy works wonders to get people to stop by. “If you get people walking in, sooner or later they’ll talk,” says Ken Jobe, news director at WHBQ-TV in Memphis, TN.

Face any preconceptions

If you’ve been in the business long enough to be taking a job as news director, you won’t walk into your new newsroom as an unknown. Know what’s been written about you on the gossip web sites because your new staff has probably read it. You may not need to address it directly, but forewarned is forearmed. Look for allies in the newsroom who can help you dispel any misperceptions. At the same time, don’t try to recreate your personality for every newsroom. “People need to know that you’re not a chameleon,” says Kathy Williams, news director at KRIV-TV in Houston. “Be what you really are. If you are consistent, the people who are making it up about you will surface.”



CULTURE check

You may have been hired to be “the avenging angel of change,” as one news director put it, but you need to really understand how your newsroom works before you decide to blow it up and start over.

Observe and assess

Take time to observe the newsroom and how people work together. Get a feel for the “chemistry” in the room. Are your staffers watching your newscasts or the competition’s? Are they spending time browsing news gossip sites on the web? Don’t preside over the morning meeting at first; let it unfold as it always has so you can assess how it works. Time spent at the assignment desk will tell you a lot about how the staff interacts.

Evaluate systems

Look at work flow, lines of communication, chain of command and quality control systems. See what the newsroom measures and rewards. These things often reflect a newsroom’s culture.

Ask for insight

Talk with the senior members of the newsroom to get their views of how things are done and why. Then talk with newer hires, and watch for differences in their descriptions of the newsroom. If you do a newsroom survey, ask people to describe the work environment. (See “Newsroom Surveys,” page 39)

Review the history

Learn where the station has come from as well as where it’s going. How does the staff view the station’s legacy? Looking back over past disciplinary actions is another tip off to a station’s culture.

Adapt and adjust

Instead of making wholesale changes, see if you can build on what your newsroom does right. “Sometimes, you can make your greatest victories doing that,” says KRIV’s Kathy Williams, because people will see that you kept what was working well and be more willing to go along with your changes.

MISSION possible



Once you've gotten to know the staff and assessed the newsroom's culture, it's time to turn your attention to the changes that may be needed. How can you best develop and share your vision for the future?

Be inclusive

Develop the mission and vision with staff input. Find out what they think the mission currently is and what they think it ought to be. You might try asking each work group to develop its own mission statement—a list of what they expect from themselves every day and what others should expect from them. Incorporate the common themes from these statements into the overall vision for the newsroom.

Enlist the staff

Involve as many members of the staff as possible in deciding how the new vision or mission can be implemented. "You can explain some new strategy to the staff, but putting it into action is much more demanding," says one news director. "Letting them help form the plan to execute that new vision or mission works wonders."

Explain clearly

Make sure the goals you set are well understood. "I'm not sure when it became okay to keep as much information from your people as possible," says WDSU's Anzio Williams. "I believe in letting them know what we're trying to accomplish." Help employees understand how the mission can help them do their jobs better, and possibly further their careers, one news director says. "If the employees have a stake in what you're doing, they'll be more receptive."

Share widely

Write up the vision, post it on the wall, send it out by email, mention it in meetings and personal conversations. Have a large group meeting and get the entire station involved, not just the newsroom. "From sales to accounting, everyone needs to be on board with the mission and know why it's important," one news director says.

“Let the staff know why you are making changes, get their involvement in creating the change so they have buy in.”

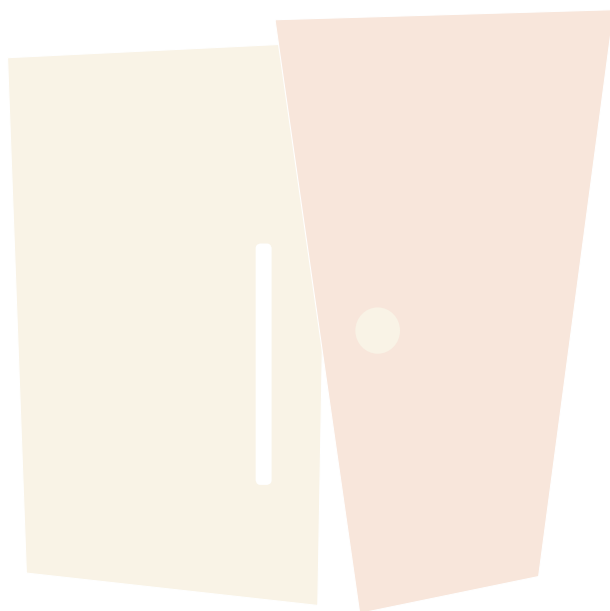
Joyce Reed • Vice President of Strategy • Griffin Communication

Be consistent

Once you've set the vision, stick to it. Your priorities for the newscast must be exactly the same every day. It's easy to confuse or discourage the staff if you push "breaking news" on Monday and "in-depth investigations" on Thursday, one news director says.

Reinforce often

Make a point of noting when the mission pays off in coverage or ratings. Share examples of success in every story meeting every day. If you don't talk about the vision or mission every day, none of the strategy you've worked so hard to develop will take hold.



.NEW in town



It's tough enough to adjust to a new newsroom, but if you've moved to a new community, you also have to learn your way around outside the building. Put on your reporter hat and try these suggestions from news directors who've done it many times.

Explore

Buy a good map and spend a few hours each weekend exploring the area. Don't be afraid to get lost—you never know what you'll discover. Ask people you meet to show you the high points and hidden places they like. Ride along with your reporters and crews. Ride public transit.

Enlist the staff

Have your most experienced reporters introduce you to the mayor, police chief, school superintendent, and other key community leaders. Ask long-time employees for some history and perspective. Says one news director, "I have done that, and it not only has helped me better understand my new hometown, it has also shown them I have an interest in this area, and I am not just passing through."

Find a tour guide

Ask around at the station if there are "good people" to get to know. Take those people to lunch and learn about local history and what makes the community tick. One news director suggests taking photographers to lunch at "the smoky diner they share with the local deputies, and you'll get your fingers on the pulse of your town real fast."

Read and listen

Subscribe to the local paper and be sure to read the letters to the editor. "That will give you some sense of the values in your new community," says one veteran news director. Listen to local radio DJs and talk show hosts to see what they're talking about. If you have live shots scheduled at public or civic events, go along and talk to the people who stop by.

“Drive or walk around the community, talk to your audience; that keeps you connected.”

Esteban Creste, News Director • WSNS-TV • Chicago

Talk to everyone

Get to know your neighbors. Talk to people when you're running errands or at the health club. Chat with parents at PTA meetings. If you have kids who are into sports, be sure to go along. "You'd be amazed how much you learn on the sidelines of a 6-year-old's soccer match," says one news director.

Get involved

Recreation leagues, nonprofit groups, the local Rotary or Kiwanis Club, houses of worship—getting involved at lots of different levels can help you get to know the community better. When you first arrive, accept all invitations to "rubber chicken" events. Go to Chamber of Commerce mixers and meet the "movers and shakers." Make sure the GM knows you are interested in joining him or her at events the station sponsors.

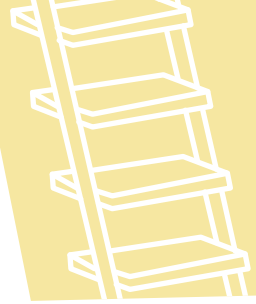
Attend a meeting

Once you know what the biggest issues and power centers are in the community, attend a few public meetings. Give people your business card, and ask them to suggest two more people you should meet.

Reach out

Hold community feedback meetings in different cities or towns in the DMA to hear what people have to say about the issues important to them. Says one news director, "It's a great opportunity to get feedback about your news operation and how it's doing, not to mention excellent story ideas."

MOVING on up



If you're promoted into your first news director job from another job at the same station, you have some advantages that can serve you well. You already know your way around the computer system and the tape archive. You understand the corporate culture and the community. But don't think you know it all, even if you've worked at the station a long time.

Get to know the staff—again

Take time to meet with the staff individually, even though you already know them all well. People often see it as a fresh start when there's someone new in the news director's office. Put aside your preconceptions and find out what they believe their challenges are. "You see a different side to people you don't see when you are not in charge, good and bad," says one former assistant news director who was promoted to the top job.

Let them get to know you—again

Understand that the staff may have preconceived notions about you. "I had to convince people I wasn't the same person as the news director who got fired, when I had been number two for so long," says one new news director. "I wasn't there to disagree with her philosophy or management style, so they were unaware that my management style was going to be very different." You may want to set the record straight about that in a full staff meeting, early on.

Prepare to play a different role

News directors who've been promoted from within say their relationship with the staff inevitably changes. You already have established relationships inside and outside the news department, but now that you're the boss, the dynamic will be different. "I'm not the person they seek advice from, I'm the decision-maker," says Dave Grant, news director at KAKE-TV in Wichita, KS. "I've been their advocate before; now I have to tell them no." Don't make the mistake of thinking you can be everyone's friend. Avoid the appearance of having a clique of special people in the newsroom, and expect your staff to have a clique that doesn't include you.

“What I’ve had to learn is that I’ve had to change more than them.”

Dave Grant • KAKE-TV • Wichita, KS

Expect the unexpected

As a member of the management team, you’ve probably been involved in the day-to-day running of the newsroom, but you may not be aware of all the long-term commitments your predecessor has made. “There was a lot of stuff I didn’t know,” says one news director who was promoted from assistant news director. Spend some time finding out what the newsroom is already committed to in terms of projects or specials. Do some research before you make any decisions.

Provide reassurance

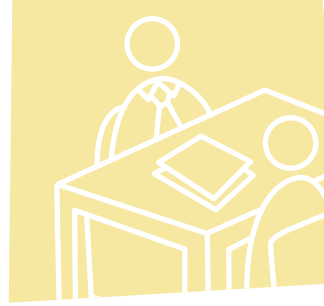
Recognize that people generally don’t like change. There may be some tension in the newsroom when you take over, but it’s not necessarily directed at you. One newly promoted news director says his first job was to make sure everyone knew that things were going to be okay. “What we needed was stability,” he says.

Make positive changes

If you’re in a newsroom that has lacked leadership for a while, show that things are changing for the better by taking action on something you know the staff will appreciate.



MANAGING up



First-time news directors can become so focused on the newsroom that they forget to look up. You may be faced with improving the product, learning a new market, hiring people for vacant positions, and creating a new disaster plan. But the most important focus of your new job is managing your relationship with your new boss. How can you do that well?

Invest time

Spend time with your new boss inside and outside of the office. Ask if you can take him or her to lunch instead of waiting for an invitation. Get to know the boss as a person: background, likes and dislikes, what the general manager does for fun. Listen more than you talk. Even though you may be disinclined to swap time in the newsroom schmoozing with time in the GM's office schmoozing, it's probably a wise idea to visit the boss every so often when nothing is going on.

Learn to communicate

Find out how your general manager wants to interact with you. Will you meet every day, and if so, where? Does the GM prefer to get information in writing, on the phone or in person? When should you use email, when should you "drop in" the office to talk, when is it appropriate to schedule a meeting? Does the boss prefer to discuss big concerns in the morning, at lunch, or in the afternoon? Ask the boss and ask anyone who might have useful insights, like an administrative assistant or human resources director.

Outline expectations

Talk with the GM frequently to clarify the mission and objectives he or she is counting on you to fulfill. Schedule time periodically to ask for feedback and an assessment of how you're doing. Get a clear idea of how much the GM wants to be involved in what you do. What decisions are you empowered to make alone? Which ones does the boss want to be called about?

“New news directors sometimes have a tendency to underestimate the power of the relationship between the news director and the general manager. It is one of the strongest relationships in the building.”

Angie Kucharski • Station Manager, WBZ-TV/WSBK-TV • Boston, MA

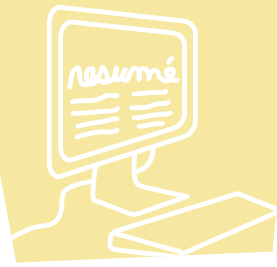
Be candid

Be completely honest with the boss. He or she needs to know that you're always being honest, and you always need to know that you have his or her trust. Learn quickly how to respectfully disagree, or at least how to voice your concerns when you do not agree in a manner that will not put the boss on the defensive. At the end of the discussion, make sure the boss knows you will execute as expected, regardless of your personal feelings.

Get ahead of surprises

Don't make the mistake of thinking that it's a sign of weakness to share information with the general manager. "You may think you have a situation under control, but someone else will see the GM in the hall and talk about it," warns WBZ's Kucharski. She advises telling the GM as early as possible, "here's something that's on the radar, here's what I'm doing about it, but I don't want you to be blindsided."

recruiting



Every news director knows how hard it can be to find good job candidates, especially for off-air positions. If you're in a small market, it's even tougher. Some prospects, even those who are right out of school, won't consider your openings because they're able to land better-paying jobs in bigger markets. Here are some suggestions on how to stay competitive in recruiting and hiring.

Connect with colleges

Visit colleges in the area and look for part-time or adjunct professors who might want to produce or write on the side. Recruit their best students for entry-level jobs. News director Mary Rigby of WCSC-TV in Charleston, SC, created a program with three local universities that have good broadcasting programs. "I promise them three presentations per year—myself or an anchor—and in return they give me their top two or three students as interns," she says. "I'm building a resource pool so when I have an opening, I've got someone to grab who knows how we do things."

Bring in interns

If you don't have an intern program, start one. Make sure your interns do more than answer the phone. Look for "wanna-be" producers, and let them write.

Groom your own

Look closely at the production department. Part-time camera operators and floor people are often students, making minimum wage. Scott Picken at KIVI-TV in Boise, ID, says he's had success bringing them over to the news side and having them help edit, run the assignment desk, or write. Gavin Maliska, news director at WXIN-TV in Indianapolis, IN, says that a month after a part-time writer is promoted to full-time, they start training to become producers.

“Recruiting was a bigger challenge than I thought.... Producers are getting jobs in bigger markets so they don't need a foot in the door.”

Robin Wojtanik • KIMA-TV/KEPR-TV • Yakima, WA

Build a database

Whenever you see a good prospect, keep his or her resume in your own database. Don't turn everything over to the human resources department. Stay in touch with people who have potential but don't fit your current needs. WHBQ's Ken Jobe even offers to critique tapes so he can track the development of individuals he might one day want to hire.

Look for "fit"

Keep the abilities and attitudes of your current staff in mind when you're looking to hire someone new. Temperament and commitment may be just as important as skill. In smaller markets, be willing to hire intelligence over experience.

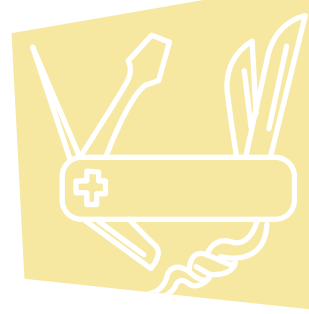
Sell the opportunity

Keep a list of success stories to help you sell the advantage of starting in a small market newsroom. Be able to name people who worked at your station and have gone on to bigger and better things. Make clear you're the kind of news director who will help new hires improve and find their next job.

Sell the area

Get booklets from the Visitor's Bureau or Chamber of Commerce, and send them out to applicants. One news director suggests creating incentives for new hires to start in smaller markets through trade-outs for reduced rent or a used car that you can throw in with the job.

BE prepared



Every job comes with surprises, and you can't possibly anticipate them all. But here are some you should probably be prepared for when you first become a news director.

“There are surprises every week, things you don't anticipate. Expect the unexpected.”

Dave Grant, • KAKE-TV • Wichita, KS

It's not all about news

First-time news directors say they're surprised at how little time they actually spend with the news product. “You can go through a whole week and realize you never saw a rundown,” one news manager said. That's a big adjustment, especially if you came up through the producing ranks. Expect to spend at least 60 percent of your time on non-journalism issues—administration, personnel, budgets and the like. “The paperwork and the sheer amount of meetings you have surprised me,” says one news director.

You will be scrutinized

Your staff will watch you closely from day one. “Every sigh, every facial expression, even the way you walk in the newsroom is being examined,” says Angie Kucharski, vice president and station manager at WBZ-TV in Boston. Think carefully about the message you send in person and in writing. Expect that your staff will discuss and interpret your gestures, reactions and comments.

The welcome won't always be warm

Some people in the newsroom may not want you to succeed, at first. Maybe they've been through a lot of news directors, and they don't think you'll last. Some people may not believe you want them to succeed. Maybe they liked the previous news director, and they suspect you'll try to get rid of them. Expect to face some resistance, and plan a heart-to-heart conversation with each of those people. "If you have a good plan, and you're communicating how you want to move forward, then eventually you start to get through to the people who want to be on the team and want to win," says WBZ-TV's Kucharski. KVVU-TV's Adam Bradshaw suggests finding an ally who's been at the station a while and who is trusted by the staff. "Once the staff sees that that person trusts you, it really helps." But you also should be prepared to deal with people who won't stop being negative. "If their attitude is one that is cancerous, get them the hell out of there," says Joyce Reed, vice president of strategy for Griffin Communication.

You can't do it all

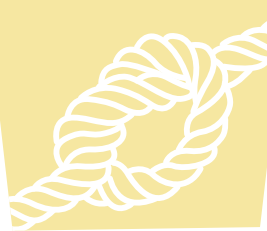
If you're not careful, you may find yourself working around the clock because the job is never done. "I would like a big sign in every news department: There is no badge of honor for working more than 10 hours a day," says Reed. "Train your staff so that they can do the job without you," says one news director. "Then trust them to do it." Expect that you'll need to create a system that allows you to delegate, so you can focus on what's most important and also have some time for yourself. Set a firm time to go home, and stick to it. "What you do is important, you've got to be driven to be successful, but you've got to have a life," says Kathleen Choal, news director at KVOA-TV in Tucson, AZ. (See "Balancing Act," page 27)

Sales thinking may dominate

Decision-makers above you may be focused less on how to build the product than on how to sell it. If the GM comes from sales, that may be the first thought that comes to his or her mind. Expect the focus outside the newsroom to be on the bottom line, and be prepared to defend the independence of the newsroom. (See "Ethical Issues," page 25)

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

"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

"The biggest mistake new managers make is they don't know how to talk to their employees," says KVOA news director Kathleen Choal. "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 Choal. 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.)



WHEN disaster strikes

Imagine you've just started your job as news director when a major disaster strikes. You might be tempted to jump in and start producing coverage, but that may not be the best idea. Here's some advice from news managers who have faced major crises while still fairly new on the job.

“I would never wish that upon anybody, but ... immediately I got to see the great journalism and the quality people. To be able to share those stories allowed us to have a common playing field.”

Angie Kucharski, former news director • KCNC-TV • Denver, CO
(arrived on the job six days before students were massacred at Columbine High School.)

Trust the staff

Step back and let other people help guide coverage, says Angie Kucharski, vice president at WBZ-TV in Boston, who guided KCNC-TV in Denver through its coverage of the Columbine massacre. “Throughout that ordeal we were going to have to stop down pretty frequently to do some temperature checks so I could get feedback about how they thought the coverage was going,” she says.

Let leaders emerge

Be ready to recognize anyone who's stepping up to perform in a time of crisis, says Anzio Williams, news director at WDSU-TV in New Orleans. He'd been there eight months when Hurricane Katrina hit. “I had two managers who did not do well at all, but I had a reporter who was a natural leader, and he's gone on to be a news director. I had a photographer, a former military guy, you say something and he's executing. I might have put my EPs in charge of groups, but when I saw different people stepping up, I put them in charge of groups. The people who should have been in charge, just by title, didn't challenge or question it.”

Coordinate the process

When there's chaos all around you, put systems in place to manage it. "My role was to start a plan in motion and provide some structure, knowing that it was going to involve a lot of consensus and a lot of listening," Kucharski says. Joyce Reed arrived at KWTW in Oklahoma City as news director three weeks before the Murrah Federal Building was bombed in 1995. "I put some structure into funneling correct information to the anchors," she says. "What we had covered, who was where."

Ask for help

Resist the urge to make big decisions by yourself. Call for corporate backup as soon as you think you might need it, says Williams. Make sure you know your company philosophy, what your support team is, and whom to call when disaster strikes.

Be useful

Kucharski says that as a new person in town she was better off being in the booth screening questionable live pictures than on the desk trying to contact law enforcement or setting up boundaries for live trucks because she didn't know the players or the geography. Reed, who is now vice president of strategy for Griffin Communication, also took on the job of monitoring the station's coverage and the competition.

Take care of people

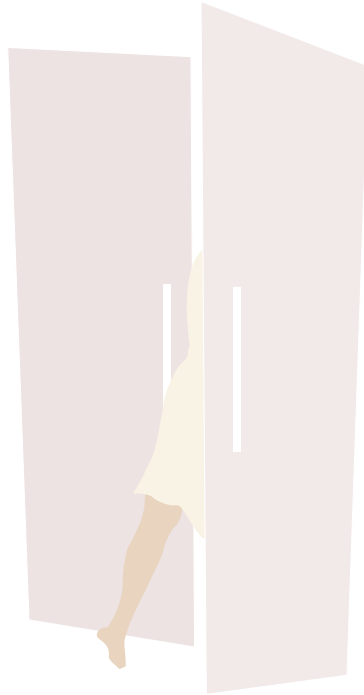
The staff needs to hear from you that you are going to take care of them, says Williams. As the hurricane approached, he gave his staff time to take care of their families and belongings. "I told them, you need to take this day on me, you need to go take care of your situations, because as it approaches, I need you to work for me," he says. "There were a few times when I said, you go be with your family and evacuate because I knew that person being with us would make it harder on the rest of the team." When the crisis hits, put a work schedule in place, and make people rest or go home. In Oklahoma City, nobody wanted to leave but Reed insisted.

Watch your tone

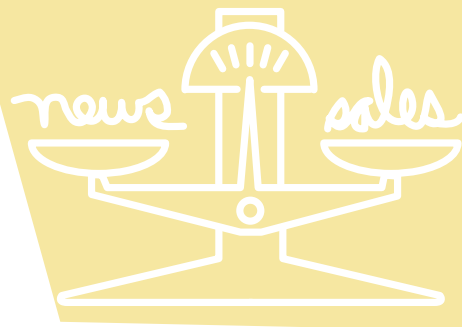
The newsroom will be a reflection of you, Williams says, so the tone of the leader's voice is important. "When I have a sense of urgency, they will have a sense of urgency. If I have a calm demeanor, they will have a calmer demeanor. If I am joking and playing around, they know everything's going to be all right," he says. "That was a tough balance for me, knowing when to crack the whip, when to be playful and joking."

Stress safety

Make sure the staff knows what you expect of them. "I am a gung-ho type news director; I push my people to be competitive, to have more than the other guys, and this was a point where I needed them to step back, so it was the reverse of everything I had been preaching," Williams says. "I told them it's better to come back alive than to be live in the storm. I had to come up with a message, 'alive over live,' and I made sure they heard me and the other mid-tier managers heard me."



ETHICAL ISSUES



It's harder than ever to be a news director these days. There is so much financial pressure and so little support. What can you do when the top managers at your station want to breach the line between news and sales?

Learn from each other

Try to understand and to be understood by other department heads, especially on the business side. "You've got to maintain the integrity of that news department, but an understanding of one another's disciplines would go a long way toward creating a great television station instead of just a good one," says Griffin's Joyce Reed. "They're real people, they've got a mission, understand their mission."

Educate

Explain to other managers at your station why it's important to maintain the newsroom's independence. Become a champion of credibility and its value to the station. "Once that's gone, you've got nothing to sell," says Gannett's Rob Mennie. "That gets their attention."

Offer solutions

Your GM wants to start charging people to appear on the morning show? Suggest an alternative approach to protect the newsroom's credibility. For example, the station might create a new program that meets the station's need to raise revenue but that's outside the news department and doesn't involve any news personnel.

Muster an argument

It's not enough to say, "I'm a journalist, and this is wrong." If a specific proposal crosses the line, in your view, find cases where it was done elsewhere and didn't turn out well when it hit the papers, for example. Know the FCC rules about sponsorship identification and insist that the station abide by them. Explain that running a billboard in a newscast noting "commercial consideration received" would taint not just one segment but the entire news product.

“You’ve got to maintain the integrity of that news department, but an understanding of one another’s disciplines would go a long way toward creating a great television station instead of just a good one.”

Joyce Reed, Vice President of Strategy • Griffin Communication

Back out

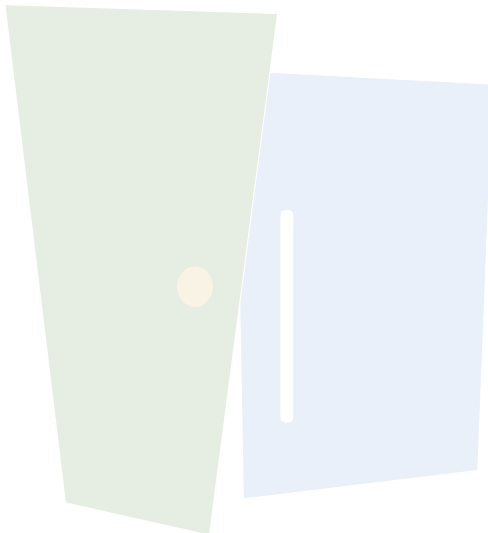
You can’t always pull the plug on a bad idea immediately. Maybe it was in place when you arrived. Back out slowly and get the deal undone. Stand up for the independence of the news department. “If you’re not willing to wage those battles, you are in the wrong business,” says one news director.

Get out

Sometimes a situation that crosses ethical boundaries just can’t be tolerated. “Try to change it, and if you can’t, have the courage to walk away,” says Robin Wojtanik, news director at KIMA-TV and KEPR-TV in Yakima, WA.

Seek help

The RTNDA website (www.rtna.org) offers a collection of ethical decision-making guidelines and resources, including the RTNDA Code of Ethics.



BALANCING act



A news director's job can be all consuming. Veterans say one of the toughest things to learn is how to maintain a personal life, whether you're married or single. "News people think their job is more important than anything else," says Clear Channel's Steve Minium. "Your job is not *that* important. Full-time focus on the job and full-time focus on the family. It is a discipline that you have to develop."

Go home

Set a hard start time and a firm time to leave the office every day. Stick to it. If you come in for the morning show, leave earlier. There's no point in working yourself to death. Your ability to make good decisions goes down after about 10 hours. Besides, what message are you sending if you don't go home? Show your staff that you trust them and leave.

Protect your private time

Don't give in to the temptation to log in from home or work every weekend. Come in one weekend a month if you really need to catch up. "I rarely work from home anymore," says KVOA's Kathleen Choyal. "It's really important to me to decompress a little bit and not worry so much about what's going on at the office."

Be candid

Prepare your family for the realities of the business. "There are only a few people in your city who do your job," says WHBQ's Ken Jobe. "If you lose [your job], you have to go somewhere. Success may also mean we're going to need to move." Explain how major news events will affect your family too. Make sure everyone understands they may have to face some situations without you, because when a hurricane hits, you'll be at work, not at home.

“We’ve moved so much one of my brothers-in-law thinks I’m in the witness protection program.”

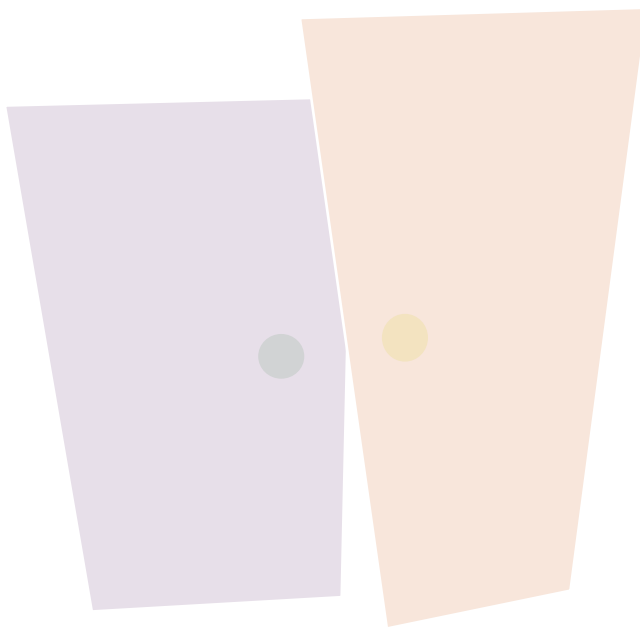
Geoff Roth • KMPH-TV/KFRE-TV • Fresno, CA

Involve your family

If you’re married or in a relationship, include that person when you’re invited to work-related events. Consider bringing your family to the TV station once in a while so they can meet the people you work with.

Set the tone

Be sensitive to the staff’s family issues as well as your own. Understand that their definition of family may not be the same as yours, and recognize their obligations to relatives, friends or partners. Let them know their family is important to you and give them time to deal with urgent family issues. Help their families understand the demands everyone in the newsroom faces. WCPO’s Bob Morford hosted a Saturday meeting for his staff and their spouses to talk about the realities of TV news. “It was the first time they had ever been invited to something other than the holiday party,” he says.



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."

TIMELINE



It's easy to feel overwhelmed by all you have to learn and do when you're new in the job. WDSU's Anzio Williams says he divided his first year as news director into three phases: "The first phase is seeking to understand what you do without making any changes," he says. "The next phase would be seeking to be understood. Once I know what you're doing, I can tell you what I'm trying to do. The third phase is, if you can't understand what we're trying to do, then we have to figure out what's the next step?"

Creating a timeline for your first few months may help you stay on track. We've started one with suggestions from other news directors and left blanks for you to add your own.

Before you arrive

- ▶ Get an organizational chart, both station and corporate
- ▶ Get a personnel list, with photos if possible, to learn names and faces
- ▶ Read the local paper online; check TV and radio websites daily

YOUR NOTES:

ACTION plan

Some news directors like to create a formal action plan with clear priorities and deadlines, which they share with the general manager. Here's a pared down version of the plan one veteran news director drew up for his first two months in a new job:

Week 1 Observation

- ▶ Spend time observing how the newsroom functions, how scheduling works and what systems are in place.
- ▶ Conduct anonymous written survey of all newsroom staff (see "Newsroom Surveys," page 39).
- ▶ Meet with the morning and evening crews to spell out expectations.
- ▶ By the end of the week, meet with the reporters as a group.

Week 2 Individual meetings

- ▶ Meet separately with each staff member to discuss roles and get feedback on what works and what needs work.
- ▶ Spend a lot of time with the assignment editors.

Week 3 Feedback

- ▶ Meet with the staff in a large group to discuss their 360 comments.
- ▶ Begin individual meetings with reporters that will be scheduled once a month to go over their work.
- ▶ Begin newscast critiques in the afternoon meeting that will be held weekly.

Week 4 Reinforcement

- ▶ Monitor progress on goals set out during Week 1.
- ▶ Hold full staff meeting at end of week to see how everyone thinks things are going.
- ▶ Start working with graphics to improve and standardize the look of the newscasts.

Week 5 Morning show

- ▶ Work the morning shift for several days to see how the show is planned, the workflow of the staff, and where improvements can be made.

Week 6 Fine tuning

- ▶ Begin full newscast reviews that will be held bi-weekly with producers.
- ▶ Sit down with producers and look at the competition.

Weeks 7 & 8 Monitoring and accountability

- ▶ New systems are in place. Everyone should have a clear idea of what is expected. Those that aren't up to speed will need reinforcing and must be aware that they will be held accountable.

“Train your staff so that they can do the job without you. Then trust them to do it.”

Kathleen Choal • KVOA-TV • Tucson, AZ

NEWSROOM surveys

Geoff Roth of KMPH-TV in Fresno, CA, sent this survey to every member of the news department during his first week on the job. Staffers completed it in writing and submitted it anonymously. The results were discussed in a full staff meeting about two weeks later.

- ▶ List three things you feel are right about the news department.
- ▶ List three things you think are wrong and need to be fixed in the news department.
- ▶ If there were one thing you could change about the news department, what would it be?
- ▶ Do you feel you have a clear idea of what is expected of you at work?
- ▶ Do you feel you have an opportunity to grow in this news department?
- ▶ List the five most important things you think the news director needs to do over the next 6 months.
- ▶ What do we do better than our competitors?
- ▶ What do our competitors do better than we do?
- ▶ What is the biggest impediment to you personally doing your best work here?
- ▶ What would you like to know about the new news director that you don't already know?

KVOA news director Kathleen Choal conducted a similar survey, but she asked staffers to sign their names. Then she used her one-on-one meetings with each person on the staff to discuss his or her specific comments.

- ▶ What are three things the newsroom does well?
- ▶ What three things do we not do well?
- ▶ What is the station's news strategy?
- ▶ What are the roadblocks standing in the way of the station being successful?
- ▶ What is preventing you from being successful in your job?
- ▶ What's the one thing you would change if you were ND?
- ▶ What are some equipment problems you are having?
- ▶ Do you think all news staffers are treated equally?
- ▶ Do you receive enough feedback and training?
- ▶ What phrase best describes our work environment:
 - Respectful and professional
 - Friendly and warm
 - Harsh and cold
 - Strained and frustrating
 - Challenging and stimulating
 - Demanding and overwhelming

BUDGET basics

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Here are some terms you might want to be familiar with if you're becoming a news director for the first time. Adapted from *Investor Words* (www.investorwords.com) and *About.com's Business Management Glossary* (<http://management.about.com/cs/begintomanage/llblglossary.htm>):

Accounting codes

Numbers used to track spending by line item and sub-category. For example, all travel might be coded as 52, with lodging as 52-01, food as 52-02 and so on.

Accounts payable

Money the company owes for goods or services it has received but not yet paid for; another term for outstanding bills.

Accounts receivable

Money owed to the company for products and services it has delivered but that hasn't been paid.

Accrual basis accounting

The most commonly used accounting method reports income when it's earned and expenses when they are incurred. Includes an estimate of revenues reported that may not ever be received, called a bad debt expense.

Assets

Cash or anything of economic value owned by a business, especially items that could be converted to cash. Examples are accounts receivable, equipment, real estate and other property.

Balance sheet

A financial document showing the company's current assets and liabilities.

Capital budget

A plan to pay for long-term outlays, such as fixed assets like buildings and equipment.

Cash basis accounting

An accounting system that reports income when received and expenses when paid.

Cash flow

A measure of a company's financial health that equals cash receipts minus cash payments over a given period of time.

Current assets

The sum of cash, tangible assets, accounts receivable and anything else that that could be converted to cash in less than one year. Current or short-term assets are important to most companies as a source of funds for day-to-day operations.

Depreciation

A non-cash expense that reduces the value of an asset as a result of wear and tear, age or obsolescence. Most assets lose their value over time (in other words, they depreciate), and must be replaced once the end of their useful life is reached.

Fixed asset

A long-term, tangible asset held for business use and not expected to be converted to cash in the current or upcoming fiscal year, such as equipment, buildings, property and furniture.

General ledger

A book summarizing all of a company's financial transactions, through offsetting debit and credit accounts.

Gross or net profit margin

Gross or net profit divided by sales, expressed as a percentage.

Gross profit

Calculated as sales minus all costs directly related to those sales. These costs can include supplies, materials, salaries, marketing and other expenses.

Intangible asset

Something of value that cannot be physically touched, such as a brand, franchise, trademark or patent. Opposite of tangible asset.

Liabilities

Financial obligations that have a negative value, such as money still owed for equipment purchases.

Long-term assets

The value of a company's property, equipment and other capital assets expected to be usable for more than one year, minus depreciation.

Net income

Net income is total revenue minus total expenses, or what's left of the monies received after all debts have been paid. If net income is positive, it is also called net profit. If it's a negative number, it's a net loss.

Operating budget

A detailed estimate of the total resources required for the business to operate, including salaries, expenses and overhead.

Overhead

Ongoing administrative expense of running a business, like rent, utilities and insurance.

Profit and loss (P&L) statement

An official financial document published by a public company, showing earnings, expenses and net profit over a given period of time, usually a quarter or year.

ROI (return on investment)

A measure of a company's profitability, equal to a fiscal year's income divided by long-term debt. ROI measures how effectively the firm uses its capital to generate profit; the higher the ROI, the better. The term may also be used in deciding whether to invest in a new product by considering the ROI, or whether it will bring in more than it costs to produce.

Tangible asset

Physical assets such as equipment, buildings and property. Also accounts receivable usually are considered tangible assets for accounting purposes. Opposite of intangible asset.

Zero-base budget

Method of budgeting under which all spending must be justified each year.

READING list

Suggestions from
veteran news directors

The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader: Becoming the Person Others Will Want to Follow, by John C. Maxwell

The Employee Connection: Empowering Your Employees Through Open Communication (Successories 1998), by Jim Harris

Finding and Keeping Great Employees, by Jim Harris and Joan Brannick

First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently, by Marcus Buckingham

Five Frogs on a Log: A CEO's Field Guide..., by Mark L. Feldman and Michael F. Spratt

Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't, by Jim Collins

Harvard Business Review

The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More, by Chris Anderson

News Leadership at the Head of the Class, by Jill Geisler

Ready, Set, Lead! The Resource Guide for News Managers, by Deborah Potter/RTNDF

Tuesdays With Morrie, by Mitch Albom

ABOUT THE author

Deborah Potter is a journalism trainer and executive director of NewsLab, a nonprofit resource for local television newsrooms.

She spent 16 years as a correspondent for CBS News and CNN, covering the White House, State Department, Congress, national politics and the environment. She later hosted the PBS series, *In the Prime*.

Deborah has taught journalism as a faculty member at the Poynter Institute and American University, and as a visiting professional at dozens of other universities. She leads training sessions for working journalists at national and regional conferences and in newsrooms in the United States and around the world.

She is a past executive director of the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation. Deborah is a featured columnist for *The American Journalism Review* and author of RTNDF's *Ready, Set, Lead: The Resource Guide for News Managers*.

She has a bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a master's degree from American University.



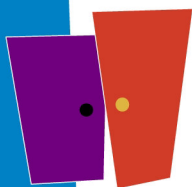


Mission Statement

The Radio Television Digital News Foundation provides training programs, seminars, scholarship support and research in areas of critical concern to electronic news professionals and their audience.

As the educational arm of the Radio Television Digital News Association, RTDNF offers professional development opportunities for working and aspiring journalists and journalism educators. The Foundation's primary objectives include:

- ▶ Promoting discussion of ethics and integrity in news coverage
- ▶ Developing leadership skills among news professionals and sound management practices in news organizations
- ▶ Encouraging diversity in news organizations and in news coverage
- ▶ Assessing the impact of technological change on the news industry
- ▶ Fostering exchanges of ideas and perspectives at the local, national and international levels
- ▶ Supporting U.S. First Amendment rights, worldwide press freedom and the public's right to know



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