



Part 4 - Handbook Highlights

By

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How To Build Your Staff

One of the first things a news director or editorial director learns is the importance of his or her staff. Those are the journalists and technicians who make your newscast work. In order to do the best journalism, you need the best people you can find (and afford).

Many news managers inherit their news team and build from there. Some have the opportunity to build a team from the beginning. I've been in both situations and found them challenging and filled with great opportunities (along with some pitfalls).

Here's what Av Westin wrote about that in his book, *Best Practices for Television Journalists*, 25 years ago —

In the real world of television news, editorial concerns are not necessarily at the top of the list when applicants are considered for job openings. Interviews for this handbook suggest an ongoing conflict between those who value good looks and on-

air performance abilities vs. those who are seeking reporters with some specialized knowledge—or at least the interest and intellect to try to develop general knowledge. Best Practices, p 17

Best Hiring Practices

I discovered during several decades as a journalist that each medium had its own requirements for what we might call ‘best hiring practices.’ All of the news media (e.g. radio, television, newspapers, magazines, online, etc) needed solid journalists who could cover and write stories well. Radio journalists also needed to be able to speak well. The same was true for television, but the way journalists looked on camera also carried ‘some’ importance in the business.

My job as both a radio news manager and a television news manager meant I had to take all of those areas into consideration every time I talked with journalists interested in job openings at our stations. Since I started in broadcast journalism in 1967, I had the opportunity to watch how that process evolved over time.

Noteable Quotables

Av Westin interviewed scores of journalists and news managers for his book published in January 2000. That means he was probably interviewing them in the late 1990s. He interviewed me for the book in 1999. That's more than 25 years ago. Keep that in mind as you read these 'quotes' from Best Practices for Television Journalists (The Freedom Forum's Free Press/Fair Press Project). Also keep in mind that Westin promised all of us anonymity so no one would fear for their job by being honest about what was really going on in television news at the time:

“There are always going to be people who get into the news business for the wrong reasons. They want to get their face on television. Hopefully, you weed those out before you hire them.” p 17

“It's one of the most troubling aspects of television. Three or four members of the senior staff here have what could probably be best called veto power, standing in the way of a new hire. Most of the

potential candidates for on-air positions get here because their tapes had passed certain looks tests.”

p 17

“I’m not sure the journalism schools are doing a very good job in hammering writing. Writing and reporting are the basic skills of anything that you do. They are turning our technicians, people who know how to be videographers and videojournalists and know to work an Avid machine but don’t know how to write a sentence.” pp 17-18

Finding the Best People

I used to visit universities that had Journalism and/or Mass Communication classes in order to speak with juniors and seniors. I was looking for bright young people who might join our news team when they graduated. I noticed a shift in the types of questions students asked during the 1990s. They were interested in how to begin their career in a large market rather than have to work in a small market to start. They wanted to know how to move quickly from reporter to anchor, how to make a lot of money in journalism, etc. I attempted to change their focus to the importance of learning the basic skills of journalism, so I can relate to the last group of 'quotables.'

I found the same to be true in hiring. I would receive scores of resumes and tapes for each position that came open. I chose the ones I thought had the best potential for our news department and called references along with previous employers. I called the candidates who moved to the top of my list and learned more about them and what they wanted to accomplish as a journalist. Then, I brought the top three

candidates to the station for an in-person interview. That gave our team the opportunity to meet the candidate and for the candidate to get to know the team, the station, and the community better. Once that was done, I made the top candidate an offer.

Here's how Av Westin explained the in-person interview:

“Use the face-to-face interviews to uncover what makes the candidate tick. Make the interview seem more like a conversation ... Find out whether the candidate has had an acceptable level of experience and testing. Keep the questions simple and to the point ... Be aware that some of the candidates you interview want to get into the news business for the wrong reason. They want to get their face on television. Check peer-group references. Call everybody on the candidate's reference list and then get one or more recommendations from people who are not on the list.” p 18

That's very similar to what I did when hiring people. The process often leads to the best people available. I did notice the same thing Westin mentioned that many of the candidates 25 years ago wanted to get into the news business for the wrong reason. Unfortunately, many of them did get into the business and are now giving news consumers 'the news' every day.

Building your 'team' is very important as a news director and cannot be underestimated or overstated. Managers, take your time hiring. Find the right people and build the best team of journalists you can find.

Diversity in Hiring

One of the things I noticed in newsrooms in the 1960s and 70s was the lack of diversity among the staff. Almost all of the journalists were white men. That did not reflect our community. I worked to change that when I became a hiring manager.

Here are a few of Av Westin's 'Best Practices' from 25 years ago —

“Look at your community when you hire, and make sure the people around the table at your morning meeting and the people in the newsroom reflect the communities you serve.”

“Hire based on potential. Recognize that every job candidate has potential for learning and growth.”

“When you have minority people on staff, it helps sensitize people to issues that otherwise would be ignored.” p 19

Part 5 Tease

In the next part of this special series I'll share about 'Bias in the Newsroom' Here's a 'tease' from Av Westin (25 years ago) —

“It's safe to say that in almost all newsrooms, blatant bigotry and intolerance do not exist. What does exist, however, are preconceived notions about race and ethnicity that can shape story selection and content. The conventional wisdom among many assignment editors is that white viewers will tune out if blacks or Latinos are featured in segments. That view can influence the choice of the person who will provide the 'expert' sound bite. There is no question that a lack of racial sensitivity affects news judgment. It is a problem that goes to the heart of fair and balanced presentation of news on television.”Av Westin, Best Practices, The Freedom Forum, 2000, p 21



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee