

Leadership Imperatives in Brief

Here are brief summaries of highlighted practices — some novel, some traditional, some debatable — grouped by category for easy reference.

Motivation

- Catch people doing things right.
- Convince people they'll do their best work here, now and in the immediate future.
- In a discussion, treat each person as vitally important — your number-one priority at that moment.
- Make lots of time for “face-to-face management” — helping make people's problems, large and small, a bit better.

Communication

- Practice candor. Practice it again.
- Deliver negative feedback quickly.
- Pinpoint newsroom leaders. Keep a dialogue with them.
- Repeat key value statements, and reinforce those values through daily examples.
- Set clear, simple goals for yourself and your team. Share them, at least twice a year.

Organization

- Develop a learning culture, with seminars, visiting experts, team learning.
- Build unity. Keep the guns pointed outside the fort.
- Delegate one clear leader on a project.
- Make sure staffers don't hand the delegated work back to you with excessive questions and requests. Help them show independence. Don't go to work for them.

Vision

- When creating vision, engage a variety of other people for their different perspectives.

- Break down good examples and examine component parts.
- Clarify vision by writing it down. Adapt to circumstances but adhere to broad goals.

Management

- Tour the newsrooms and bureaus regularly. Keep a schedule to make sure you talk with a wide variety of groups and individuals.
- Don't deliver criticism by e-mail.
- Try bold, discontinuous change. Newsrooms too often move incrementally.
- Keep the talent flow coming in.
- Hold people accountable, with feedback, with specific goals for improvement.
- Don't do your previous job. You'll hurt your successor.
- Keep good debates going among staff on key issues.
- Praise specific accomplishments. Use them to show how to get better.
- Analyze each situation with an eye toward making it better, quickly.

Competition

- Be first. But first be right. It's better to be second than to be wrong.
- Choose the key areas in which to beat the competition. Don't try to win everything.
- News is now a commodity. So look for ways to be unique — with enterprise, with scoops, with new concepts on stories.
- Constantly look at how to add value, uniquely, in the loud echo-chamber of competing media.
- Do what competitors can't or won't dare to do.

Diversity

- Assign a newsroom-veteran mentor to younger minority journalists.
- Make sure every pool of applicants for any job — especially managerial openings — has at least one person of color.
- Create an inclusive organization with enough mutual respect and honesty to not be inhibited when discussing difficult issues.
- Make sure minority staffers are positioned to have an impact.
- Seek diversity in news sources and experts.

Money

- Always watch the cash.
- Instead of yearning for a bigger budget, decide how to do things differently and successfully with what's available. Start thinking from zero-based premises.
- Be direct and honest and forthcoming during tough economic times. Otherwise, gossip rules.
- Keep managers focused on budget tradeoffs. A dollar saved on expense-account lunches can be spent on important coverage.

Meetings

- Take the last few minutes of a meeting to summarize what's been agreed to and who has the responsibility for each next step, by a specific schedule.
- Conduct staff meetings frequently. Don't let them be dictated by crises.
- Do after-action reports on coverage. Frank, intense appraisals are vital to improvement.
- Have regular meetings with key lieutenants to brainstorm progress and build trust.
- Have junior staffers occasionally lead a meeting with senior staffers, explaining how the future should look — from the juniors' standpoint.

Crisis Management

- Find out what the damage is, then limit it. Disclose truthfully.
- When a crisis gets hotter, get calmer.
- Get the facts. Don't rush to a decision. Know exactly when decisions are necessary. Never be stampeded. Never rush when you're in a hurry.
- Consult widely. Consult people of good judgment outside the organization as well as inside.
- Decide where you ideally want to wind up. Work back from that to construct a good plan.
- Give the staff an honest evaluation of a crisis and the important steps being taken to get through it.
- Anticipate trouble. Move quickly to confront it. When appropriate, apologize fully.

Self-Management

- Don't bear grudges. Have an argument — then move on to new business.
- Find where you can add value and do it. But don't retreat into your strengths, because you can get stuck in your comfort zone.
- Be skeptical, not cynical. Understand the difference.
- Remember: There's always tomorrow. Let people know, especially when things go wrong.

Advice from Mentors

- Never make a decision before its time.
- Don't be too specific about needed improvements. Urge better and then let the staffer figure out how.
- Stay upbeat. Paint the best outcomes.
- Be tolerant of the mixed qualities in people.

Leadership

- As a leader, remember your moods are contagious. Show them wisely.
- Apply energy to the system. Get good brains concentrating on new directions.

- Channel inertia toward a better way.
- Learn from the best traits of colleagues. Learn how to do what they do best.
- Live the values you preach. On core principles, don't wriggle under pressure.
- Pace the organization's progress. Mountains are climbed in stages.
- Live by the "No Surprise" rule. Instruct subordinates not to surprise you by decisions they have made. Have them bring you any potential big surprises. It's a test of their judgment to bring you only the important ones.
- Do the same for your boss. "No Surprises" works up and down the chain of command.
- Go for the big opportunity based on well-honed instinct and rigorous research. Don't wait for 100% certainty, because you never have perfect background information.

Discipline

- Do your best for the problem individual, but put the institution's credibility first.
- If the occasion demands it, inflict pain thoughtfully, without anger.
- Even top performers must treat co-workers with civility — or they must go.
- Have the courage to move out people who, after fair chances and feedback, don't measure up. Be sure they had been given a clear path to improvement.

Choosing Leaders

- Look for leaders who can describe the big picture in ways that make people want to be part of it.
- Don't be overawed by brilliance. Find people with credibility with the rest of the staff.
- Look for competitive leaders who won't be satisfied with being second.
- Find people who are comfortable with themselves, not turning every exchange into tests of themselves.
- Choose people with skills that complement yours.
- Look carefully at past effectiveness; it's a good guide to future effectiveness.
- Be careful of people, no matter how talented, who divide the newsroom sharply into friends and enemies.
- Look for people who can coach and teach as well as lead.

Innovation

- "Nothing Succeeds as Planned." In a startup, be ready to change plans fast.
- Think of the most harmful moves your competitors could make against you. Make those moves against them first.
- Create an environment where mavericks can succeed. The best innovations are disruptive, and so are their creators.
- Make some change for change's sake — to keep the organization flexible and nimble.
- Be clear — to others — about the aims of innovations.
- Innovate for the now, not for the far future.

- Don't punish mistakes in innovation. Congratulate the instigators. Fear of mistakes leads to rigidity.
- Start from new premises in brainstorming. Make the box bigger.

Editing & Fairness

- Apply the “if true” rule rigorously to questionable assertions.
- Be suspicious of “off-the-record” revelations.
- Push reporters to take risks, then demand care in the writing.
- If you are taking a hard shot at a subject, also say what the subject has done well. Don't caricature.
- Steer clear of anonymous cheap shots.
- In reporting controversy, give various sides the opportunity to explain their viewpoints.
- Have the courage of your convictions because fairness, in the end, is a personal judgment.

Teamwork

- Remove difficult members from teams. You will be rewarded.
- Show solo stars how teams can enrich their work.
- Reinforce to the staff that you win as a team — or lose as a team.

Aiming at the Audience (The Golden Gut)

- Explain the nuances of a story well and the audience will appreciate its value.
- Lead and reflect audience sentiments. Too much reflection leads to pandering, too little leads to irrelevance and alienation.
- Recognize there are multiple audiences. Try not to get stuck in one-size-fits-all approaches.
- Remember focus groups and surveys can give feedback and reaction — but they cannot help create.

Community

- Have off-site meetings with community groups. They will give new perspectives.
- Schedule meetings with the public.
- Bring in community leaders under non-crisis circumstances, for dialogue.
- Have guts when challenging your community to improve. But don't render yourself irrelevant by being too removed from community sentiment.

Personal/Work Balance

- Take regular breaks from work for new insights.
- Don't define yourself solely by your job. The job can be taken away.
- Start a private lifetime list of goals to achieve outside of work. Have fun with them.