

# Introduction

The zest of strong leaders is vivid. They can make work seem like a mission of mythic aura — or like play.

At their best, strong leaders can command a newsroom with their presence, their eyes filled with merriment, anger, mischief, sympathy, delight, intensity for accomplishment.

To watch Ted Turner stalk through a CNN studio is to see the workplace transformed by staccato wisecracks, quick compliments, a huge, inimitable grin. Leadership electrifies.

As Daniel Goleman writes in the *Harvard Business Review*, mood contagion from leaders is a psychological phenomenon. Who ever had so much fun? said Ben Bradlee last year, recalling the glory days working with publisher Katharine Graham.

Besides zest and charisma, what other skills do we more ordinary mortals need to practice the art of leadership in news organizations?

To answer that, the Freedom Forum interviewed 20 news-business leaders.

What follows are edited excerpts of practical knowledge imparted by these individuals about the people and processes of an ever-surprising calling.

“I’ve made every mistake in the book — and then some,” says Norman Pearlstine, editor-in-chief of Time Inc. “But I’ve learned from the experiences.”

In fact, all the leaders expressed varying degrees of humility about having wisdom to pass on. But “What I’ve Learned” interviews have a good history and an important place in a profession, as the books of leadership expert Warren Bennis have shown.

In that spirit, the interviewees agreed to discuss issues that are key to successful leadership — communication, discipline, vision, choosing lieutenants, day-to-day management and many others.

They brought a variety of perspectives — from major newspaper editors and publishers to online entrepreneurs, to network executives and the president of a Spanish-language daily. Likewise, their past experiences outside journalism enhanced their insights — experiences from the White House and New York City Hall to venture capital firms and academia and law and a host of businesses, large and small.

Despite the range of experiences, common elements emerged:

- The power of curiosity and questions as sparks for good journalism.
- A wry pleasure in the Dickensian cast of characters journalism presents as colleagues.
- Clear and cool views on the demands of Wall Street on news organizations.
- Shrewd concerns about the tensions between quality news and the trend toward tabloidization.
- The clear importance of managing self as well as the society of the newsroom.
- A constant scanning of the technological horizons for the rapidly changing future.
- A delight in the very fact of frequent change.

Most recalled with fondness their own mentors — people from whom they had learned much.

A 30-year-old quote on ethics, a way of viewing stories, an approach to difficult colleagues, a way of conceptualizing new fields of coverage — all provoked appreciative memories of enduring insights.

The hope is that this booklet will provide a number of those same high-quality insights — shortcuts to a better way. The participants offered them with the caveats that come from knowing that what worked well in one situation may not transfer to a similar event a couple of years later.

People change, as do methods of persuading them to right action.

In these excerpts hundreds of years' experience are applied to the grit of journalism's daily demands.

Some of the best practices are explicit, some implied. And observations on a range of subjects, such as the journalistic effects of the Sept. 11 terror attacks, also are included.

A note on method: The excerpts do not have quote marks around them because they have been edited. As with the "Writers at Work" series in *The Paris Review*, the interview subjects were sent the comments for review and clarification because the intent here is instructional, not inquisitional.

From 90-minute interviews, these short excerpts have been chosen with concern for context. But, as in all such editing, the process is imperfect and the responsibility for any resulting flaws lies with the editors, not the interview subjects.

Another note of humility: Several of the subjects suggested others — more suitable than themselves, they felt — to be interviewed. Certainly, many other outstanding leaders would have contributed greatly. But for a report on news leadership at the start of the 21st century, this group has range; and each member brings an unusual angle of vision to the ever-changing art of leadership.

Collectively, the result is real-world pragmatic wisdom in a field that will always lack final answers.

# How to read and why ...

... as the best-seller phrased it:

Put this book together as you'd like.

It's designed for random access.

You can skip to chapters of immediate interest on the different elements of leadership.

For better pacing, skip any lengthy quote that doesn't grab you right away. Circle back when you have time to be surprised.

Short attention span? Go first to the summary of leadership imperatives beginning on page 109.

Argue with the experts here.

A number of useful practices are detailed. So are ways of thinking about key issues in leading news organizations. Some are quite debatable, and you can enjoy that part, too.