

A Director's Guide to Managing the Modern Press

Presented at the AAUP Annual Meeting 2014, concurrent panel "Managing the Modern Press"

Introduction:

We see advice lists all the time from big tech CEOs (*New York Times*), bestselling writers (*Publishers Weekly*), and weight-loss experts (*Self*). It's about time we gathered together the wisdom of AAUP-member press directors. For instance, now-retired Steve Maikowski recently shared "things learned along the way" with another director. Here's one from his list:

"Cultivate every friendship made in publishing, and especially in the AAUP. This knowledge base will in many ways be the most important thing in your professional career, and those friends will all help you through the inevitable difficult times."

In April we created a survey to capture the words of wisdom from AAUP directors, or what we called, "The 5 Habits of Highly Effective Press Directors." The results are anonymous but represent the advice of directors from all four size categories of presses—from small presses under \$1.5 million to large presses over \$6 million, and from directors whose tenures range from 1 year to 29 years. We hope you enjoy these collected words of wisdom from some of the best in university press publishing.

UP TO 1.5 MILLION

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

- Form a relationship with one or two mentors outside the publishing industry and one or two within it. Your leadership skills will benefit from the universal aspects of management as well as particular and unique points of view
- Think about building a leadership tool kit: (1) books and outside leadership resources; (2) internal management policies and support (from peer directors/managers in your organization and from Human Resources); (3) mentors you have secured formally or informally in your field and beyond; (4) your press management team and a collegial environment of shared problem solving, (5) a folder (either real or metaphorical) of effective past practices; (6) a built-in training budget and schedule for your own professional development and growth.

Look up (Get out and see what's happening. You can't manage from behind your desk.)

- With staff, set clear and reasonable expectations at the outset, stay in touch, and hold people accountable. Do not hesitate to remove those who don't perform up to par (I am still challenged by this, but know my life would be infinitely better if I did it). In other words, the work needs to be theirs, not mine.

- Hire people with very strong leadership skills. Change is hard, and requires managers who people trust and who know how to turn the ship in a new direction, and who are able to convince existing staff that the change is in everyone's best interest.

- Hire for hunger, intelligence, and character. Then teach.

- Listen, listen, listen. Hear. Then decide.

Collaborate. Meet with deans, chairpersons, committee heads, and librarians and come up with ways to do joint projects and have a voice on campus. This could mean being a member of a digital humanities working group, having books in the library's digital repository, doing an exhibition catalog, or producing a born digital book project.

Administrators love collaboration.

- Listen. Have an open mind and seriously consider suggestions from all your staff members, from interns to senior-level positions. They are doing the day-to-day work and often have great ideas for improving systems. Don't be a dictator but do be decisive.

Embrace technology as a means of expanding the press's global presence, but also as a tool for efficiency and productivity.

Don't recreate the wheel. Stand on the shoulders of the best, and often the oldest, presses to look for great business practices and incorporate them into your own operation. You should differentiate yourself where it matters, not in every aspect.

- A dozen years ago we were hiring people whose skill set looked a lot like our own. Today, the most attractive candidates think intuitively outside the conventions of traditional print media, and we look to them to help us reinvent our publishing persona.

- One tactic for maintaining good author relations is to imagine that you will be working side by side in the same organization for a number of years. Welcome to museum publishing!

- Good content and good design make advances in technology worthwhile. IT concerns and priorities are often at the apex of the triangle; an equilateral triangle argues for a better outcome.

- Network! On campus with administrators, faculty, fundraisers, etc., and off campus with AAUP colleagues and valued vendors.

- Empower your managers and include them in many press functions and dealings. Be sure to hire people who are passionate about publishing.

- The Press is an extension of the University — a lab of sorts. Incubate undergrads and grad students in your lab. They will keep you honest and fresh.

PLANNING AND STRATEGY

- Always clean your desk at the end of the day. Leave only one item on the desk — the file or project that you will work on first. When you arrive, start working on that.
- Brag. Let administration, faculty board, advisors, etc., know every time you get a strong review and media attention. Positive focus on the press means positive focus on the university, and that's a good thing. The press may be subsidized but the university gets good marketing in return.
- Revisit. Constantly look at the ways you are running the Press from budgets to digital initiatives to distribution. There is always room for improvement. If you are unsure if you're doing it right or don't know the best approach, reach out to your colleagues in the UP world. I have found them to be the most useful resource. Tap into their collective experience.
- Never underestimate the value of a vigorous editorial sweep for quality assurance online or in print. Skip it or skimp on it at your own risk.

Make time to read, write, and think. Being a director is an intellectual enterprise.

- Plan. It may be painful or arduous but a strategic plan is a beneficial tool for moving your press in the right direction and giving you an opportunity to work with your administration in helping you to achieve your goals. This should include fundraising, staff improvements, and digital initiatives, among many other items. Consider an external review, which can spur the strategic plan. AAUP has funding for external reviews for small presses.

- Understand how much a book is costing you to produce, including the labor for each staff person that is responsible for producing the book. Manufacturing costs are a small component of calculating costs and payback. Build a financial system where staff report each week how they are spending their time, tied to the books they are working on. It will be a real eye-opener for you, and may make you think twice about how you are investing your labor dollars.

- You cannot be too organized.

- Consider letting low-cost vendors handle components of your workflow until you can fully consider how to make a shift internally. Converting print files to digital may be less expensive until you can change internal practices.

- Follow the leaders. When you see a publisher trying something innovative, try to learn from them and don't wait until everyone else has made a shift in technology, practices, workflow. There is a balance for when to make the move, and the devil is in the details.

- When contracting for outside services that are reliant on a term, be wary of any agreement longer than a year. If necessary to engage for more than one year, make it very clear what the terms are for breaking the contract due to a breach, and be clear on the nature of the communication to sever services.

Take advantage of consortium efforts, ranging from UPCC to CDC distribution. All of these programs leverage large talent pools to the benefit of even the smallest presses.

- *Think big (have big ideas and large goals).*

- There is a balance to your work of increasing the value of your press within your host institution and increasing the value of your press within your publishing markets. Watch that balance; it is tricky. Sometimes you will feel like a clumsy elephant on a high wire and other times, magically, you will feel nimble as a sprite on it.

THE BIG PICTURE

- When in doubt, do the hardest thing first.
- Don't overwork or you'll burn out. Ten - hour days are fine, coming in on weekends is fine, but have a life and live it. Self-care is essential, beginning with sleep, exercise, and good food.

There is an art and science to everything. Make room for both.

- Be OK with failure. Seriously. Everything is up in the air at this point in our industry. We will try things and they won't work. That doesn't mean we can't learn from them and progress on a different path.

Step Back. (Spend a part of your day just thinking about opportunities and challenges).

1.5 - 3 MILLION

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

- Get involved! Tag along with the director or volunteer to serve in some capacity for something outside your "job description," like chairing meetings at the press or on campus or taking on a new responsibility.
- Represent! Probably my most-valued quality: every staff member represents the press and the university wherever they go, whether they are attending an event or working a press event. I encourage people to get out there and talk to people (favorably!) about what they do and what the press does.
- Be professional! For example, wait until after the Editorial Board meeting to vent about something you find frustrating or view as unfair. And when doing the latter, don't just gripe, explain why the situation was bad and how to avoid it in the future.

Never forget that time is a valuable, finite resource for you and your staff. Always seek to improve workflows and root out bureaucratic inefficiencies (both internal to the press and as a result of imposed policies).

Get to know everybody, maintain an open door policy, maintain a confidence, treat people fairly, and allow that people have personal lives and personal issues to solve.

- Remember that the press’s established workflow and procedural rules apply to you, too! A “do as I say, not as I do” philosophy only increases the likelihood of workplace chaos and disharmony.
- Don’t duck/ignore/reassign obvious “macro-level” problems that can best be resolved with your direct help. That’s not to say, however, that staff should not be encouraged to use their own expertise to wrestle challenges without your input
- Set a good example in your interpersonal communication style. Be respectful of views different from your own, and always strive to show that you’re willing to make the time with interested parties to discuss issues publically/private, as warranted. Cultivate an environment that encourages the respectful sharing of new ideas.
- Experiment! Directors value staff being proactive and experimentation. Try and suggest new ways of doing things from how meetings are handled to money-saving ideas for operations.

No press is an island. Make sure that you work to cultivate good relationships with authors, university administrators, local/state/national politicians, civic leaders, etc., etc., because you never know when you’ll need external support to resolve a difficult challenge.

- There is a real difference between being a manager and being a leader: Press directors need vision, dynamism, and an eye on the horizon, and they need good managers to handle process. Understand what the roles are: don’t over-manage the managers beneath you, yet provide the vision to the Press.

- Develop relationships on campus with as many stakeholders in the press as possible: administrators, series editors, editorial board members, scholars who publish elsewhere, scholars as reviewers, librarians, library publishers and IT experts, alumni and alumni organizations, appropriate student organizations.

Manage by walking around. See your customer service staff just as important as your editor-in chief and marketing director – they are.

- Know the strengths and weaknesses of your marketing and sales department. Work toward the strengths, buttress the weaknesses. Over time plan to increase the strengths and decrease the weaknesses to build the strongest department possible.
- Good people respond better to carrot than stick. Surprise them with praise and incentives. I bought my entire staff an iPad each after a record year: they feel valued (and they can use them at conferences and in meetings, and there was an insistence that they all read at least one book to get used to the idea – so a practical gift too!).
- Be proactive! Start that project you want to see happen and report on success/challenges/even failure (better described as a learning experience!). I highly value staff who *just do it*.

Discovery is the new currency. Eyeballs mean more to most scholars than royalties. Think about share of mind over share of wallet. But keep the share of wallet closely second!

PLANNING AND STRATEGY

- Personally know how to prepare a title P&L in your sleep. Know what the important numbers are, break-even points, advance recovery numbers, gross margins. Set a gross margin target for your press and stick to it. Master the annual budget. Conduct long-range planning regularly.

Utilize the resources available through the AAUP to the nth degree. We are extraordinarily fortunate to work in such a collegial environment – it's rare and to be cherished. Go to the annual meeting, read the dispatches from central office (especially the stats), volunteer for committees, get on the board, nurture relationships and LEARN from one another.

- Cultivate friends in high places and choose when and how the press should break anonymity on campus: if it is on the press's terms it will play out a lot better than if it is on the university's terms.

We are, after all, in the business of matching writers to readers. Whatever markets and channels and formats and processes we work within to do this work all rank below or support the essential relationship between writers and readers.

- Keep a steady eye on contract signings and transmittals. Make sure the flow is steady to meet your press's goals. Know which subject areas and types of books are profitable to you both in monetary terms and in goodwill terms.

*Know the list inside and out.
The list is everything.*

- Always ask the fundamental question: 'What is it for?' What is the Press for? What is X new digital initiative actually for?, etc. It will help cut through the surrounding rhetoric and make the right strategic decision.
- Get the core business basically right and then experiment around the fringes.

THE BIG PICTURE

- It is important to control the aspects of publishing that are in our control and to be aware of those aspects outside of our control. Agonizing over issues beyond our control can obfuscate solutions that we can control.

We are the connection between author and reader. When you wake up each morning you should be thinking not about breakfast but about new connections no matter your role at the press.

- No one dies when you make a mistake in book publishing. In fact, publishing is essentially a collaborative act of correcting errors. It is more important to cultivate a climate that rewards creative solutions rather than one that punishes mistakes.

- In many cases we spend as much time in the office with our colleagues as we do with our families and loved ones at home. Practice the Golden Rule. The significant events of our lives, both joyful and sorrowful, should always take precedence over the demands of our professional duties.

Try to remember that the books we publish transcend mere evaluation by sales. Sales are great, sure, but the books we publish, and the research, ideas, and arguments they contain, will outlive all of us. Everyone I know has profoundly benefited, intellectually and spiritually, from reading books that did not make money.

Know the power players at your university/ system. Know who controls your budget and what makes them tick. Always champion your staff, providing them with ample professional development, encouragement, mentorship, and value their work. Promoting internal candidates can often boost overall press morale.

3 – 6 MILLION

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

- Do not postpone difficult decisions. As soon as you know what you must do, take steps to do it. A hard decision always feels better when it's behind you.
- Be flexible, be open, and be ready.
- If you can't give raises (due to freezes and the like) but can afford to upgrade tools and the workplace, do so, but include staff in the decisions so that they are aware that these are the only options available.

*Do not hire to fill a vacancy:
Hire when you have found the
right person to do the job.*

- This is likely most important.: No matter how discouraged you feel personally, project confidence. Not Pollyanna optimism, but confidence that your staff will deal with the circumstances and come through. Be as visible as you can be in addressing problems to show staff you're engaged. Personnel problems require special discretion, of course.
- Be above the fray. Don't participate in office gossip, don't engage in office politics. In the long run, those behaviors will not benefit anyone who wants to move up in the publishing world.
- On the other hand, manage "up." Don't ignore your university administration, directors at other units of your campus, library deans, or others you know who carry some voice with the administration.

PLANNING AND STRATEGY

- Get to know the person(s) you report to well and court his/her friendship. In most university operations, a president or provost may not know what a press does and accomplishes so one must explain to him/her/them why what you do for the university is important and how your operation fits in with the mission of the university.

*Listen carefully and be thoughtful.
Try not to have “pre-made” answers
unless it’s an HR situation.*

- Know HR rules and regulations.
- Diplomacy and patience with staff and outsiders should be practiced at all times. And treat people always with respect. Always share your knowledge freely and enthusiastically with them and they in turn will return theirs tenfold.

THE BIG PICTURE

- Set realistic performance goals for everyone. Manage expectations.

*Measure the worth of the list
acquired under your stewardship
on its scholarly significance and
publish as many books as possible
without going bankrupt.*

- From the start to the present scholarly publishing has historically always been in a crisis so it’s a normal state of affairs. Therefore never freak out and think that today’s crisis is any different or more severe. The current crisis will be replaced by another one five years hence. Keep your hands firmly on the wheel and steer away from potholes!

OVER 6 MILLION

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Never get too high when things are going well, and never get too down when they’re not. Seek the golden mean, the “auream mediocritatem,” and keep an even keel.

- Treat all your staff equally, with respect for them as people first and as colleagues second.

Never let your bosses hear bad news from others before they’ve heard it from you. No surprises.

You are earning a living by publishing books. Remember that. Sure it can be a crazy and frustrating business, but you should count your blessings and sleep well at night knowing that you are making a genuine contribution to the world of knowledge.

Thank you to all press directors who participated in our survey.

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