

Chapter 4:

Executive Producers

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS – THE SHOWRUNNER

You are now in charge of pre-production, production, and post-production. In other words, everything. The most critical task on your agenda, however, is making sure that quality scripts get delivered on time. You do this by effectively managing a writing staff and freelance writers. Only by giving a director and your entire production team a script on or before its prep date can you achieve maximum results over time. If you fall behind in writing scripts, it often becomes impossible to catch up. In the chaos that often results, not only does the quality of the writing suffer but so does the acting, directing, and post-production. Good shows are often compromised, sometimes fatally, by poor management. The professional showrunner knows how to multitask, making constant decisions that allow everyone to do their best work and production to proceed as efficiently as possible.

How do you get the job? Most showrunners are veteran TV writers who have written successful pilots and, consequently, have earned the top job on their own shows. Others are selected on the basis of their experience to take over existing series or, increasingly, to help run new shows that may have been created by less-experienced writers. Because the single most important task of running a TV show is delivering scripts, the focus here is on responsibilities related to managing writers.

HIRING A WRITING STAFF

The good news is you've written a pilot, it's been produced, your dream's come true. Your show is going on the air. The bad news is you're in production in six weeks, you need 12 episodes, and you don't have a single additional script or writer to help you. Your first job is to hire a writing staff.

Reading Scripts

- There's no question that the marketplace is flooded with an overwhelming number of "competently" written scripts. Unfortunately, competent might not be good enough. What you're looking for is a script that rises above all others, and what defines that is not easily quantifiable. Suffice it to say, it's a subjective business, and evaluating scripts is not easy.
- The studio and network will have suggestions, and it makes sense to look at their lists. It is these executives' ongoing responsibility to seek out new writing talent, and they can be of some help in bringing good writers to your attention. Also, it's a good idea to develop relationships, if you haven't already, with a few agents whose taste you trust, who know yours, and who will not shotgun you with their client lists but will make available to you writers they believe will fit your needs. Manage agents instead of letting them manage you.

Interviewing Writers

- What you should be looking for beyond literary talent and experience includes basic compatibility with your temperament and style; you should also seek ethnic and gender diversity. Most important, arguably, a clear understanding of the writer's take on your show. Does he or she get it? Will this writer bring a

dimension to the show that you need, don't have, or that would complement yours? Would you look forward to being with this person for 10 to 12 hours every day?

References

- Possibly before but certainly after interviewing writers, you will want to make some calls to their previous employers and colleagues. How was this writer to work with? What responsibilities did he or she actually perform? Any particular strengths, limitations? Double up on all references when possible, and don't forget to consider the source of any comments you receive.
- In addition to soliciting references on writers, you might increasingly find yourself in a position of having to give references as well. It is an individual decision whether or not to give a reference. If you decide to, it is your responsibility to give an honest and fair assessment of the writer, in a timely fashion, as the reference undoubtedly will be time sensitive.

Shopping on a Budget

- A major factor in making your final decisions is your budget. The studio will give you a dollar amount you can spend on writers. How you divvy it up is pretty much up to you. Is it better to have one writer-producer and three less-experienced writers or two high-priced writer-producers and a staff writer? How you plan to run the writing staff should help shape your thoughts. Will you be depending on a strong Number Two to run the writers' room? Are you planning to actively produce every episode yourself or will you want your writers to shepherd their own shows through the production mill? The answers to these and other questions will help you shape your staff.

HIRING FREELANCE WRITERS

There are essentially two ways to approach freelance scripts. One method is to assign a freelancer a story; the other is to have the freelancer pitch. Within carefully defined limits, you have the opportunity to meet with a writer without having to make a financial commitment in advance. What are those limits? Loosely stated, you may meet with a freelancer twice to discuss ideas. If you request that the writer come in for a third meeting on the same story, you must hire the writer and pay for, at a minimum, a story.

MANAGING WRITERS

Obviously, there is no one way to manage writers. Through your own unique combination of intuition, personality, common sense, and acquired wisdom, you will find a way to get the job done. Some showrunners are cheerleaders; others poker-faced. Some sit in on every story conference; others communicate solely through notes on outlines. Some delegate rewriting; others do all the rewriting themselves. Within the wide range of possibilities, however, there are some general guidelines that can help you manage effectively.

Define Goals and Standards

- Your staff members want to help you, but they won't be able to if you don't effectively communicate your needs to them. Be sure to lay out your expectations both individually and collectively. Provide regular feedback to let your writers know how they're doing.

Give Good Notes

- It's amazing how much a kind word can motivate a writer in the

throes of a fourth draft. Everyone looks to you for direction and tone. You've been at it so long, you might have forgotten how impressionable you were starting out. Writers seek role models. Be a positive one.

- Begin with praise and the writer will listen enthusiastically to whatever list of demanding notes might follow. Start with a negative comment and you'll be facing a demoralized writer trying to contain his or her emotions instead of listening productively to your notes. What's more, you've just made your own job more difficult. Somebody's going to have to make that script better, and you've just increased the odds that's it'll have to be you. The challenge is to find those aspects of a writer's script that you can genuinely enthuse about, hit those hard, then move on to the critical work that remains to be done, and explain it clearly and patiently.

Protect Your Writers

- It's easy to blame your writers. For anything and everything. A good showrunner runs interference for his or her staff.

Be a Mentor

- All writers on your staff want to continue up the ladder. Help them. Your staff will work harder and make you look better if you are generous with your knowledge, time, and delegation of duties. Provide opportunities for writers to learn new skills and responsibilities. Exposing staffers to production not only builds a more effective team that can help you carry the load but also repays a debt that all showrunners owe to the profession. After all, how did you learn the ropes? Chances are somebody took time to invest in you. Now it's your turn to do the same for others.

MANAGING YOUR TIME

Managing time effectively not only means getting the most from yourself but getting the most from everybody else as well. As showrunner, you have a literal army of people working for you. They need constantly updated marching orders to keep the production moving. If you are unable to keep the instructions coming, whether in the form of scripts, notes to writers, or directives to department heads, you will soon have reduced the work capacity of your army to a single, overworked individual—you.

How to avoid it? Long hours, organization, foresight, a good staff, delegation, and constant vigilance. Even so, bottlenecks at your office door are unavoidable. Your job is to keep them as infrequent and short-lived as possible. The key is figuring out how to keep other people working while you're doing what you need to do. Effective showrunners constantly perform production triage: who or what needs attention most, what can be put off, what can be saved, what must be sacrificed?

TAKING CREDIT

Historically, showrunners only rarely put their names on scripts written for the show by other writers (see “Credit Grabbing” in Chapter Two). As showrunner, you need to recognize that the power you hold creates the potential for abuse. Though your own writing staff can contest shared credit through arbitration if you put your name on their scripts, the reality is that few writers will dare go up against you for fear of jeopardizing their careers. Showrunners who routinely take writing credit on scripts assigned to others tend to create resentment and mistrust among the staff, resulting in low morale. This could be

through ignorance or arrogance. Some showrunners have cited the standard that writing credits should accurately reflect “who did what” on a script. But a different standard has long applied to television writing, a standard of fairness based upon the power structure of episodic television. A showrunner is expected to rewrite. It comes with the job description, and, as the showrunner you are well compensated for it.

Although it might be frustrating to do a page-one rewrite and send it out with someone else’s name on it, as showrunner you need to ask yourself, who assigned the script? Who approved the story? Who was in charge of notes and rewrites? Who is ultimately responsible for every word that appears on the show? You are. All good work on the show redounds to your credit whether your name is on a particular script or not. Conversely, all poor work is also attributed to your leadership regardless of whose name appears on an episode. It’s important to think about that before putting your name on someone else’s script.

MOST IMPORTANT ADVICE FOR A FIRST-TIME SHOWRUNNER:

This is complicated. Making the transition is difficult, which is why it's so hard for great writers to become great showrunners. You have to acknowledge the transition you've made, and in the process you have to throw out 90 percent of what you've learned to be or do as a writer. (The 10 percent you hold onto has to do with trusting your vision and your voice.) But now you have crossed over into the business of maintaining a show. You have to stop seeing the people around you as adversaries and you must start seeing them as partners. This includes everyone from the prop guy to the network. Everyone is trying to help you realize your position—give on this, take that. Nothing good comes from standing firm on every point. The director isn't there to hurt you—he or she is there to serve you. The network isn't trying to denude your vision—they are trying to platform it. Know that you have entered into this strange marriage of art and commerce. Don't resist it; instead, attempt to understand it. Being able to distinguish big battles from small ones is the challenge of anyone in a leadership position. The hardest thing for a writer who is suddenly a showrunner to realize is that you've necessarily entered into this strange relationship. Stop trying to get a divorce. Figure out how to make it work.

—Barbara Hall

BEST ADVICE

Best advice is something I heard Oliver Stone say once. “Ass plus chair.” Be strong. Be a leader. Be confrontational. If there are actors trying to get away with shit, call them on it. If someone on your staff isn’t cutting it, get rid of them. Without emotion. This is big business, and there’s a lot at stake. Don’t hope for things to self-correct. They won’t. As much of a pain in the ass as it is, you have to get in there and fix things yourself. You need the respect of everyone on your show.

—*Joel Surnow*

Expect to be rewritten.

—*Al Jean*

Don’t rush it. It takes time to learn the craft of episodic writing and producing. I spent five years on staff on three different shows before writing my first pilot. Six years before executive producing on my own. There’s a lot to learn; don’t allow your agent or a studio to force you into a position beyond your experience. In all likelihood, you’ll fail and it can take many, many years to get another chance.

—*John Wells*

Worry about the writing first, second, and third.

—*Carlton Cuse*