Without mentors, we’re left empty-handed—and empty-headed

It’s About The People

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Every week, I read my old friend Larry Rosin’s article about qualitative research in which he mentioned WMMO/Orlando. I was the PD who put the station on the air in 1990 and hired the talented staff that helped catapult the station during what I consider to be a high point of my radio life. Having qualitative research remains a powerful tool that gives managers and financial backers the confidence to actually believe what truly astute programmers already know from experience—or, dare I say, the politically incorrect concept known as gut instinct. But without someone who can implement a plan, develop the team and keep it focused, you get what radio has become since the Telecom Act of ’96.

Radio cannot be a “top-down” business to survive. Look at every successful iteration of formatic radio since the days of Todd Storz and Gordon McLendon. They grew from street level upward. Top-40 radio burgeoned from watching folks pop coins in the jukebox. Local news, sports and issues drove listeners to the full-service giants like WGN/Chicago, KDKA/Pittsburgh and KMOX/St. Louis. When centralized management crams their objectives from headquarters, local input withers. Certainly, great talents like Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern are rare exceptions. Few achieve the greatness required to trump the streets of your community as a basis for program content.

Further, when a company reaches such mas that a middle manager is responsible for the performance of 250 radio stations, it could be argued that there is really no meaningful oversight happening at the corporate level.

Radio cannot survive without its people, and especially not without its mentors.

In the ever-present crush for continued fiscal growth, the industry is beginning to look like a torso without any limbs.
—Cary Pall

Radio’s Unseemly Bottom Line

By Mike Novak

There is a partner who joined my law offices after his prior firm forced him to step down. He did nothing wrong: His former firm simply maintains a strict policy of mandatory retirement at age 70.

I marvel at the short-sightedness behind his previous firm’s policy: At a time when this man’s talent and judgment are at a peak, he is shown the door, solely on account of his age. Unfortunately, the radio industry has for years been afflicted by its own epidemic of age discrimination, cloaked in the cloth of “fiscal responsibility.”

Having represented air talent for more than 25 years, I have sadly observed many instances of radio personality firings motivated entirely by a person’s seniority. The offense: performing too successfully for too long, in turn, building meaningful salaries commensurate with their years of service. In November 2007, CBS TV WOCM/Detroit’s Tom Ryan go after 25 faithful years. Earlier that month the same fate befell Dave “Kane-O” Kane, Dino Kaye and Mark Cronin at Entercom’s newly acquired WCMF/Rochester, who collectively had 70 years’ experience on the air in that town. [Ed. note: Kane has since rejoined WCMF.] The list is painfully long. Several years ago, ABC sacked WJR Detroit’s Jimmy Laurence (50 years’ service), Mike Whorf (39 years) and Enrie Harwell (55 years) because of their lengthy tenures. Steve Cooper (34 years’ service) of Entercom’s WTP1 Indianapolis was another victim.

The stories are disturbingly similar. A talented personality with a lengthy and successful ratings history is summoned to management’s office, usually by ambush. Naturally this employee is earning considerably more money than their replacements will. He or she is soberly advised that ownership has “decided to go in a different direction.” They are then unceremoniously discharged and usually not even afforded the opportunity to say goodbye to their fans. This, at a point in their careers when they have artfully honed their craft to make their extremely challenging on-air duties appear effortless.

The vanishing breed of radio veterans banished from the broadcasting business on account of ageism are class acts, each of them unique. Every forced “retirement” represents the chipping away of an era. Striping the radio industry of these giants cheats the listeners and is indeed a great mistake.

Hopefully station owners will wake up and realize they should rise above the bottom line, for we are all the poorer for it.

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