

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

It's About The People

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Several weeks ago, 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 format 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 down their objectives from headquarters, local input withers. Certainly, great talents like Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern are rare exceptions, not the rule. Few achieve the greatness required to trump the streets of your community as a basis for program content.

Further, when a company reaches such mass

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. The life blood of radio is its people and radio's plasma is being drained. Scan the top stations in each market. Traditionally, they have a living, breathing decent-sized local staff of people at the top of the list.

And who are the people being cut? Often, it's the mentors, the people with the historical knowledge needed to train the next generation. The industry's collective historical knowledge base is being erased, just as completely as the Bolsheviks erased Russia's history prior to 1916.

Conversely, I would argue that the next generation has not yet learned how to be effective communicators with their peers. I can't tell you how many times during the last 10 years I have heard disturbingly ineffective content coming from the mouths of radio's baby DJs and talk hosts, simply because no one is offering them the mentoring they need to get better at their craft. And these mentors are exactly those being targeted for extinction by the business. I can't imagine a more effective way to kill an industry.

Just down the road from my home, Procter & Gamble is very effectively using its senior managers to nurture the next generation of P&G's leaders. So why is radio committing industry suicide?

Through a long series of events and unintended consequences, the research industry has to accept just a little of the blame for the loss of talent on radio. Research provided a paper trail that allowed bean counters to quantify what is not quantifiable. In the process, that has helped to drive a small city of talented individuals out of the business forever and allowed a handful of myopic power brokers, many without a lick of historical perspective, to take the keys and promptly drive us all over the cliff—without any of us having a vote about it. **R&R**

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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 moti-

vated 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 let WOMC/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 Launce (30 years' service), Mike Whorf (39 years) and Ernie

Harwell (55 years) because of their lengthy tenures. Steve Cooper (34 years' service) of Entercom's WTPI 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. Stripping 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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