School of Journalism

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA September, 2008

**GARY MAITLAND** \*

A Difficult Personnel Problem

Gary Maitland was a fixture in local television. At 47, he had spent over 25 years as a reporter and news anchor. In many ways, Gary was the ideal television anchorperson: extremely attractive with a strong, authoritative vocal style without a hint of arrogance; warm and friendly, with a quick wit and good rapport with the station's reporters and other anchorpeople. He also had excellent rapport with local and state officials whom he had often interviewed over the years. He was the market's most recognizable and best-liked celebrity.

Gary has been at WZZP-TV for 2 years as the sole anchor on its 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. newscasts, after 12 years as the market's number-one anchorperson at a rival station, WQQL-TV. Gary's defection from WQQL was a highly publicized event, not unlike the bidding wars which take place for the talents of a free-agent athlete. After wavering for months, he signed with WZZP. In addition to getting the highest salary in the market for any radio or television personality, Gary also gained control over the content of his newscasts and was given the title of Managing Editor.

Despite the sweetheart deal and a large-scale promotional blitz, things did not work out as planned for WZZP management. While Gary did bring some of his audience over to WZZP, WQQL retained its number-one position in both the early and late news. The first rating book after Gary's switch showed the stations in a virtual tie in both the early and late news; in all subsequent reports, WQQL led WZZP by three or four rating points.

The main reason for WQQL's lead seemed to be the new anchor team the station brought in: Bill Valentine and Mary McVee, an extremely attractive, personable, male-female duo who concentrated on hard news and investigative reporting. Valentine, who was African-American, had been a reporter at the station for several years and McVee, who was white, was new to the market.

But much of the blame for the falling ratings was placed at Maitland's feet. The WZZP news director knew that Gary insisted that the producers try to select stories for the newscasts that were soft and that concentrated on good news which celebrated the market's conservative, mainstream values. Also, the good-natured bantering Maitland and other members of the news team enjoyed on the air at WQQL sounded more like strident antagonism at WZZP.

Gary's off-air personality also changed. Claiming, "I don't have time for all that," he refused to participate in station community-oriented events. He began showing up in the studio at the last second before air time and departed the premises within minutes after the completion of the broadcasts and debriefing meetings through which he showed his obvious boredom and displeasure. Between the early and late news broadcasts, Gary would give the late news producer some quick instructions about the angle he wanted on certain stories and then leave for a leisurely dinner. He usually returned with liquor on his breath. Twice he had been late for the 11 p.m. newscast, forcing the producer to forego the pre-show tease and go right to commercials and the pre-produced show open. On the rare occasions when he didn't go out for dinner between shows, he would always have several beers in the newsroom before the 11:00 p.m. newscast.

Gary's problems at home had apparently spilled over into his professional life. Gary's former wife moved to California, making it difficult for him to see his two children. There were reports that Gary's drinking had become excessive. Finally, late on a Tuesday night, a drunk-driving citation that included abusive behavior toward a female arresting officer confirmed almost everyone's suspicions: Gary Maitland had a serious drinking problem; he might even be an alcoholic.

The general manager of WZZP stayed late on the Wednesday following Gary's arrest and called Gary into his office the moment Gary's 11:00 p.m. newscast was over. The general manager was furious. He screamed at Gary: "I've had it! This is it! Look at this item in the paper! You've made the station look awful! You're fired! We have a morals clause in your contract and I'm invoking it. Your behavior last night with the cops was totally out of hand. I got disturbed at 3:00 a.m. by the police chief screaming at me about your abuse of the arresting officer. How dare you try to fondle that policewoman and then call her every sexist name in the book. You're stupid! Not just last night either; I'm also firing you for being repeatedly late, which is in clear violation of your contract. Your behavior around here has been awful, moronic. You're a drunk, Gary, and because your ratings didn't go up, you've cost me a bundle. I'm paying you exactly twice the total that Valentine and McVee are making and you've been terrible on the air – being nasty to the weather and sports people and to the reporters, and saying filthy things to your producer. You're a creep and we're getting you out of here before we fall any further in the ratings and get any more bad publicity in the newspaper!"

Gary was stunned. He stammered, "What about my paycheck and my benefits -- my health insurance?"

The General Manager was still angry. "I have no idea. Come back tomorrow and the business manager will figure all that out. I don't think you can keep any of those benefits. Damn you, you've almost ruined this station!"

AUTHOR’S NOTE

While the incidents in this case are not factual, they do represent a composite of actual events and common operating practices. This case was prepared to use as a teaching tool.

ASSIGNMENT

1. List all of the things the general manager did wrong in his Wednesday night meeting with Gary Maitland. What problems are likely to be the result of this conversation?
2. Assuming the Wednesday night conversation did *not* take place, but that all of the facts and accusations are true and that you are WZZP's general manager, which of the following options are you going to select in dealing with Gary Maitland? Are there other, better options?
   1. Terminate Maitland. Fire him and get his bad attitude and influence out of the station as soon as you can get the details worked out. It might be best to let Gary get a fresh start in another market, allowing you to develop a new strategy against WQQL. While this course is favored by your news director, it has at least two drawbacks: (1) If you lose an inevitable court fight about invoking the morals clause, you will probably have to eat eighteen months of a $350,000-a-year contract, and (2) giving up on Gary might reflect negatively on the station from a public-relations perspective, now that the public knows about Gary's drinking problem from the newspaper story. Paying out Gary's expensive contract will also reduce your financial ability to employ a two-anchor strategy, which your news director is urging. Even though Maitland's contract has a morals clause in it that your lawyers believe is enforceable because of the incident with the policewoman, invoking it and firing Gary might be a problem because if he is an alcoholic, he might be considered disabled by a court. Also, the lawyers indicate that you might have to spend almost as much in court costs as you would if you paid him off if Gary decides to challenge his firing in court.
   2. Suspend Maitland immediately. Grant him a paid leave of absence and insist that he enter a full-time rehabilitation program with the condition that if, after a reasonable time he shows improvement, you will allow him to resume his duties as an anchorperson, but not as managing editor. During the suspension you can try a two-anchor approach in the early and late news.
   3. Retain Maitland as your main anchorperson and managing editor. You will suggest but not insist that he enroll in a rehabilitation program in his off hours, hoping that his control over alcoholism will lead to improved job performance (and better ratings).
   4. Overlook this first offense but shift Gary's on-air contributions. The sales department feels taking Gary off the air entirely would adversely affect revenue. You could use this incident as an excuse to switch him to doing only the early news and try a fresh approach in the late news with a new two-person anchor team. This switch would take pressure off Gary and allow him to work out his problem on his own.
   5. What are the broader implications of each course of action?
   6. Should the station have a drug-and-alcohol policy? If so what should it be?
   7. Finally, and most important to this case, what are your goals in your first conversation with Gary?

\* Adapted by Charles Warner from the "Go-Go Giddens" case in Barry Sherman's  *Telecommunications Management,* McGraw-Hill, 1986.