School of Media Studies

THE NEW SCHOOL February, 2014

**IN TROUBLE**

Dirk Davis Thinks He Is About To Get Fired

Dear Charlie: Once again, I wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed the RTNDA/University of Missouri News Directors Management Seminar. I have never learned so much in such a short period of time. When I returned to KVVB after the seminar, I put a lot of the ideas I learned into practice. I got much more input from all of the people in the news department – I really did become a participative manager. In the last couple of months I've had several people tell me that I'm a better news director.

Two of those people are not my lead anchor and my general manager. Ellen Arnold, the anchor, has been at the station for about five years – she preceded me by three years – and she has a very tight relationship with my general manager, Lou Mounty. I don't think it's anything more than a close business relationship, but you can never be sure with Ellen, who will stop at nothing to get her way. Lou hired Ellen and has promoted her as the station's leading personality and star.

At first Lou thought Ellen would be KVVB's savior in our ratings battle with Channel 6, the market's news leader for over a decade with 45 shares in both early and late news (we're a distant second with steady 25 shares, although we had a nice uptick in the May sweeps to a 29 share). But Lou seems to be a little discouraged now about ever overtaking Channel 6. Ellen, who talks with Lou frequently, seems to sense this and I believe she is trying to divert focus away from herself and onto me. She wants to make me the problem and the scapegoat.

Lou is on the hunt for scapegoats too. This is his third general manager's job, each in a smaller market. He's been here eight years and seems to be frightened. The local owners are putting pressure on him to keep profits up. They are in the construction business and don't understand the importance of news. Plus, some of their real estate and construction deals are in trouble, and they want the bottom line propped up no matter what. I think Lou is looking to make me the problem.

For example, last week he told me to "fix the weatherman." The weatherman has a habit of looking at the monitor when he does the weather instead of pointing to the map wall behind him often enough. It's minor problem and can be fixed in time. But Lou is on a tear about it. I've talked to the weatherman several times, but it will take a while to correct the habit. Today Lou said again, "When the hell are you going to fix the weather man?" Lou goes home about 4:30 p.m. and takes notes on the newscasts, then brings in the notes two or three times a week – usually nit-picking stuff like the weatherman, never anything substantive about content.

Also, Ellen has been complaining to Lou that we change her scripts all the time, that we won't let her ad lib on the air, that we don't involve her in any news decisions and that her producer hates her. She sees Lou about three or four times a week, always with the same litany of complaints. Lou is getting tired of it and has said to me, "Do something, be decisive, make her happy – we're paying her more than we pay you!" What can I do?

Ellen is right: (a) we have to edit her scripts because she's an atrocious writer, (b) we ask her not to ad lib because she's awful at it – she has a silly, nervous and high-pitched giggle that drives everyone crazy, (c) we don't involve her in news decisions because she's an ex-beauty queen, not a journalist and has terrible news judgment and (d) her producer does hate her because Ellen is impossible to work with. Ellen constantly lets everyone know that she has access to Lou, and if someone asks her to do something she doesn't want to, she says things like, "I don't think Lou would like that." As you know, the producer, Lenise Smith, has an MA from your J School and is an excellent, intelligent and dedicated producer. Ellen makes Lenise's life miserable. I tried several times to tell Lou that Ellen is a problem, but he won't listen, so I've stopped saying anything.

Lou doesn't want any more bad news. Business is way off for the first quarter, network ratings are down, the network has cut out compensation and the owners are hollering for more profit. Lou is very tight with the general sales manager, who he thinks is an aggressive, tough guy who pushes the salespeople to the limit. The sales manager is in Lou's office three or four times a day brown nosing him.

Lou likes the operations manager, too, who he recently promoted from being promotion director. Lou fired the program director, who had been with the station 19 years, and combined her job with the promotion director's and called the new job operations manager. The operations manager is a memo freak. He puts everything in writing – it's a flood. He can't even have a conversation with me; he comes to my office and hands me a memo that's carbon copied to Lou. He did it three times yesterday. Lou loves it! He says, "Now there's a take-charge guy." The ops guy hasn't done much, since Lou makes all the programming decisions (he likes to get a free dinner from the syndication salespeople) and the advertising budget has been cut way back by Lou.

The promotion cutback drives Ellen nuts, but she won't say anything to Lou or Hank, the operations manager, who she knows is one of Lou's pets. So Ellen complains to me and has somehow twisted things around so that it's my fault. She even said to me this morning, "Why don't you promote me more?"

Charlie, I'm afraid. My wife and I like this area, and the two kids are happy with their friends and school. We have a nice house with a big mortgage. What can I do to avoid being fired? I think I'm a good manager and I have strong support in the newsroom, especially from my 6:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. producer, Lenise, and my right-hand person, my assignment editor. We know we're doing a good job on news, but how do I convince Lou?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

ASSIGNMENT

1. What advice would you give Dirk Davis?