

Hosts walk high wires, producers hold nets

Organization charts may put the producer in charge, but, hey, who really acts like the senior partner?

By Jim Russell

Susan Stamberg needed a housekeeper. When I was a first-time producer of NPR's *All Things Considered* in the 1970s, Susan was hosting. She—and therefore I—had a weird problem. *She* needed to pretape the show's third half-hour (6-6:30) so she could get home to prepare dinner for her young son and husband. And *the show* needed for Susan to stay and host it live.

I proposed a solution to Susan: "You need a housekeeper." Susan thought that was interesting, but had no idea where to find one. "Don't worry," I said, "I'll find one for you."

I tell this story because it illustrates a radio producer's job in the delicate and crucially important relationship with the host or star of the show. I've often joked that while all of us have job descriptions that end with "all other duties as assigned," a producer's job description is made up *entirely and solely of that single phrase!*

I'm not complaining, either. It takes incredible talent and focus to be a performer. It is a scary, risky proposition to go out on that stage, face a potentially hostile crowd (they're *all* potentially hostile), drop your guard and perform. Susan used to warn us that when all hell broke loose, the tapes broke and the recorders stopped working, she would just go out and do her "interpretive dance of spring!" She meant it, and she knew that some day, it just might happen.

Performing takes a lot of guts and energy and willingness to risk one's ego. Jay Kernis, NPR's senior v.p. for programming until last week, well understands the risks that talent face every day.

"It's not easy to walk the high wire, but

we ask hosts to do it every day or week," says Kernis. "It's terrifying up there, and we want them to make it look exciting but effortless. When a host looks down from the wire, she or he should see us (producers) on the ground holding out the net in case they should fall. Not only aware of where the net is backstage, but actually holding the net out underneath them—and we also should be smiling up at them. Encouragement is the key."

David Brancaccio, former *Marketplace* host and current *Now* anchor, observes that the hosts are out front when the listeners turn angry. "While within the shop, the producer shares the heat when things go wrong, it is fair to say the audience blames the person on the air. I never get calls, e-mail, or comments when button-holed on the subway that start with 'Tell your producer not to let you sound so stupid.' The great producers who have made programs I have hosted successful have all recognized that special existential horror felt by their on-air folks when there is a screw-up in front of millions of people."

Because performers focus so much psychic energy on performance and face the anxiety of failure, they sometimes miss out on the balanced lives experienced by normal people. I've seen them struggle with everyday tasks such as replacing burned-out light bulbs, shopping for dinner, staging children's birthday parties and getting the laundry done.

Successful producers help talent compensate. They make a deal with their talent: "I'll help you maneuver the everyday travails of living life, and you will go out there every night and try to give the performance of your life."

Many production staffs and even some producers don't grasp the trade-off, how-

ever. They often resent what they see as the "odd" host behavior and complain about a host's ego and seeming obliviousness to others' needs and feelings.

Being a host isn't a license to abuse co-workers, but co-workers need to understand the stress and drain of performing, and I think most do not. If everyone thinks talent are asses of the "Ted Baxter" variety, it tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Former NPR Vice President of News Bill Buzenberg talks about the vulnerability of talent: "They need constant reassurance. They need to know that the producer is looking out after his or her interests at all times. Support the host, make the host feel comfortable and focused, and the show will be a success. Undercut or criticize or be less than fully supportive, and the host will fall short, and soon want another producer. I have seen that many many times."

"Every host I have ever worked with—no matter how big and nationally well-known—has had both a big ego and has been a delicate person inside who really needed constant support and words of praise for their work and understanding of their difficult role," Buzenberg says. "They are the ones hanging out on a limb, and it feels very tenuous to the hosts, no matter how secure the slot really is. Good producers know that the success of the host is their own success, because then the program succeeds."

Beyond helping a talent navigate through life, what is the key talent of a good producer? A lot of people think it is conceiving and shaping a show, selecting guests and music, knowing production techniques and what sounds good. All of these *are* important, but they're not the top priority.

The greatest demand on a producer is to know when talent is delivering her best performance, "on her mark"—the equivalent of a theatrical actor delivering the right line, in the right way, on top of the right mark on the stage floor. Talent drift on and off of their "mark," and the producer needs to stand back and listen, really hear the performance, and know whether it's perfect or the performer has drifted. And, when she has drifted, the producer has to know how to coach her,

supportively, back to the mark.

This requires enormous trust between talent and producer. The producer has to be willing to do whatever it takes to establish that trust. The talent has to feel the producer has nothing at stake except obtaining her very best performance—and must hear a consistent message from the producer: “I am here to help you deliver the best ‘you’ that ever existed.”

It also requires tremendous patience, time and energy to have a good relationship with a host. As I once said to a producer, “If he (the host) wants to walk on the beach and contemplate the universe, you darned well better like the feel of sand in your toes.” A host wants to know that while the producers and reporters are focusing on their segments of the show, *somebody* is paying full attention to the entire program, that somebody is the keeper of the flame, ensuring the show is what they intended.

A good producer can't fake it—and must be prepared. Veteran producer Ben Manilla puts it very well: “I can't tell you the number of times I've been told that a specific performer has a bad reputation—‘he/she is very hard to deal with.’ Some of the talent I've worked with who have been so described include Walter Cronkite, Whoopi Goldberg, Soupy Sales, Billy Joel, etc. In every case, I quickly discovered that *if I was well prepared, had a clear picture of the issue at hand, and acted professionally*, it was effortless to collaborate with the talent, and they invariably delivered great performances.”

Despite this delicate interdependence between host and producer, issues of “power” regularly arise. On an organization chart or job description, the host may “report to” the producer or the executive producer. But we'd all be fools if we didn't recognize that the successful host has special privileges and access to the big boss and to VIPs.

The host, not the producer, is the embodiment of the station's or the program's brand, and he knows it. The audience—even professionals in the business—tend to give tremendous credit to the host and little to the producer. Christine Tschida, who was Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* producer for 11 years, puts it

very honestly: “Being a producer is a job for someone who is comfortable being completely out of the spotlight but directly in the line of fire. I always used to remind myself that if the show was brilliant, it was all credit to the talent; but if it was a disaster, it was all my fault.”

In local stations, the relationship between producers and hosts may be even more confusing. It's best described as “a delicate dance,” according to a study conducted some years ago by public radio consultants Ken Mills and Steve Martin. “Producers most often view the relationship as collaborative,” they wrote. “But when push comes to shove, the host is the ‘senior partner’ and the producer is the ‘junior partner.’”

Of the producers they surveyed, nearly half said the host had final authority, some said the program director did, and none thought the producer had final authority.

Whether that fact is recognized in a talent agreement or not, the successful host knows he has the power, and the smart producer recognizes it, too. Managing a powerful and egocentric artist is a great challenge for a producer. The talent needs to be invested in the show, needs to feel that his or her ideas receive proper consideration. The producer needs to guide show development with a gentle hand so that the talent don't feel shoved or forced. Rather, the talent need to feel they're guided by *their own reasons*, not the producer's. A smart producer offers viable options to the host. This doesn't mean the host's point of view trumps every debate. But it does mean a smart producer listens to the hosts' concerns and tries to address them in a timely manner. And, if the producer or executive producer must make a decision that runs counter to the host's desires, the producer *must* level with the host, explaining why he chose to go another way.

“What makes a producer really good is to somehow be able to push talent to a place that suits the producer *without the talent feeling betrayed or defeated*,” Robert Krulwich said.

The mark of a good producer in these circumstances is the ability to weigh the arguments, giving considerable weight to the host's views and, if necessary, to sell a contrary decision to the host without forc-

ing a confrontation.

In the end, as NPR's Jay Kernis concedes, “Even though you are in charge, hosts always win. You can't *force* them to do something they really don't want to do, that they don't think is in their best interest or the right thing for the show. They are the ones on the air, and they control the microphone.” And, Kernis says, if you do force the issue—“if you win this time, they will get back at you next time—and that indicates a bad partnership.”

Buzenberg, the former NPR news v.p., says that producers need to be realistic and sensitive to how they exert their influence: “Producers who think they are the final say, and wield their power accordingly, make that tension worse and ultimately unbearable for the host. Producers who realize their power is strictly limited by how happy they can make the host will keep their jobs and produce great programs.”

More than anything else, producing is the art of managing talent. If you can do that in a way that fulfills the talent and results in a great show, then you have reached the pinnacle of the producing profession.

“Just as it takes great talent to be an excellent host, it takes a subtle, nuanced ability for the best producers to recognize they are indeed second fiddles,” Buzenberg says. “They need to accept that fact so the first violin can always shine, and thus make the program shine as well.” ■

Jim Russell created APM's Marketplace and Weekend America and developed the concept for PRI's The World. He's now a program consultant (www.programdoctor.com) based in Chapel Hill, N.C., and recently helped develop The State We're In, co-produced by Radio Netherlands and WAMU, and The Story with Dick Gordon. He is working with a number of stations to help strengthen local talk shows.

