

VISUAL JOURNALISM
LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Vision Courage & Heart



Lessons in leadership from
author **Bob Lynn**, who used
uncommon common sense
to lead two newspapers
to photojournalism greatness

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1 THE VISION

Voices

It started with the voices.

Voices in my head about running a photo department.

Yet the last thing I wanted to do was be a manager. I was a staff photographer at the Cincinnati Enquirer. Hey, I loved shooting pictures for a living. And besides, I'd seen so many negative management styles in my career, I had no desire to join the club.

But the voices persisted. Actually, it was more my brain having a conversation with itself – “You know ... if ever I was in charge of a newspaper photo operation, I'd do it differently.” All kinds of ideas poured through my head about ways I'd lead and manage.

I knew that newspapers where I had worked – as well as others across the country – could be much better. Could give their readers much more. Better pictures. Better use of pictures. Better-designed pages. It was clear that at most newspapers, man-

HOMELESS Documentary photography is the heart and soul of what we should be doing as newspaper photojournalists. These homeless children sleep where they can – tents, shelters, motels and here in a car. **Jamie Francis**

agement's low expectation for photo content had become self-fulfilling prophecy. The photo department was seen as strictly a service department, not as a professional, creative group of people capable of producing superior, storytelling work.

Bends of the visual deep

And, unfortunately, the same is still true today. Photographers and picture editors at many newspapers suffer from what I would call “the bends of the visual deep.” They've had their enthusiasm and caring for photography driven out of them by an indifferent tradition-bound newsroom culture, a culture that still regards photos as window dressing for the printed page or fodder to feed the Web site. Worn down, the photographers and picture editors have simply given up hope.

Sadly, in many cases, the same can be said for photo department managers. Some, I'm sure, are not even aware that they have – for all practical purpose – hoisted the white flag of surrender.

These long-suffering members of the photo department simply put up with:

- Not being included in story planning.
- Poorly conceived photo requests.
- Unnecessary last-minute assignments.
- Too many assignments in a day (meaning photographers don't have time to produce quality work).
- Being told exactly what and how to shoot assignments by people who don't leave the newsroom.
- Having to turn in virtually “everything shot” (as in, “we don't trust the photographer or picture editors to make good choices”).
- Not having the best and most compelling pictures used.
- Having pictures poorly cropped, sized and displayed.

And upper management typically doesn't have a clue. “Hey, it's your job. You're getting paid. What's the complaint?”

Where's the content?

And that's only the half of it. There are newspapers out there doing a decent job with pictures. Decent content. Maybe good, or

even strong, photo use. I figure people at these papers are pretty much satisfied. I don't want to be a killjoy here, but they shouldn't be. They may be doing a superior job with picture selection and use, but there is an ugly little truth about content in American newspapers today. Even the good ones fall short a lot. Day in, day out, picture content isn't nearly what it could be, or should be.

It doesn't have to be that way. We can do better.

The voices kept ringing in my ears with ideas about managing a photo operation. Slowly I came around from "if I was ever in charge" to "I want to be in charge." I thought – "I can do this. I can make a difference. I can work with photographers, picture editors – and everyone else in the building – reporters, word editors, designers, production people. We can all be successful."

The vision

It was clear to me what needed to be done. First, set photographic content standards high – even the sky should be no limit. In other words, a staff producing only ordinary "good" photography would not do. Second, build an outstanding photo staff. One where everyone fulfills her or his potential. Third, produce a great daily photo report that is used effectively. One that is great, not once in a while, but every day.

And never forget that, in the end, it's all about quality photographic content and serving the reader.

That's it. It's that simple. Set high standards. Build a great staff. And know that your No. 1 job is – day in, day out – seeing to it that your staff produces an exceptional photo report. That it produces pictures better than anything the editors, reporters, designers and readers have ever seen. Pictures so exceptional that they will make their own case for being used effectively.

No. 1 job

It seems to me that many photo managers never stop to think that their No. 1 responsibility is the day in, day out production of an outstanding daily photo report. They're consumed with simply getting all the photo assignments covered, or obtaining new

equipment, or balancing the budget, or putting all of their energy into photo projects, or just pleasing the boss. While all are important in their own way, they are not your No. 1 job.

There is really no excuse if all you have to offer readers on a daily basis is boring, cliché images. For those photo managers who don't put the photo report first, it's a case of not seeing the forest for the trees. If your paper isn't producing excellent pictures every day and running them well, then what's the point of your job? If the paper's design sucks, campaign for a better design. If you have the skill, maybe redesign the paper yourself. And if picture reproduction on the presses is out of register half of the time, work with the press crews to change that.

The voices and common sense

So, lo and behold, I had a vision. I had a mission. I knew I wanted to run a photo department. And I could hear the voices, over and over again, telling me how to lead a staff to greatness, that the most important things to remember were really just common sense things – kinda Sunday School stuff.

- Treat every staff member like you would like to be treated.
- Believe in them and they will believe in themselves.
- Respect them and they will respect themselves, and their self-confidence will grow.
- Trust your staffers and they will be trustworthy.
- Treat them fairly because it's the right thing to do, as well as the smart thing to do.
- Use lots and lots of positive reinforcement.
- Be absolutely honest with them, but always leave them their dignity and dreams.
- Have an open-door policy that is really open. Welcome suggestions, welcome criticism.
- Never assume someone's guilt without knowing the facts (know the deep wounds that come from being falsely accused).
- Reward excellence.
- Hire people who are not only bright, talented, full of energy and passionate about photojournalism, but who are of "good heart," meaning they care about other people.

Motivation - the bricks and mortar of success

When you add up all these common sense (or better put, uncommon common sense) or feel good ways to work with your staff, it points to one thing - MOTIVATION.

Motivation is the bricks and mortar for building a successful - let's make that a great - photo operation.

And so, when I took the plunge into the deep waters of leadership and management at The Charleston Gazette (three years) and at The Virginian-Pilot (17 years), all the things the voices had been telling me - all of them - proved for me to be the Holy Grail of leading and managing a photo department. What we were able to accomplish at those two newspapers was like magic, so rewarding and so darn much fun.