



So You Wanna Be a General Manager?

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Who among us hasn't thought, "I could run this place better than [insert name of boss here]."

For some, maybe that's a pipe dream. But for the dedicated and truly talented, climbing to the top of the corporate ladder is a realistic goal if they keep honing their skills.

At Station Summit 2017 in Las Vegas, Valari Staab, president, NBCUniversal Owned Stations, talked about her own path to the top and offered some advice on how aspiring executives could move up.

"When you are looking at who can rise to general manager positions, I feel like creative service directors are in good shape to be GMs because they have that perspective of touching both news and public relations," she said in a moderated conversation with Scot Chastain, executive VP of affiliate marketing and development, NBC Television Network, and PromaxBDA board chair.

"The thing that holds [CSDs] back a little bit is not managing as many people, but they have serious advantages over the news director and the vice president of sales.

"If you run a newsroom, it's hard to get out of that newsroom and see what else is going on. If you run sales, you are often out of the building and not connected to the rest of the station. You don't want someone who is very dismissive and says sales people don't do anything but take people out to lunch," Staab continued. "You want someone that understands that just like your job is hard and has a lot of responsibility and keeps you crazy busy, it's the same for those other department heads."

Staab advised would-be up-and-comers to avoid the trap that has stopped so many ambitious executives in their tracks: they are extremely good at their current job but they lack the skills needed to take them to the next level.

"What got you to the job you have right now â€" is often not the thing that will make you good in your next job. You often become successful because you are very good at what you do," she said.

What that means is aspiring leaders have to go outside of their comfort zone to acquire skills that don't come naturally to them.

"The key is to learn as much as you can about every other department and develop strong relationships with the heads of those departments. Be willing to get involved with other departments to understand how they work," she said. "Education-wise, learn as much as you can about how people communicate. Reading people and understanding what people are actually saying to you versus what their words say is huge. The better you understand people, the better you can build an environment that will allow them to do their best work."

As for Staab, she's worked hard to put the local back in local broadcasting during her six years overseeing NBC and Telemundo's 30 stations.

"The internet has created a very demanding consumer who can get what they want when they want it. Linear television doesn't do that. It doesn't give you exactly what you want in the moment you want to watch it. You have to have reasons that people will come to you at a certain time and will stay connected to you and to me and that reason is original content," she said.

Most top stations in local markets offer local news. The key is to take that news and make it a station's own so that viewers will always turn to that station first to get the story.

"We do something at our stations that I call 'Google-proofing' the news," Staab said. "We tell our reporters all the time that you can be assigned to the same story that three other reporters in the market are assigned to, but at end of day we want you to have elements in your story that they didn't get, things that they didn't find."

Viewers also tune into stations that consistently offer breaking news, exclusives and investigative pieces, all stories that their competitors don't have. That

means building robust, well-running newsrooms from the ground up. First, station news teams have to be able to cover the market's basic news, and then it can work on adding more complex stories on top of that.

"We want to develop newsrooms where we are breaking news and finding enterprising stories. To do that, we have to have a well-functioning news department that's covering all the bases before it has the ability to get people out there who can break stories and find stories.

"In order to jump-start newsrooms that weren't as good as they could be, we put investigative units in all the stations. We put seasoned journalists next to young inexperienced reporters who needed to be grown and taught," Staab said.

Once all of that was in place, Staab brought in the creative service teams.

"I'm a big proponent of not advertising a bad product," she said. "We laid low until we had good journalism to promote. We worked on evolving the brand and getting the message out. We worked on getting people consistent with their brands."

Another key change Staab made was decentralizing NBC's local marketing. Several years ago, NBC put all of its station marketing into a central hub that would create assets and deliver them back to the stations. But that created a homogeneous feel that had no connection to stations' local markets. And that connection is everything in the local broadcasting business.

"Centralized marketing is such a bad idea," she said to applause from the crowd of station marketers. "The marketing has to reflect the actual town and city that the station is in. When NBC centralized, they were spending more money than I spent putting creative service departments back in all of our stations."

In the end though, Staab said the challenges faced by broadcasters are mirrored in almost every other industry right now.

"If you want to leave broadcasting and go to an easy business, good luck," she said. "The internet has made everything more difficult. It's made it harder to stay relevant and good in your job, I don't care what your job is. Yes, we have challenges as local broadcasters but we don't have many more challenges than everyone else. Whatever job you get, it's your job to look at what's happening, consider what's coming to you from the future and adjust to it."