



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

Broadcast Operations **Training for a Successful Station**

[January 2014] At many stations today, studios often sit empty while the automation rolls on. With fewer and fewer staffers, training the newbies many times is hit and miss. But it is important to the overall success of any station.

With hundreds of LPFM stations getting ready to launch on the airwaves, it is worth a moment to remember that they – like all successful radio stations – must be oriented and “well-nested” within the heart of the community with which they intend to serve, in fact it is mandated by the Federal Communications Commission as the very reason for the right to exist.

Additionally, while the FCC is generally a bit more lenient with LPFM stations, they too must have someone who is responsible and answerable for all technical issues related to the license.

That makes the skills we have and maintain (through training) critical to the success of both ourselves and any organization to which we might be attached. And since both change, everyone’s skill levels must change too.

A CONTANT MISSION

Like it or not, we are being driven to become well-versed in all aspects of our jobs – and many more tasks besides them.

Low Power FM stations will be growing by leaps and bounds over the next several months. Any broadcast station – but perhaps LPFM even more so due to the budgetary restraints – faces the issue of properly training their staff to handle the daily operations.

Success depends upon good cross-training, so that every associate learns the skill sets to deal with everything from routine operations to transmitter outages to emergency alerts – and yes, the occasional plumbing incident.

How deep the cross-training should go depends upon the size of any given facility. In a large facility, there is not always the same need for staff to know a little about everything, but in smaller ones the more staffers may need to “cover” for others, whether due to sickness, vacation, or other issues, the smoother things will work with fewer crises.

FOCUS ON WHAT IS NEEDED

In the “Good ‘ole Days,” many stations had large staffs, some focusing on specific areas, from news gathering to transmitter maintenance.

Today you rarely find a large staff and there are few specialists, as the whole staff pitches in to care for whatever is needed. Thus, broadcasters are forced to think and act more as generalists. Periodically, we should take the time to ask ourselves and fellow staffers, if they are prepared for the various challenges that present themselves each day.

For example:

- What does each one need to know about the station operations?
- Is technical training be furnished to all employees?
- How can we teach and cross-train when there is no money set aside for that?

LEADERS LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Being secretive does not really promote job security.

It is my humble opinion that those who lead in any station must find ways to teach everyone under their watch as many of the skill sets and the abilities that they hold as reasonable and possible.

One could start with the various tasks in the studio – understanding how to record material, get it into the automation system, how to edit the automation schedule when necessary and ensure the traffic and billing applications “know” what is happening.

A short tutorial for everyone, demonstrating the transmitter and how it works will go a long way to reducing off-air situations and getting the signal back up to par as quickly as possible.

It is true that “old fashioned one-on-one” training can be hard to schedule, even expensive. So look at the options as regards what is needed to know to run the stations and its systems. Some volunteers can train others, sometimes a group staff meeting is more efficient. But do not neglect staff training.

DO NOT IGNORE TECHNICAL ISSUES

Non-technical folks generally are happy to ignore the transmission system – at least until the station drops off the air. Successful stations ensure regular maintenance prevents the majority of potential failures.

In order that anyone in the station can understand where things are – and should be – there will need to be a basic log of operating conditions and sign-on, sign-off times. Everyone must at least be aware of the EAS system and how it fits into the overall state and national alerting system. The best situation is when staff properly understands procedures for alerts that are transmitted and/or received, so they are logged properly.

Having competent technical assistance is important, and trying to cut corners on engineering can really cause problems. An example of the need for training came across my desk this past weekend while chatting with a couple of younger engineers were trying to work together to get a new LPFM station on the air with their new exciter/transmitter.

However, a problem occurred: the unit had a lock-out provision to prevent accidental changes to the programming parameters of this transmitter. One engineer fought with it for quite a while, trying different settings until, as he said, he “swore at it enough until it began to work.” Clearly that was not what fixed the problem, but something was amiss, and could return later unless diagnosed properly.

Another station suffered poor coverage for months until it was discovered that someone had wired program audio out of phase. Bringing in someone with technical training uncovered the problem and allowed a rapid fix.

STUDY, UNDERSTAND, & DOCUMENT

Most of us have dealt with “glitches” that called for a re-program a re-boot or re-configuration. That information would be handy to have in a training file for those would be allowed to make such changes



Depending upon the type of transmission equipment one might buy, some training could very well be furnished free of charge.

Indeed, most manufacturers encourage education about their gear. This might take place over a conference call, specialized training documents that can be perused over in a conference room, or the latest in training, web seminars. Manufacturers also maintain web sites with key information available 24/7.

Yet, in the depths of a crisis, sometimes the easiest solution is to call the manufacturer's support number and get prompt, helpful assistance to solve the problem at hand.

Again, once the issue is handled, a narrative should be placed in the station log, equipment manual, or both. That way, the next person to

deal with the gear will have an idea of the issues that have been handled.

DO PLAN AHEAD

As is normal for this time of year, much of the country finds itself in a very wide cold zone. That raises an important question: do you know how to protect your equipment, your operation and most importantly yourself from the dangers of the winter?

Likewise, remember preparing for upcoming storm seasons, the summer heat, etc., are all part of proper planning to keep any facility running smoothly and successfully. Let us conclude by recalling the immortal words of Sgt. Phil Esterhaus (Michael Conrad) of Hill Street Blues saying his trademark phrase, "*Let's be careful out there.*" – ***The BDR***

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