

# Is it Time For a Change in Your University Reporting Structure?

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**\*University** – is a generic title that also includes colleges, school systems, and state agencies.

During my three-decade tenure at the helm of a public station, each time I felt the station was not meeting its potential, I could trace it in-part to the university reporting structure. **The message of the station's importance was not getting to the people in the power positions within the university structure.** Because the university's success measurements for the station were too narrowly defined due to the reporting structure, the station's potential was stifled.

I began my tenure at a station reporting to a department which was part of a school. I took a student-run station considered an ancillary training laboratory reporting to a broadcasting department and transformed it into a statewide public radio network. **The internal university reporting structures were critical to the success of the station.** After my first three years, the station reported to a Dean. My goal for the station in year two was to have the station reporting to the VP level, and by the fifth year, that goal became a reality.

**Each upgrade was a step closer to gaining recognition from the university that the station's importance and success were critical to the university and that the station's success would reflect positively upon the university.** Each move carried the station closer to the Governing board, and each move helped remove another internal layer of station message filtering. In addition, the moves were followed by winning more regional and national awards for journalism including the duPont Columbia Award for Broadcast Journalism Excellence (considered the equivalent of the Pulitzer) in year five. It also was reflected in the additional revenues generated because of the increased performance in programming designed to meet the community's needs. The community valued the station more due to increased local programming and in turn, the listeners contributed more reflecting the added value of the local programming.

If your university's reporting structure is interfering with the success of the station, you have options. The first (and by far the easiest) is to leave the station, which does not help promote public broadcasting. The second is to attempt to make a change, and if you are successful, you and the station will enjoy the rewards. This process can be a difficult and time consuming process with a lot of politics involved. But if you are successful the rewards and gains for public service far outstrip the struggle.

## **Steps to Changing the Reporting Structure**

Making a reporting structure change is difficult, time consuming, and political, especially if all factions are not in agreement. Each university setting will require tweaking the process. Here are some steps to follow and, not necessarily in chronological order.

- **Universities like to compare their performance with other universities.** Use the information in the USA paper *To Whom Should a Station Report Within a University Structure?* to help demonstrate where other universities are placing their stations.
- **Create a business plan.** Universities are becoming more sophisticated and business-minded. Any plans for changes should be justified by a supportive business plan.
- **If you do not already have one create a station advisory group, a friends' board or a friends' support group for the station.** The clarity of the word "Board" can be complicated in University environments. This is not the University Board or University Trustees. The station will define it. Note: In some university environments a Board or even an advisory group is restricted by the licensee or by statute from engaging in some activities
- **If the station does not already have planning documents, develop them and include a mission statement, goals, and objectives.** Review the university's mission statement and their goals and translate how the station fits into those plans.

- **Communicate your station's value to multiple upper administration resources.** Send out monthly emails to all the campus administrators touting the station's accomplishments and the ways the station promotes the university. It may include the number of public service announcements about university events, the number of university faculty or staff sources used as experts in a news report, information about the broadcast of the university symphony, special features about university projects, etc. If students are used under the supervision of the station's professional staff, feature a student of the month and describe the duties performed by the student.
- **Never Surprise Your Boss.** If you are working on this process, get your boss involved early before contacting outside groups. You want to be considered a "team player" with solutions rather than a "trouble maker" with complaints. In fact, if the boss has early buy-in, he or she may help gain support both internally and externally for the change.
- **Get 100% agreement and buy-in among the station staff** and endorsements from the station advisory group, major funders, political connections, and other key individuals whom the university respects and trusts.
- **Sometimes you simply have to wait for university administrations to leave.**
- **Be patient** because it takes time and energy that will be added to all the other jobs and duties the GM has. The process to move my station from an ancillary training laboratory reporting to a broadcasting department to a Vice President took about five years and success came in incremental steps
- **Reporting structures and office space are two sacred areas for some within universities.** Be prepared to become a target. I survived firing threats due to proposing university structural changes, and I survived other internal unit's harassment after a structural change was made. The great rewards come in the long-run when those who first opposed the change came and congratulated me on the station's successes. In effect they were saying you were right to do what you did and your vision of the future was correct.

- **Change is a negative word** – The typical first response to change of any kind is negative. Be prepared with a list of positives.
- **Don't give up.** I failed more times than I can count, but the successes eventually came. My stack of successes is tiny compared to the stack of failures. You only fail when you give-up. DON'T GIVE UP
- **Find strong allies within the university** – There were a few times that successful persuasions were as the result of a power within that I knew nothing about. Your station's friends have friends, too, and sometimes you will not know all of them.
- **Integrity is everything.** It takes years to build trust and integrity, but it can be lost quickly. Within the university, your trust factor is your strength. If you are trusted you will be heard. If you make a promise ... fulfill it. You provide the vision for the future of the station. If allowed to attempt your vision, do everything you can to fulfill it. In the mid 1980's, I envisioned a signal expansion that became a reality. It was a five-year process that resulted in a considerable station debt at the end. The expansion debts were paid-in-full a year sooner than promised. The vision was fulfilled, and the dollars were raised as promised. Actions speak louder than words, and the actions of the fulfilled dream allowed the university to trust other expansion visions down the road.
- **Do not get caught in the personality trap.** "I really like reporting to \_\_\_\_\_ because he or she is great!" What happens when this great person leaves? Unfortunately, personalities cause some decisions to be made in the short-run without a vision for the future. Do not be short-sighted. Unfortunately, even if you are not, structural decisions sometimes come down to personalities and politics rather than on common sense and public service. This is not a sound basis for decision making, but you will have to deal with it from time to time.

## Conclusion

It is imperative the station manager have an on-going process that not only communicates the value and importance of the station to the person to whom they

report but to others within the higher education community. **The top station administrator's job is to define and translate the station's value into terms and grids any administrator can understand.** It is likely this university administrator will eventually be in a position to recommend and/or review upper administrator replacements, and some of them may themselves be promoted into positions over the station.

The higher education community is fluid, and the fact that you have a great relationship with the licensee today does not necessarily translate into a good relationship in the future. It is common for a station manager's tenure to last through several university administration changes. Change is not the exception but the rule, so **have in place an on-going licensee education process that extends beyond the administrator to whom you commonly report.**

The suggestions above are a not a guarantee to success, but they are better than doing nothing and assuming the university understands your station's importance. If you have a great relationship, and the structure does not impede success, congratulations! Just remember, life is what happens when you are planning for it. Keep informing as many university administrators as possible about the value of your station and the impact it makes on your community and the culture in which you live. **Regardless of how much or how little financial resources the university supplies the station, they still own it and you are hired to protect it for them, and in some unfortunate instances, from them.**