won’t have to worry as much about kick-backs, padded time cards, inflated petty cash expenses, missing equipment or being charged for something that wasn’t legitimate. And you’ll never have to worry about your ability to assemble a good, reliable crew.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not totally living in la-la land and do realize that you can do all of the right things and there will always be those crew members who are less than professional, hard-working, ethical and reliable. I can personally attest to having worked with my fair share of individuals who don’t know the meaning of the term team player, incessantly complain and find fault, are sloppy and careless, will always try to get away with something and/or will be looking to cash in on every minute of meal penalty or overtime they can get their hands on. There are bullies and slackers and those who can talk a good game but never manage to follow through. The thing is, once you know their game, you can choose not to work with these people again. Over time, you’ll learn who to stay away from. Then when you have the ability to hire your own crew – when you’re the decision maker, you’ll be able to cherry-pick from the best, because ultimately high standards will attract high standards.

### Negotiating Tips for Hiring Crew

- Department heads will generally work for less if you rent their equipment and/or vehicles.
- If you want to pay someone more than what the studio has allotted for that position, you might be able to do that by way of a (higher) box/kit rental.
- Although some studios set maximum allowable salaries that are carved in stone, others may allow you to pay an individual more than what’s budgeted if you can make better-than-anticipated deals elsewhere and show which account(s) the additional monies can be taken from.
- There are always those individuals willing to work for trade-offs: experience, screen credit, the contacts, points, advancement to a higher position, etc.
- If you happen to be fortunate enough to be starting a show when the industry is going through a slow period, you should be able to line up a top-notch crew willing to work for less than their normal rates. People want to continue working, receiving their union benefits, renting their equipment and making new contacts. We’re all the most flexible when jobs are the least plentiful.
- Appeal to your friends who aren’t working. They too, may be used to higher salaries, but if they’re not doing anything else at the moment, they might be willing to help you out. For those who are afraid to commit for fear that something better may come along, agree to let them replace themselves should they be offered a better-paying show before your show is completed.

So many film schedules are pushed back or canceled that there’s always a good chance they’ll be able to finish your project and not have to leave after all.

- If your budget is truly tight, and this is discussed ahead of time, crew members will often consider waiving a certain amount of meal penalty and overtime (as long as they’re feeling fairly treated in all other respects). Significant amounts of meal penalty and overtime may often be exchanged for an extra day or two tacked on to a wrap schedule.

### AVOID CUTTING OFF YOUR NOSE TO SPITE YOUR FACE

It takes a considerable amount of skill to make good deals and to deliver shows on or under budget, and those adept at this rarely have trouble finding work. Developing this expertise, however, doesn’t come about merely by spending less money. The skill is in getting the most value for your money and knowing where to spend in order to save. Too many people in our industry are too busy trying to be heroes by slashing costs, reducing salaries and cutting corners, when in reality, this is often a good way to run into trouble. Many poor decisions are made in the name of saving money; what may appear impressive on paper often turns out to be much costlier in the long run.

If you can afford to pay fair salaries but are paying less for the sake of saving a few bucks, your crew, if feeling unjustly treated, will find innumerable ways to make up that extra money, and then some. Whether it’s relating to crew salaries or renting less-expensive, less-than-adequate equipment that may break down and create expensive delays, beware of choices that will ultimately cost you more.

Another tough call to make is on the set at the six-hour meal break or at the end of the day when unforeseen events have created delays. Do you pull the plug? Do you avoid meal penalty and/or overtime only to have to spend another day at a particular location, incur another day (or possibly week) of rentals or have to shoot a sixth day? Taking it one step further, do you pull the plug on a schedule that’s running over, taking the chance that if there’s not a sufficient amount of footage – you may have to come back for reshoots at a later date? Talk to your key people (department heads and first assistant director) well in advance of making any major decision, and realize that there might be more than one clear-cut answer. Also be aware that no matter how judicious your decision may be, there will always be someone second-guessing you. But don’t let that stop you. Have confidence and trust your instincts. In the final analysis, it’s important to remember that the mere act of making a decision is often just as important as the decision you make, or you may find yourself standing around all night (on golden time) trying to decide what to do.
When you're working with a tight budget and don't think you can afford to hire someone with a significant amount of experience, think again. You can rarely afford not to. Those with the expertise in the type of project you're doing, in the operation of equipment you wish to use or with the knowledge pertaining to a distant or foreign location you wish to shoot at are more valuable than two or three others with less experience, and they'll ultimately save you both time and money. You will never be sorry hiring the very best people you can afford.

Occasionally, one of your department heads will ask you for something you know for a fact (or just instinctively know) they can do without, and approving the request would lead to unnecessary costs. But for the most part, if you're working with people who have earned your trust, and one of them tells you he needs an extra person or an extra piece of equipment, it's probably because he does. True, it's an added expense you hadn't budgeted for, and this department may be able to do without – but there's also the chance that by denying the request, you may be compromising your schedule or the safety of your crew. This is when things tend to fall between the proverbial cracks, because all bases can't be covered at once. Do you spend more now or risk incurring any combination of delays, overtime, second meals, loss and damage, late-payment charges, reshoots or accidents later on?

So now we're back to spending more for that experienced person who comes to the table with the most-informed, best-qualified answers as to when it's most appropriate to spend in order to save. And this is also where those long-term relationships come in handy, because if you're working with department heads you know and trust, there should be little or no need to second-guess them.

STANDARDS OF BUSINESS CONDUCT

In the past several years, more and more production entities have implemented guidelines that discourage conflicts of interest and discrimination and encourage proper standards of business conduct. One company I was with required all employees to take an online ethics course as a condition of our employment, and I've found that whether you're directed to an online site or handed a booklet (like at Disney), many other companies are doing likewise.

Here are some examples of elements that constitute ethical business practices:

- Respect: The production company is committed to treating all cast, crew and staff members with fairness, dignity and respect – free of any discrimination or harassment.
- Diversity: The production company endeavors to be multicultural and is receptive to the unique talents and potential of every member of its diverse work force.
- Safety: The production company is committed to providing a safe working environment for all employees.
- Accountability: The production company believes that employees should take responsibility for their actions.
- Confidence: The production company is confident in its employees' abilities to handle situations effectively.

Elements relating more specifically to conflicts of interest include:

- Gifts: The receipt of cash, gifts or services by an employee or member of the employee’s family from any organization that does business or can be expected to do business with the production company should be reported to the production executive.
- Influencing Business Transactions: Participating in, approving or attempting to influence others to approve any transaction involving cash, goods or services is prohibited if the employee or a member of an employee’s family receives any personal economic gain from the transaction.
- Promotional Items: All merchandise secured for promotional purposes, if not totally expended during production, shall be returned to the company it originated from or disposed of in accordance with the distribution of other company assets.
- Additional Compensation: No compensation, rentals, fees or value substitutions shall be paid to any employee if not specified in that individual’s deal memo. Only the production executive is authorized to grant additional compensation.
- Use of Company Information: Employees may not use confidential company information for their personal benefit or the benefit of others.
- Accurate Reporting: All employees are expected to report and record all information and complete all company documents accurately and honestly. This includes time cards, reimbursable petty cash and business expenses, invoices, safety records and all other related documentation.
- Vendors: All employees shall deal fairly with the company’s suppliers, treat vendors fairly, avoid unfair buying tactics and favoritism. This is where getting competitive bids for all major rental packages comes in. (See more about competitive bids in Chapter 3.)
- Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and Related Matters: The Foreign Corrupt Practices Act makes it unlawful to give anything of value to foreign government officials, foreign political parties, party officials or candidates for public office for the purpose of obtaining or retaining business for the company or directing business to the company.

If you do an online search for “Standards of Business Conduct,” you’ll see more examples of these types of programs than you could ever want to know about – more than enough to create some standards for your own production.

POLITICS AND PRINCIPLES

Unfortunately, there are individuals in this industry to whom ethical business conduct is just a vague concept, as they credit their success to being able to create an
atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Many have spent their entire careers as screamers, scammers, egomaniacs and sleazebuckets – with little or no regard for others. (Amazing, huh?) And there are those who thrive on game-playing and one-upsman ship, regarding politics as an extreme sport. Some people can work in this type of environment – even thrive on it. But I never could, and at a certain point in my career, I figured out that I didn’t have to. And I was lucky enough to find and stay associated with some truly good people in this industry who never cease to inspire me.

So to enhance this chapter, I’ve interviewed a few of the people I most admire. They’re top industry professionals who are highly respected for the way they conduct themselves in everyday work environments fraught with politics. The following are some of their thoughts on how to succeed and deal with others within this competitive, ego-driven arena.

#1: Jonathan Sanger (Elephant Man, Frances, Vanilla Sky, Suspect Zero, The Producers)

Jonathan Sanger is a man with fabulous people skills that are evident in everything he does – even in the way he answers his phone and expresses pleasure at hearing the voice on the other end of the call. Jonathan has several good tips for dealing with people in our industry, although to him, it’s not a matter of politics; it’s just the way he is.

When dealing with his crews, he doesn’t talk down to anyone. He came up through the ranks, understands what they’re up against and conveys his understanding and respect for them and the work they do. He makes good deals but doesn’t go overboard to save a few bucks. He said the crew knows when you’re not being fair, and all they’d have to do is slow down for five minutes a day, and you’d lose more than you could have ever saved by shaving a few dollars off of a few salaries. He prides himself on being fair; and as a result, his crews are supportive and loyal – willing to go the extra distance when necessary.

This doesn’t mean Jonathan always gets to play the good guy and never has to make hard decisions. He says that too many people are afraid of making the wrong choices, so they often do nothing, which is worse. If there’s a problem affecting the show, whether it’s someone on the crew who isn’t doing his job, a conflict of personalities, a petulant actor or a budgetary issue, Jonathan believes that you have to act as soon as possible for the good of the entire production. Otherwise, you end up diverting too much time and energy monitoring the problem and not enough on everything else that needs your attention. He says that if you’re the one in charge, then you should be willing to take responsibility for your decisions – as long as you have justifiable reasons and can defend your choices.

When it comes to dealing with anyone, including top-level professionals and studio executives, he tries to start all new relationships by finding common ground in any situation. He gives the example of walking into someone’s office and seeing a photo of the guy playing basketball. “Great,” he thinks to himself, “I like basketball” – so now he has something to start the conversation with instead of jumping right into business.

As it relates to selling projects, making deals, raising financing or dealing with the studio power structure, he clearly demonstrates to others that he knows what he’s doing, and that he takes his responsibilities seriously. When a situation gets too politically sticky, he quickly assesses who’s involved and the circumstances. Though always up for a good challenge, when faced with too many competing agendas, he says sometimes you just can’t be effective enough and it’s better to just walk away.

When I asked Jonathan how he deals with someone who’s being unreasonable or possibly out of control, he said there are no set guidelines as to how to handle all situations – that sometimes you just have to improvise. Under these circumstances, however, his best advice is to find a way to comfort this person, calm him down, try to understand where he’s coming from and attempt to enlist his logic in finding an amenable conclusion.

Jonathan sees the fact that he likes people as one of his best qualities. He’s open and gracious and has the ability to get along with all types of personalities. He does this in great part by creating work environments that are enjoyable – not fearful. And he finds value in everyone he deals with. Feeling his respect, others are more open, they give more and there’s less friction. I don’t know about you, but this is my ideal universe.

#2: A Top Production Exective (who prefers to remain anonymous)

I recently spoke to another friend, who’s a production executive at a major studio and who deals with highly political situations every single day. And although he prefers to remain nameless, he had some pretty insightful advice to share. First of all, he says that you need to treat everyone with respect, no matter what their position is. Second, know who you’re in business with before you get into business with them. For example, when dealing with a lead actor or director who has little regard for budget constraints, he might build safeguards into their contracts, making them responsible for a sizable percentage of cost overruns. If he knows going in that someone is high-maintenance, he’ll build in backup plans to cover a range of possible situations. When producers and directors are contemptuous of the studio’s involvement or dismissive when it comes to studio guidelines, my friend endeavors to define their common objectives, reminds everyone
that they’re partners in the process and proposes ways for them to share in the responsibility. He says you can’t let your own ego get in the way, because when it comes down to it, it’s all about respecting the integrity of the work.

#3: Ira Shuman (Just Married, Cheaper by the Dozen, The Pink Panther, Night at the Museum, The Pink Panther 2, The Spy Next Door)

Then there’s my long-time friend Ira Shuman, who’s a talented line producer. The political attributes I see in Ira start with his affable personality. He’s easy to talk to, easy to laugh, is patient, fair, accessible, treats everyone with respect, does what he thinks is right for the entire company as well as for the show, and he rarely if ever loses his cool or raises his voice. His philosophy is that you’re at work for more hours than you’re at home, and you need to be a person – not a machine. And unlike those who separate their personal and professional lives, he prefers to integrate his. He says you have to care about the people you work with, their lives and their feelings. He wears many hats at once – not only that of a producer, but also a husband, a father, a friend, a golfer and sometimes even a parent or coach. As easy as Ira is to work with, he holds the people who work under him accountable, and they know there are consequences to not doing their jobs properly. He sees filmmaking as a team sport and values supportive and loyal team members. When he’s working for someone, his goal is to see that person win and to make the best picture possible. When people are working for him, he expects them to be there to help make him win, to support their teammates and to work to the best of their abilities. He says that you can’t be a team player and have your own agenda – the team has to come before your personal interests. For those working in a more corporate setting, his advice is pretty much the same – honor your chain of command and make your leader a winner. If that happens, hopefully you’ll become a trusted and much-relied-upon member of the department. He adds that you should keep your nose clean, carefully watch what you say, don’t deal with others from an emotional level, don’t fight the fights you can’t win, and should you choose to get into it with someone, carefully ponder the dynamics and consequences before doing so. He says when people around you are playing dirty, you have to honestly ask yourself who you are and exactly how ambitious you are. If this isn’t you, nor is it the quality of life you see for yourself, then leave and find a less aggressive arena in which to work. If playing the game to the max and existing in a dog-eat-dog environment is something you’re okay with, then jump right in and give it all you’ve got.

A PRODUCER’S MISSION

Ira is a guest speaker at my USC class each summer, and a couple of summers ago, he came in with what he called his “mission statement.” I was so impressed that I asked him for permission to include it in this new edition, because his is a doctrine that will serve us all well – even if you’re in a position to act upon only a few of these guidelines:

- Deliver your film for the agreed-upon price.
- Deliver bang for the buck – make it look as if it cost more than what you were given to spend.
- Upgrade past standards.
- Make everyone stretch and do more than they think they can. Work harder and smarter and care more.
- Keep the creative doors open – don’t always be the “no” guy. Figure out creative ways to do what needs to be done, but deliver it all for a price.
- Don’t allow individual visions and agendas to jeopardize or distract you from the plan.
- Team. Team. Team.
- Lead, follow or get out of the way
- Honor your chain of command.
- Support your leaders to win.
- Service the movie, because it’s movie you answer to.

Thanks, Ira! Thanks also to Jonathan Sanger and to Matt Birch for their help with this chapter.