THE ELEVEN LAWS OF SHOWRUNNING
Javier Grillo-Marxuach
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Upon finding this essay, any number of showrunners with whom I have worked in the past will assume it is a personal attack in the language of a management lesson. No matter that what follows is a distillation twenty years of experience – and has been in the works since I ran my first show, *The Middleman* – I expect to be excoriated by some who will believe I am writing out of envy, or to avenge some perceived slight, or was just too cowardly to say it to their faces.

It takes that level of ego to be a television writer/producer: the conviction that what you have to say matters so much that it is worth not only mastering the tropes of an entire medium, but also the risk that all the intermediaries required to create the finished product will ruin it all with some fatal blend of incomprehension, or incompetence.

For many, the undeniable triumph that is pitching a series idea, having a pilot ordered, successfully producing it, and then having it ordered to series is nothing less than a validation: not only of their voice and talent, but also their Way of Doing Things. This often translates to an intractable adherence to the notion that "my creative process" is so of the essence that all other concerns must be made subordinate lest the delicate alchemy that made success possible be snuffed.

This often leads to incompetent and – whether through ignorance or ego – abusive senior management. I'm not talking about "the lack of experienced showrunners" currently written about in industry publications, but rather that the management culture of television shows as represented by both experienced and novitiate showrunners is beset by a cult of idiosyncrasy over professionalism, and tolerance of toxic behavior; all enabled by the exigencies of getting the show on-air, and keeping it there by any means necessary.

This is exacerbated by there only being two sins for which a showrunner pays with a pink slip: wasting time and squandering money. However, these contingencies are amply prepared for in studio plans and budgets; and an entire army of dedicated professionals stands beneath the showrunner day in and out to ensure neither occurs.

Why? Because they depend on the show – and the perceived creative and managerial genius of the showrunner – for their living. So, once they have a show on the air, even the worst managers muddle through on something resembling time and budget: usually by the sweat of a lot of talented individuals doing everything humanly possible to keep the ship afloat.

One of the most jealously guarded secrets of TV is the reality that those who get their pilots made and show picked up on any given year are usually no more gifted, visionary, or prodigious, than the ones who did not. There are as many television writers who work regularly as there are professional NBA players at any given time – by that metric, we are all breathing rarefied air – but the process by which television shows are made and selected is by no means some mystical divination by which the artistry of very special snowflakes is empowered that it may elevate the art form as a whole.

Television is – quite simply – a business: with winners, losers, seasonal patterns, production schedules, budgets, and deliverables... just like any other business.

What we do is nothing more – or less – than hard work... hard work that is not exclusive to any one person, but helped along by scores of competent, experienced professionals whose job security is tied to the longevity of the endeavor... hard work that can be done efficiently, thoughtfully, and in a way that doesn't ask anyone involved to sacrifice their personal life, dignity, and – sometimes – personal safety.

Historically, there never was much of an apprenticeship/ mentorship mentality in television. Writers are notoriously taciturn and parochial about their "creative process." However, when there were only three to five broadcast networks and a much longer queue to the top, someone who worked their way up from staff writer (the lowest and least paid position) to show creator/executive producer/showrunner could at least be reliably understood to have at least spent many years learning how to make the trains run on time under the tutelage of writer/producers who had endured the same trials.

Nowadays, programming outlets are as likely to buy television pilots from more junior writers, as well as playwrights, screenwriters, novelists, investigative journalists, and bloggers whose "my year of doing this and not that" article managed to break the Internet as they are from seasoned writer/producers –

and then put them in the position of having to manage what is essentially a start-up corporation with a budget in the eight figures and a hundred-plus employee workforce. More often than not, the weight of that responsibility sends both the experienced and inexperienced into the warm embrace of a mistaken belief that it was all put there to service their creative process and nothing else.

As special and wonderful as creativity and process may be, they are assets that can be channeled, managed, made to work on call, and sent to bed at a decent hour. Any television show – from the most formulaic, to the most genre-defining, medium-transforming phenomenon – can be made on time, on budget, and without demanding that any of the employees put more time at the mine than they absolutely have to, if the showrunners simply apply basic, commonsensical management strategy to their stewardship of the enterprise.

Why is it so hard for showrunners to implement simple strategies in the name of running the show efficiently and humanely?

The answer is that "simple" doesn't mean "easy". The simplest decisions are often hardest because they demand a painful concession to an unpleasant truth. Every one of the Eleven Laws asks for the same thing: the surrender of a quantum of attachment to a showrunner's idea of themselves as the fountainhead of the show's greatness to serve the show and those who work to make it.

It seems like a contradiction – to ask someone from whom visionary leadership is demanded to surrender their ego – but it isn't, because of...

THE FIRST LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU STOP MAKING IT ALL ABOUT YOU

You pitched an idea, sold a script, and got it made. Now you have sixty million dollars and thirteen hours of network airtime – with a strong possibility for much more – for a bully pulpit. Nothing goes in front of the lens that you do not approve. Nothing gets on the screen without your stamp. To the studio, network – and the general public – you and your show are one and the same.

Because it's all about you, you also need to face the truth that your staff works for you in exchange for a paycheck, not out of a genuflecting admiration of your genius. They will do whatever you

need done because they enter every conversation knowing that you can _fire_ them. Their indenture is a given. Their loyalty is not.

It's on you to invest your staff in the vision of the show – in your vision – and turn them into true believers and dedicated workers who will go the extra mile. You can do that by giving them the opportunity to express themselves within the framework you have created.

You can also do that by instilling fear – of job insecurity, of the loss of political capital in the show's hierarchy, or simply the harsh judgment of a capricious father figure. You have the power to be either an enabler of your employees's creativity, or make them the enablers of your whims.

What will you do with that power? Will you garret yourself until you absolutely have to emerge to tell your staff what to do? Will you demand that everyone jockey for your favor in order to have the information they need to do their job... or will you provide that information freely so that creativity blooms because – and not in spite – of you?

Are you strong and secure enough in your talent and accomplishment to accept the possibility that other people – properly empowered by you – can actually enhance your genius... or will you cling to the idea that only you can be the source of that genius?

How you answer that question determines the leader you will be.

THE SECOND LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
KNOW YOUR SHOW AND TELL EVERYONE WHAT IT IS

It seems weird that someone would sell a show and then not really "know" what it is – or be unwilling to share that information. Kind of like Steve Jobs not telling his staff more about the iPod than that "it's white and needs a dial"... and yet, not knowing – or not telling – what the show is a common showrunner dysfunction.

Your employees need specific knowledge of the tone, texture, and technique of the show to do their jobs. Even after producing the pilot episode, most of that crucial information still remains in your head. The pilot episode was a prototype. Now you have to discern what it was that worked so well in the pilot and turn that into a reproducible result. You also have to figure out the

things that didn't work - with a certain amount of honesty and self-reflection - and then articulate to your team how you want them fixed. Most of your work as a showrunner is to communicate information to other people so that they can execute it within their field of expertise.

One of the great contradictions of the way we make television in the United States is that writers are given managerial control over the entire enterprise... but writers are very often bad communicators outside the page. Also, talking to people non-stop, all day, with great specificity about a project this size is hard, and tiring. That much said, there are seven words no competent showrunner should ever say:

"I'll know it when I see it."

When you're a showrunner, it is on you to define the tone, the story, and the characters. You are NOT a curator of other people's ideas. You are their motivator, their inspiration, and the person responsible for their implementation.

Bottom line: the creativity of your staff isn't for coming up with your core ideas for you, it's for making your core ideas bigger and better once you've come up with them. To say "I'll know it when I see it" is to abdicate the hard work of creation while hoarding the authority to declare what is or isn't good.

While anyone can say "I'll know it when I see it," it is the writer's ability to create that is the reason we are the showrunners in American television. To be effective, you have to articulate what Maya Lin referred to as "a strong, clear vision." You have to draw the boundaries of the sandbox with precision, detail, consistency, and integrity.

This is a difficult task that requires intellectual and creative rigor, a measure of non-solipsistic introspection, and that you make a discipline out of talking to other people and being on message at all times. As a showrunner, you must communicate your vision so that everyone understands it, and then preach it, day in and out, to the point of exhaustion until everyone feels it in their soul like a gospel. And here's the great part of successfully communicating a shared vision: your employees will love you for it.

Loyalty to an employer begins with the knowledge of what the job is. Loyalty comes from knowing that your bosses have your back

both in the form of giving out the information necessary to do what you do and do it right, and the empowerment to use your own abilities to improve on the baseline.

THE THIRD LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
ALWAYS DESCRIBE A PATH TO SUCCESS

Describing a path to success is the natural outgrowth of the Second Law. This advice was given to me by the non-writing Executive Producer on my show *The Middleman* - a very seasoned production executive who strove to create an environment where I could excel in communicating the goals of the show to all comers.

"Always Describe a Path to Success" means - in its most practical form - "Do not leave a meeting without letting everyone there know what they are expected to do/deliver next."

If you tell your staff how to please you, two out of three times they will come back with a way to do exactly what you want. If they can't, they will often come up with a number of better ideas out of a desire to address the spirit, if not the letter, of a clear directive.

Every clear directive you issue is a gift because it relieves your staff of the stress of having to divine your goals. A clear directive is an indication of trust: your way of saying "I have taken the time and effort to figure out our goal. I now acknowledge that you have the knowledge and resources to figure out the process."

To successfully define a path to success, you don't even have to know the exact hill to take. The grinding race that is television often means that you may not always know the next goal; but even if you articulate your order as "Help me figure out the next hill to take," or "Let me know what our resources are so that I can make an educated decision about where to attack next," that alone constitutes a directive with a defined outcome.

You will be amazed at how much even that measure of clarity will galvanize a team. When you define the problems, you not only control the direction of the enterprise, you also free your staff to do what they do best: dedicate their unique skills to their solution.

THE FOURTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
MAKE DECISIONS EARLY AND OFTEN

As the days, weeks, and months churn away, you will find that – whether you like it or not, and whether it's in your comfort zone or not – everyone constantly solicits decisions from you. Remember the First Law.

And yet, an aversion to making decisions is a massively common showrunning dysfunction. It comes out of an understandable insecurity: once you make a decision, the world knows where you stand. Once you say "This is what this is," you have made your taste and opinion clear: the world will judge you. Decision aversion can also be a stalling tactic designed to let you have it your way without ruffling too many feathers on an interpersonal and creative level. Wanting to be seen as "a nice person" and a "good employer" are understandable desires.

While "nice" can mean "affable" and "pleasant," a second definition of "nice" is also "precise and demanding careful attention." In my experience, nice people – and good bosses – rip off the Band-Aid early, make the case for their decision, hear out any remaining arguments, then shut down the discussion and send everyone off to get on with their work.

Avoiding decisions causes your staff to run themselves ragged coming up with contingencies and robs them of the time they need to properly execute your vision. There's also the sad – and very frustrating and demoralizing to your employees – truth that most decision-averse managers usually return to one of the first things they were pitched as their final answer.

Your job is to make ideas come to life. The first step is to commit. Commit early. Commit often. Make committing the same as breathing: you might as well do it now, because you will have to do it eventually.

Most importantly, the sooner you make a decision, the sooner you will know from your crew what is achievable, and the sooner they will be able to expand upon – and use their talents to – elevate it. The time you spent not deciding is time you rob from your staff's ability to make whatever the object of the decision the best it can be. The show simply cannot go on until you say what the show is.

THE FIFTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
DO NOT DEMAND A FINAL PRODUCT AT THE IDEA STAGE

When you sold your pilot, you didn't take an eight million dollar film of your script to the network meeting. You talked the executives through your idea for a series, the characters, and your story for the pilot, and they proceeded to entrust you with millions of dollars to fulfill your vision. Considering how much the creation of a TV series depends on a studio and network's ability to visualize a bunch of words coming out of some writer's mouth, it is surprising that many showrunners lack the skill to visualize story when pitched to them by their own staff.

Architects can see buildings off blueprints. That's their job. Yours is to see the gross anatomy of the stories the writers pitch you off the shorthand of the board, and to let them run with the details. The next step is to visualize even further down the line as the writers refine the muscular, circulatory, and nervous systems in the slightly more detailed treatment of the story, plot, and scenes in an outline, and – if you don't like the shape of the surface once the script come in – for you to give notes and rewrite if necessary.

If, as a showrunner, you repeatedly have to return stories to the board after they have been outlined or scripted – or find yourself sending your writers off to script and outline in frustration, only to then rewrite from page one, you need to consider doing some work on your own ability to create and discern story from the foundations up.

Not all writers have this ability, but it is something that can and should be learned – and which is crucial to making television – because the physical production of the scripts depends on the departments having consistent, and accurate communication from the writers office as to what is coming down the pike.

One of things increasingly lost as showrunners are no longer asked to work their way up the ranks in the television hierarchy is a comfort level with collaboration in the form of the writers room, and a knowledge of story – usually born of coming up with one story after another on other people's shows. It is from this longitudinal experience of collaboration and story generation that most showrunners learn how to visualize.

How, then, if you do not come from a lifetime of conference and teamwork, but find yourself forced into collusion with a writers

room - whom you need, if for no other reason, to generate the
sheer volume of material the show demands - do you develop this
skill? The answer is trust. You take the leap of faith that the
professionals you hired can execute on the page what is
shorthanded on the board. You trust that someone pitching you
"meet cute" knows how to render that on the page given an
adequate amount of time. You trust that other writers
occasionally need to retire to their keyboards to do their job to
the fullest... and understand that, because you will decide
whether or not they have to be fired after they turn their draft,
they are profoundly invested in doing a good job...

As showrunner, you have to divest yourself from the desire to be
the audience. You are the chief designer and architect. Sure, you
can demand to be "entertained" by work that feels complete in its
gestational phase, but often, the inevitable product of that
demand is that will you be bored by it by the time it reaches
your desk because you will have effectively destroyed a crucial
part of your staff's creative process.

Ironically, it's the part of the process that many dysfunctional
showrunners guard jealously for themselves...

THE SIXTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
WRITE AND REWRITE QUICKLY

Scripts are an expression of a writers soul... but that's not all
they are. A script is also work order.

Without a complete script, no one can decide where they are going
to take the trucks with all the lights and cameras and costumes,
and for how long. Without a script, no one can figure out how
much it's going to cost to make this episode of your series.
Without a script, the actors can't prepare for their work in
front of the camera.

A script is the most specific description of the work ahead of
the production for weeks to come. If you procrastinate - or allow
yourself to become precious - you are creating a void in which no
one knows what their job is; especially your writing staff.

A studio has given you millions of dollars to hire a group of
people whose mission is to learn how to produce work that reads
and sounds like your voice. Reproducing that voice is the primary
goal of your writing staff. The best and most efficient way they
can do that is by reading your prose and dialogue. The faster you

write, the sooner they can integrate your idiosyncrasies into the process... and the faster you rewrite their work, the faster they can internalize your changes to their work into the matrix of that learning process.

For most competent writers working under the exigencies of a television season, a week to a week and a half is considered ample time to write the first draft of a script from a solid story break and outline... and yet, dysfunctional showrunners routinely avail themselves significantly longer spans of time to write their own scripts. This destroys morale - as your staff sees you taking liberties you would not give to any of them - and causes chaos in production. Your show's scripts, as written - or rewritten - by you are your most effective tool in your performance of the Second Law. You can't talk to everyone at all times, and eventually, you have a responsibility to take your talk from the theoretical to the real.

A script ultimately represents the concretization of your voice and gesture. A script is your proof of concept, and if its fate is to fail that proof, then you are better off knowing sooner rather than later, so that you - and all of your employees - can use the time to fix what's broken and right the ship while there is still time.

Scripts are how you talk to cast, crew, studio, and network. Write them quickly, rewrite them impassively and efficiently. Work your scripts until they are ready, but recognize that in a fast-moving business like television, most of the time they will only be ready enough.

Your best ideas will survive criticism, the worst ones... there's no amount of attachment that can keep them alive, and it may not be worth fighting so hard for your precious children: the horizon is full of other children, all of whom need your immediate attention and will quickly make you forget the ones you've had to leave behind.

THE SEVENTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
TRACK MULTIPLE TARGETS EFFICIENTLY BY DELEGATING RESPONSIBILITY

In the 1980's, the members of the Berlin Symphony told joke about their imperious conductor, Herbert Von Karajan: The *maestro* gets into a taxi. The driver asks "Where to?" "It doesn't matter," Von Karajan declaims, "I'm needed EVERYWHERE!"

With or without the colossal arrogance, that is one of the
essential truths of showrunner life. This is why understanding
the First Law, and practicing the Second, are so important. At
any given moment during the course of a season, there are six
stories that have to be minded: the story in development on the
board in the writers room, the story in outline, the story being
scripted, the story being prepared for production, the story in
production, and the story being completed in editing and post
production.

That means meetings. Costume meetings, set decoration meetings,
hair and make-up meetings, budget meetings, casting concept
calls, network and studio notes calls on multiple drafts of
multiple scripts, outlines, and stories, sound and special
effects spotting in post-production... enough meetings to wear
down even the most extroverted mass-communicator.

And yet, your job is to track all those targets. Because that is
a manifestly impossible task, you have a secret weapon in your
arsenal designed to combat the fatigue that comes from always
having someone at your door who needs to be told What is What.

That weapon is, of course, your writers.

Though you don't realize it just yet, your writers are, in fact,
your apostles. Yes: that motley bunch is a band of spiritual
warriors ready to spread your Evangel to every corner of your
show's domain.

The reason the ranking system of writers goes from staff writer,
to story editor, to executive story editor, to co-producer,
producer, supervising producer, and co-executive producer, is
because you're not just running a show - you're also running a
producer/showrunner academy. Even if you are woefully
uninterested in teaching/under qualified to teach this
discipline, this is the duty that fate has thrust upon you. The
way you run a producer/showrunning academy is by making the
writers in the room the privileged bearers of your knowledge of
What The Show Is and then sending them off to all these meetings
to give voice to your unique vision.

The reason the Second Law is so important is that, once you use
it to empower your people to spread the Word, it actually takes
stress and labor off your hands. TV production is a nigh-
insurmountable, and ever-rising, Everest of work. It is for that
reason that, over decades, a system evolved by which a team of

highly creative people were put in a privileged position of access to the seat of power and knowledge. All you have to do is share with your writer/producers/showrunners-in-training What You Want, then send them off to all the meetings and have them report back. You do not have to give up your command authority: remember the First Law, and remember that there will always be a final meeting on all these matters before the scenes are shot.

Why should you ask for this help and take yourself out of at least part of the loop? Because it all begins with the story: you need to focus your energy on making sure that the stories are developed to your satisfaction from the ground up. The writers room is the forge of your show's creation – the single most important place in the universe as far as you should be concerned – even though everything conspires to keep you away from it; jealously guarding your time in the writers room should be your prime target.

The more your stories represent the purest version of your vision, the more involved will be your writers's knowledge of that vision... and the better your scripts are going to convey the vision to everyone else involved with the production (as well as the outlying regions, like the people who cut your promos at the network, or the people who license the show for merchandising).

This is why conveying your vision clearly – making sure the work of the writers room reflects it first and foremost – and delegating the conveyance of that vision to others is so important. You are in the business of telling stories: you must strive to free your mental bandwidth to make sure they are your first, and final priority.

THE EIGHTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
RESIST THE SIREN CALL OF THE "SEXY GLAMOROUS JOBS"

In the business of entertaining people, many facets of the process of entertaining people are entertaining in and of themselves. Consider the costume designer's workshop. They have drawings of pretty girls on the walls, the costumers are frequently young and attractive – and have a great sense of style and design – and, every once in a while, beautiful actors come in and put on a fashion show for you.

The same applies for production design and prop fabrication – festooned as they are with blueprints, concept art, fabric

samples, and awesome gizmos in various stages of construction. And wait 'til you hit the VFX office, where the boffins will regale you with endless tales of pre-vis and fluid dynamics simulations.

Then there's casting. That's where you can hear actors come in and say your lines in every manner possible. That's right, pretty people come in, say your words back to you, and you get to JUDGE them with impunity!

These are "the sexy, glamorous jobs." You can convince yourself that your direct supervision of these tasks is of the essence... especially if you are stuck on a difficult story knot and the other writers keep telling you the direction you want to go isn't going to untangle it. But you're damaging the show by believing it.

There's another pernicious aspect to the siren song of the sexy glamorous jobs; the longer you spend with your other departments, the more you rob from them the time they need to actually do their job (the designing and construction of things that will look great before the camera and not just sound great in your conversation)... and, by and large, most of them will be too nice to tell you to go away and let them work.

So don't be a Time Bandit (or a "Time Vampire"). Tell people what you want concisely... and then <u>leave</u>... or better yet, tell one of your writer/producers, let them have the discussion with the different department heads first, and then make course corrections later when there's an adequate level of proof of concept.

All of this brings me to post-production. In the late twentieth century – thanks to advances in computer software and memory, and the development of the non-linear/non-destructive editing workflow – post-production changed from a fairly recondite and artisanal process to becoming the single most seductive time suck for showrunners. A showrunner can now go into the editing suite with a large leather couch and massive high-definition screens with a pipeline to the editing system, and watch an episode, a sequence, a scene – even a single sequence of shots – over and over again, and demand any change that enters his/her mind... and, thanks to the miracle of computerized cut-and-paste and endless levels of "undo" and "redo" see it all in real time, and continue to demand changes until every combination of every frame that was shot has been considered.

It feels like real work, but it isn't, I promise. More often than not, all of the consideration and reconsideration done by showrunners of the material in post-production is a distraction from the the far less immediately rewarding work of the writers room. The trick to maintaining a healthy balance between the editing room and the writers room is to not fool yourself into thinking that post-production is where the show truly is. If you repeatedly find yourself "looking for the show" in post, it is because you most likely lost it in the writers room.

So how do you mitigate the siren call? By keeping your eye on the story, and by delegating to those who know the story best the task of making sure that the cut has been maximized toward the telling of the story before you step foot in post. Instead of going into the editing room to watch the first cut of the show from the leather couch - where you can be tempted to start taking things apart before the theme music plays - watch it in your office with the editor and the episode writer. Have a thorough discussion with them as to whether the scenes are telling the story (concerns of style and flair can wait until the story is solid) while an assistant takes notes, and then send the editor off to perform the notes.

When the editor is ready with the next iteration of the episode, do NOT look at it. Send the writer of the episode in to look at the next cut and let him or her decide whether the notes were addressed and give the next round of feedback: again, focussing on whether or not the film is telling the story. Only after you've allowed these steps to take place - maybe more than once - should you get on the leather couch and make it sing.

When you begin to work this way, you may feel like you're abandoning a child during a crucial developmental stage, but I promise you - what you are doing is giving the children being conceived a fighting chance at life.

Now, just because I am an advocate of delegating to your staff doesn't mean I am blind to the truth that all of your hires may be up to the tasks you assign for them, which leads to...

THE NINTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
EXPECT YOUR STAFF TO PERFORM AT VARYING LEVELS OF COMPETENCE

As I mentioned previously, you are not just running a corporation, but also a spoke of the apprentice-to-master wheel

which many of your writers will ride all the way to becoming senior level writer/producers themselves. Among the many keys to being a successful mentor is the understanding that – when you have a room full of writers of different ranks and levels of ability – they will all perform on the page, and in the writers room, differently.

The executive producer-level writer with twenty-five years of experience – who ran his or her own show last year and is now on your staff as your Number Two – should be reliably expected to turn in drafts in which the story and scene structure are solid, and the characters speak with a voice close to what you have established. You may not ultimately like this writer's execution– that part is subjective – but you should have no doubt that you are in the hands of a pro.

This is what your senior level writer/producer has been doing for twenty-five years: learning how to solve story problems in script, mastering the craft of creating scenes that have a discrete beginning, middle, and end, and figuring out how to weave the prosaic concerns of plot and theme into dialogue that conceals the storytelling machinery beneath.

The assistant whom you promoted to staff writer as a reward for loyalty, hard work, and support – and because you read a spec script that you don't really know how long they took to write (or how much input they had from others in its creation) – cannot be expected to deliver on that level. It's on you to not only budget your time and energy to both give them thoughtful notes and rewrite their material, but also to muster the *largesse* to judge their work leniently.

To most showrunners, this seems unfair... and it is, to be honest, something of a damned nuisance. Nevertheless, it's on you to help your junior staff up the long ladder to mastery. The more well-considered your feedback, the better the scripts your writers will produce. It isn't some glacial process: give your staff accurate and specific information about what you want, and constructive feedback as to the how and why (and yes, describing to them WHAT to write counts – don't think they will resent your telling them exactly what you want the scene to look/sound like), and you will see marked improvement from script to script.

It sounds simple, and yet, many showrunners can't wrap their heads around that concept. Sometimes it's just more expedient to

stall until you find the time to fix it yourself. It's also wrong. You hired them. You teach them.

The flip side of judging writers without considering their level of experience is the privileging of notes and feedback from "trusted" outsiders. I have seen every variation in this over twenty years, and have been called upon to perform notes given on scripts by the parents, spouses, and children of showrunners, as well as longtime assistant, and even the line cook of a restaurant (whom the showrunner believed was his link to staying "real").

Though it is the accepted wisdom in creative disciplines that "the best idea wins, regardless of where it came from," the most well-meaning attempts to enact this belief end often badly for all parties involved. Imagine a relatively benign version of this scenario: a showrunner asks an assistant to come in from the bullpen and pitch a script note to the twenty-five year veteran.

Here's a few of the reasons why this well-meaning gesture often ends in tears:

A. By the time a pitch/outline/script comes to the showrunner, the writers room has undoubtedly discussed it to every possible endgame. The outsider's idea was most likely already tossed around, taken for a test drive, kicked on the tires, and judged wanting for reasons that you have not yet had the time to examine.
B. You have told the more senior staffer – the one whom you should be trusting with the stewardship of your vision – that you trust them so little that you are looking for help anywhere you can get it.
C. You have sent the message that it's OK for an inexperienced staffer to speak out against a superior. That's not necessarily a sin, but applied capriciously and frequently, it breeds an entitlement in which junior staffers hold back the process because they believe they have the right to veto marching orders from anyone but the showrunner.
D. You have put a younger member of the hierarchy in the awkward position of being shut down in front of you by another one of his/her mentors. Everyone loses face.
E. You are privileging the counsel of people whose power differential with yours is so steep that they will <u>never question your decisions in a productive way</u>.

Now let's say that someone who answers the phones in the front office comes to you with an idea that you do find undeniable. How do you present it to your staff without triggering the awkwardness described above? You give the note yourself without the staffer in the room: if it succeeds the tests, you then graciously give credit to the junior member, also preferably without them in the room, and then later let them know that their idea is being used and that everyone knows where it came from. If the idea is proven to have already been talked about and discarded – and you realize you yourself are behind the mainstream of the creative process in your own room by pitching it – you take the blame, shrug it off, and move on. You're the boss, it will not damage you.

Conversely, if you are the youngest/least experienced/lowest-ranked writer on a staff and have an objection to the work of a more senior writer (and I am giving this advice here because it behooves showrunners to teach this behavior), and have an idea as to how you might fix it, then run your criticism/idea by the next person from you in the hierarchy... and maybe then go with that person to the next person up. You build consensus, insure that the ground under your feet is solid, and then make your move.

These last two points do bring up one, frequently very difficult managerial issue: what do you do when your writers room truly includes a bad apple? Does that fall under the rubric of "expecting writers to behave at different levels of competence?"

Sometimes, yes: bad behavior is often the result of lack of experience and education, That doesn't mean you have to tolerate it, and there are a lot of very useful strategies to mitigate the damage done by negative actors in your staff.

These are the three most common kinds of bad apples that show up in writers rooms:

1. The "Doctor No" – A writer who responds to most ideas that are not theirs with "that sucks" and then lets everyone know how and why, usually without providing ideas about how to fix the problem.
2. The "Hostage Taker" – Sometimes, Doctor Noes cross the line into Hostage Taker, refusing the let the room move on until their objections have been addressed. In younger and less experience staffers, this behavior is career-destroying. Another brand of hostage-taking comes from the writer who mistakes the open environment of the ideal room – to which its

participants should be able to bring their personal business, within the parameters of it being germane to the story – for their personal psychotherapy session/PhD thesis defense.
3. The Politician/Manipulator/Insulter – This refers to those who, through either tone-deafness, a desire to be heard and appreciated, or just plain malice, use information divulged in the open forum of the writers room to publicly or privately hurt, undermine, or make a punchline out of the other writers. This can be especially cancerous: the room runs on a certain amount of trust and sensitivity, and repairing that trust is an exponential investment of time from the speed with which it can be broken.

The strategies you need to correct these problems are simple and straightforward. Oftentimes the people doing these things do not realize that they are negative actors. Showrunners are often conflict-averse: many staffers will go through entire careers without ever being told they are behaving badly.

Here are the simplest ways of clearing the barrels of Bad Apples:

1. Throw the problem back at Doctor No – Doctor No tells you that they disapprove of something, you reply "You break it, you bought it." If you can pitch an objection, but not a solution, you have not earned the right to speak. As showrunner, you get to express that, first politely, then in escalating levels of exasperation until it sticks. More importantly, expressing this is an important part of your job as a teacher: the critical faculty develops earlier than the more craft-focused, patience-requiring, spade-and-trowel discipline of story generation and repair. If you don't correct Doctor No-ism early and often, you are causing yourself and other showrunners more trouble down the line.
2. Confront problems early, head on, and earnestly – If someone is chronically hijacking the room, tell them firmly, but politely (and preferably privately) that "You have a tendency to overshare, it's not always useful, and it undermines the times when what you have to say helps move the story forward," or "You need to watch the jokes about people's personal lives, they come across as hurtful," or (this was once said to me, and to this day, I thank the bearer of the bad news) "Your graphic descriptions of your self-loathing and body image issues are making the other writers uncomfortable, you may want to take your hand off the throttle." You don't have to be artful – or artfully impolite and cruel – to tell people what you need from them. If they push back, don't engage or become

defensive, hear them out, and let them know that they have been heard but that - their defense notwithstanding - you have identified a problem and want it worked on. This is often a crucial aspect of problem-solving: many people need to know they are on the record, even if it doesn't change the outcome. Remember, you're not anyone's best friend: you're the boss.

3. Discuss the problem with your closest subordinate, have them deal with it in one of the ways described above, and save your intervention as a court of final appeal - The reason a twenty-five year veteran is being paid to be your right hand is because they bring the experience and weight to deal with problems like this. Use them: let them deal with the problem, have their back, and if the recalcitrant writer insists on not changing, use the power of your office to reinforce the message at a later time. If, in spite of all this, the pushback continues, then there's always the nuclear options:

4. Exile - Some are so incorrigible that it eventually necessary to figure out a better use for their talent. Writers who perform well on the page but badly in the room can be used in draft writing and rewriting, and kept out of the room altogether. I have often seen Hostage Takers sent to perform producorial services on the set. So much of what happens on the set is about clarifying - especially for the actors - the context of the work at hand, that the sort of fine tooth-combed discussion that can turn into hostage-taking in the room can serve a useful purpose. This is not an optimal solution: writers are paid to write, but some writers are so incompatible with the collaborative process that you may find yourself cornered into finding an alternate use for them.

5. Firing - Sometimes, there's just no two ways about it. The merciful way (once you have dotted all your i's and crossed all your t's with the studio's HR) is to rip off the Band-Aid and be done with it, then everyone can move on.

Nothing above is easy or comfortable. The seduction of the "writing-staffs-as-democracies" fallacy - the desire to believe that you can abdicate your teaching responsibilities because everyone in the staff is "equal" - is aided by how tangential and time consuming these interactions feel. It is far easier to believe that everyone should have one voice and one vote. It is also very damaging.

A writer gains mastery over the form and function of television in the same way that chess players master their game: by studying old games, internalizing the patterns, and practicing, practicing, practicing. Lay-people mistake both chess and writing

as explosions of genius-level creativity: but where does the black powder for that explosion come from? Pattern recognition. That's why the twenty-five year veteran is usually so good at the job of breaking story, even if the younger writers demonstrate a greater flair for dialogue, or can render the rhythms of the current popular culture with greater fidelity. Veterans don't have to reinvent the wheel every time out. The veteran looks at the board and recognizes the ten different ways the game can go from that point to a win, or a draw, or a defeat.

There are only so many variations in chess and story telling – the reason you rely on the veteran is that they don't have to play every variation in order to predict how to reach the outcome you want. The art of writing is in how you disguise the mechanics of this assembly, just as the art of chess comes from fooling your opponent into not seeing your endgame thirty moves ahead.

You may be tempted by the idea of a cabinet of equals – with yourself as the first among them, of course – but your job is to lead and teach. You earn love by recognizing that everyone's gifts are different and giving your employees an environment in which is it safe to try, and both succeed and fail. Every member of a writing staff is on the hook for the education of the next person below them; recognizing that everyone is working at a different level is your first step toward building camaraderie.

Hierarchy is neither a dirty word, nor the sign of a hidebound mind that resists change and innovation. Hierarchy is not proof that you're a square and sell-out. Properly enacted, and thoughtfully maintained, hierarchy is the flak jacket that allows each member of your staff to reach their highest potential without being shredded by gunfire.

THE TENTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
DELIVER GOOD AND BAD NEWS EARLY AND OFTEN

TV shows are natural incubators for the sort of dramas that come along when your force a hundred or more temperamental people into close communion under the pressure of intense work performed under great stress. Invariably, drama comes from secrets. In my experience, secrets are poison – especially when you are exposed as their bearer. Sunlight is the best disinfectant.

The Tenth Law of showrunning is a close dependent of the Second. As the source of the show's vision and the one best qualified to say What It Is and What It Is not, make truth-telling your

business, rumor control your secondary vocation, and complete transparency your ultimate goal. Save the drama for the screen.

The reasons for this are of the essence of the First and Second Laws. You want and need to be the source of all that is true about your show - even if that truth is unpleasant. The worst position for a leader is as the bearer of bad news everyone already knows.

Any information that aids the speed and efficiency of creation - even if it temporarily hurts feelings - is worth exposing early, tactfully, and often... and if that information exposes you as the cause of a blunder, you are better off putting your pride aside and owning up than expecting everyone who works for you become the unwilling accomplices in - and hostages of - the protection of your own self-concept. Whenever a rumor, a lie, or a truth that you have not sanctioned takes on a life of its own, it undermines your own ability to set the tone, define the parameters, and describe a path to success.

Transparency is not just a moral imperative to the life of a showrunner; it's a necessary lifeline. If you need to devote one iota of your energy to deception tracking and maintenance, that's an iota that's not going to the work you need to accomplish in the writers room. Transparency streamlines your life. Being transparent before anyone can be transparent for you means you control the narrative. Giving bad news before they crash land means no one can claim surprise at a bad break.

Being transparent also helps to break down a commonplace fallacy in television: the idea that network and studio are your adversaries. In fact, these are your production partners and your financial backers - as invested in the success of the series as you are - and they deserve to have a clear picture of the process.

In short, when everyone knows the truth, no one can be surprised by its arrival. When it comes from you, no one can say that you lost control.

THE ELEVENTH LAW OF SHOWRUNNING
SHARE CREDIT FOR SUCCESS TO A FAULT

The Eleventh Law of showrunning is the tail of the snake in the mouth of the First... never miss an opportunity to point out how another person's work has made you look good. It's your name on

the show and it's all about you anyway, so you lose nothing by sharing credit.

It sounds counter-intuitive. Most showrunners feel embattled in a job that is manifestly greater than any one person's ability to perform, and feel that – because of their daily marshaling of the resources necessary to commit to that level of intensity – they deserve to be recognized as the sole author of the production.

In truth, that recognition is already there. I'm not just talking about the First Law: the validation of your primacy comes weekly in the form of the largest check on the payroll, the biggest office in the suite, the parking spot closest to the front door, and the Executive Producer credit in the main titles of every episode of the show... along with your production company card after the end titles.

Everyone knows who and what you are. Everyone is hanging on your words.

The wonderful thing about credit is that it's not a finite resource. The more credit you give, the more credit you get – for being a genius and hiring a great staff, for being a good boss and a nice person (finally!) who can acknowledge the contributions of others, for fostering a positive work environment, and – most crucially – for being the kind of showrunner who protects their writers from the kinds of short term judgments that you have the liberty rethink in the long term.

By that I mean this: because of your feelings of embattlement, you will often be tempted to tell the studio or network about which writers are not performing to your expectations in order to explain a temporary stop in the script pipeline, or a missed deadline, or to assuage your own temporary feelings of annoyance. There are few things a showrunner can do that are less becoming of their station than to throw a staff member under the bus.

The first reason is that the road is long and you may find yourself discovering – as this writer does further work for you – that you actually quite like their writing. You have the liberty to change your mind, but a single bad remark (like a yawn from the emperor in *Amadeus*) can paint a writer's career at network or studio for far longer than you imagine. The second reason is that – when you impugn your own staff – it makes your own stewardship

of the show, your ability to communicate to your staff
effectively, and your own hiring decisions appear suspect.

And yet there will be times when the studio or network will ask
for a draft that you are not prepared to hand over because you
need to do a lot of work on it because the writers didn't nail
it. You know what you say? You say: "There's still work to be
done." That's it – be honest but be fair to the writers and their
process, even if it frustrates you.

If there is pushback from the studio or network, take the
responsibility yourself: own it and revel in the truth that a
blow that would cripple the career of someone of lesser rank is
but a ding on your door.

The reason this is the final Law of Showrunning is not just that
it feeds right back into the First Law, but also that it is the
biggest test of character before you as someone who has just been
handed something close to absolute power in the business.

How you deal with praise – and success, and all the concomitant
slings and arrows thrown at you for your position – and whether
you recognize that you have within you the strength to be that
aforementioned flak jacket to your staff, is as true a test of
your self-esteem and worth as a person as anything you will ever
face.

EPILOGUE

It may be a gross generalization to say that leadership is not a
defining characteristic of most writers, but in my experience, it
is where we most often fall short. And when we fall – or see
something brewing we do not want to face – the natural thing to
do is seek refuge. The place where most of us find it is a vast
and impregnable fortress called "my creativity." Surrounded by a
crocodile-infested moat known as "my process," it is in this
fortress that all other concerns are banished in the name of you
doing "what I have to do" to be "brilliant on the page."

As a showrunner, this is about as far from a safe space as can
exist. The symptoms addressed by the Eleven Laws swirl around
this delusion like debris around that scientifically inaccurate
black hole in the eponymous Disney sci-fi disaster from the late
70s. It is in this fortress that you think it's OK to excuse
yourself your managerial shortcomings under the mistaken
impression that – because you have gone there to find your muse –
you are entitled to any accommodation, deferral of difficult

responsibility, or abdication of a human obligation, that you deem necessary.

All writers indulge this kind of magical thinking to some level: we cling to our depressions, darknesses, and deceptions thinking they are the source of our genius. We mistakenly believe that our creativity is a karmic recompense for whatever traumas we suffered in the past, and use the excuse of "my process" for any number of toxic activities that we believe service the creativity, but which only prolong misery.

For a showrunner, this clinging is toxic not just for the obvious reasons, but because it provides place to run away from all of the very real responsibilities of your position.

The price you pay to play to an audience of millions on the word stage is that you have to make concessions between the tempestuous *artiste* you idealized for yourself when your pain was something that pushed you toward self-expression. The cost of admission to the Majors is that you have people who depend on you: not just for their living, but also their creative, emotional – and, occasionally, physical – well-being... and, oh yes, you also have an audience that's waiting to be entertained.

As a showrunner, your reality is that you are a senior-level professional: someone who earns more for producing a single episode of television than most Americans do in a year, and has earned the power to either indulge their worst side, or aspire to their best.

Whether you choose to embrace this truth, you owe it to the people who have signed up to work for you to not visit upon them the traumas of your past because that is the only way you think you can perform on the page. You also owe it to them to come to reckoning with the truth that you creativity and your pain are not one and the same, and that the need to believe that in order to get the work done is incompatible with your current lot.

Facing this may be the hardest and most painful truth for any writer. While one certainly informs the other, your darkness and your writing come from different places... losing the former – or at least dispelling it long enough to be a fair leader to your employees – will not affect the latter. Your creativity is a renewable resource – just like praise, and credit, and is fed by everything around you – especially the great people you hired to facilitate this difficult undertaking. Your creativity is not

some finite thing that must be hoarded and protected with arcane devices and traps, but rather a gift that you should bestow on every one of your charges if you want them to succeed to the best of their ability.

And, if you don't have the time or energy to lay down your affectations, you can at least shield others from your insanity by building a scaffold of professionalism around yourself. Suffer for your art if you must – but make the effort to prevent others from becoming participants in your daily reenactment of your trauma. It will make your show a better workplace place for you and every member of your staff.

Of course, you don't have to take my word for this.

As I said previously, even the worst – and most abusive – of managers are generally propped up into functionality, not just by their writers, but by everyone who depends on their ability to perform for their profit. These may, then, be the only Laws that are not only completely optional, but – in all honesty – tangential to the most commonly accepted definition of success in this field.

Nothing I have described above will guarantee profit, fame, awards show recognition, and cultural currency and influence: but I can guarantee that, if you make a habit of practicing any number of these Laws, they will make your life, and your relationships – both in and out of the job – at least a little bit better.

So I will just leave them here – as they say in the business of show – "For Your Consideration."

What happens next is up to you.