

ONE BIG HAPPY CREW

By Bill Magod, STAGE DIRECTIONS, October 2004

I once received a telephone call from a production company owner inviting me to work an upcoming gig. It would have been my third show for him. The first two were very difficult because there was insufficient pre-planning. Most items/gear had no labeling: scenery and lighting were tossed from the truck into the theater with no regard for our time and energy; and his attitude toward the crew was less than professional.

I thanked him for thinking of me, and, in an effort to dodge the offer, quickly said, "I am booked." He immediately responded, "But I haven't given you the date yet!" Oops, I thought. Because I believed there would be no benefit in telling him why I preferred to work for other production companies, and not wanting to burn any bridges, I asked him for the date, and repeated that I was booked.

The fastest and easiest way to make employees happy and increase morale is to give everyone a raise, but that's only a short-term motivator. Your company would soon be bankrupt and everyone would be out of a job!

I live by the old saying, "The customer is always right." I define customers as those who benefit from the work I do. As a production manager, my customers are the stage crew. Their customers are the actual ticket holders, the people with the money.

Thinking of the stage crew as my customers gives me an advantage, especially because they are the ones who will actually pull off the show. When things go well, they make me look and feel good, and when difficulty occurs, I am there to serve them and they know that. Too often I hear about managers treating stagehands as "replaceable assets," like a dimmer or amplifier. Since theatre is a collaborative art, I am a firm believer in honest and timely communication. Each show should have a production book with information ranging from people's names, titles, telephone numbers and email addresses to scripts, cues, equipment lists, schedule, etc. On the road, these can include information pertaining to each city – the hotel, venue, local laundry and cleaners, shopping options, even restaurants.

For each job, production schedules are handed out to each person on the crew and posted in several areas of the theater, including dressing rooms and the promoter/producer's office. Often at the bottom or reverse side of the schedule, I will include key information from the production book.

In the production book, I will include the times of food service or meal breaks, in addition to estimated times of sound check, strike and clocking out. After all, by knowing when sound checks, rehearsals and breaks will occur, the stage crew can best schedule their breaks effectively.

At the start of each crew call, I like to gather the crew and hold a meeting. I introduce the department heads and myself, then communicate each person's responsibilities, the schedule and goals of the call, even the location of bathrooms and smoking areas. I inform the crew that I believe in teamwork and welcome suggestions.

Pat McKeown, an A1 audio engineer and crew chief, says he gets frustrated when the crew he's given doesn't have the right experience, and that he wishes in these circumstances management would have given him a head's up. Sometimes, due to budget or availability issues, I am forced to promote people, and at other times I am hiring someone for the first time, like a test drive. In either case, I let the crew chief know the team's background, and who may require extra supervision.

When things change, as they often do in this industry, sharing the information is important, too. Often I hear disgruntled stagehands say, "And when were you going to tell us?" When Mark Lorenzo, rental sales manager for the Boston branch of High Output, a top industry equipment supplier, gives the crew new instructions, he reminds people that "this is new information."

One thing about meal breaks: they're important, and a great investment in crew satisfaction! When I asked

Michael Bosworth, owner of Music First Productions, a New York City-based audio company, “What advice would you give to another crew chief on how to keep your crew happy?” he quickly responded with, “One word – food.” In fact, everyone I interviewed for this article put food and/or planning time for meal breaks first on their list of priorities.

A good production manager knows when to bring food in for the stage crew to keep things on schedule or simply reward them. I remember one July Fourth when, at 5 p.m., I placed an order for pizza to be delivered at midnight. After three days of load-in, setup and an 8 p.m. show, I knew the crew would need another meal to get through strike and load out. In addition to providing food and drink (those who know me know I always have a cooler of water and soft drinks onsite), keep it fun.

It takes many people coming together to put on a show. Be honest, smile and treat people with respect and they will do the same. When I make a mistake, I immediately take responsibility and apologize. The crew learns that I accept mistakes, and by sharing our experiences, we can all learn from the mistakes and become a stronger and better crew, eventually working as a tightly knit team.

Besides, anyone who does not make mistakes isn't human. And if you're not human, then I don't have to pay you.