

PROGRAMMING TO WIN

by John Silliman Dodge



You Talkin' To ME?

Unlike any of **Robert DiNiro's** lines in *Meet The Fockers*, we'll be quoting his famous *Taxi Driver* speech long after he's gone. Even if you never saw the film, you know the scene. He's staring down the mirror, pumping himself up for a show-down with some low life scum.

"You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? Then who the (bleep) else are you talkin' to? You talkin' to me? Well, I'm the only one here. Who do you think you're talking to? Oh yeah? Huh? OK."

Thing is, those lines weren't even in the script. Years later, director **Martin Scorsese** revealed that DiNiro improvised the most famous scene of his career. They shot it right after the actor and director had a heart-to-heart about the nature of the character, his motivations, his state of mind and his purpose. As a result of that direction, DiNiro had a new and deeper understanding of what his role was all about. When the cameras rolled, he wasn't just reading someone else's words — he *became* the character.

I listen to a lot of air talent and most announcers sound undirected. They're not "talkin' to me." If they're talking to anyone, they sound like they're talking to themselves — people alone in a sound-proof box cranking out the backsell, promo, and frontsell. If there's engaging content beyond that, it's rare. Sure, their tone is great. But the difference between an announcer with great tone and an announcer who regularly delivers great content is the difference between a model and an actor. You know what I'm talking about.

Actor **Jeff Bridges** has more to say: "I like to make the 'skin' between a director and myself as thin as possible, so feelings and impulses pass easily between us.

It's a marriage of sorts. The director is my partner, my guide, [and] and my leader. He can help me transcend my own concepts and opinions. To go beyond my ideas about the scene and what I think I'm capable of doing. The director is also my audience."

Revenue-wise, the movie business dwarfs the radio business so I figure they must be doing a few things right in Hollywood. Let's explore this actor/director relationship and see how we can successfully adapt that relationship to radio.

As a PD, consider your "actors" your announcers. How much one-on-one time do you spend with them? How deep into their role, their communication, their delivery do you go? How much do they hear from you about the audience and the mission? Do your announcers consider you their director, their guide, their leader, partner, coach? Are you the person they trust, the one whose opinions they seek out, the one that co-create them?

You might say, "John, it's obvious where you're going with this and I just don't have that kind of time. Between meetings, Selector, record calls, I'm lucky if I spend ten minutes a week one-on-one with my jocks." I know the drill. I've been a PD like you. I often confuse the noisy, urgent, in-my-face things I think I have to do right this minute with the important work I know I should be doing. But if the PD job was easy, anybody could do it. It's not easy. That's why they hired you.

It's time to get serious about your most important role: coach. Every actor, every athlete, every musician knows that a great teacher can help them achieve their full potential. So here's the straight deal — without regular, deep, clear, ongoing

direction from the coach, your great voices will never become great communicators. If you lack time, please call me and perhaps I can help. Meanwhile, here are five things you can do to carve out precious time so you can spend that time developing talent who draws a crowd: **Give your Selector duty away.** Of course the music has to be right. But if you think that the difference between a good seg and a great seg is the difference between a good station and a winning station, think again.

Give your open door policy away. You think you're being inclusive and available, but what you're really being is constantly interrupted. Post hours open and hours closed; in short order people will learn to respect it.

Give your decisions away. Empowering people is not about giving your power away; it's about multiplying your power times their number. Push every decision you make down to the lowest possible level. If you lay out the right vision, one that everyone can buy into, and you clarify that vision at every opportunity; even your junior employees will begin to make good decisions. Train a group of professionals to confidently solve most of their own problems and they'll stop coming to you complaining that the pencils need sharpening.

Give your assumptions away. Twenty-first century radio is as much about presentation as it is about music. It's about putting attractive talent in front of listeners 24/7. Let's not kid ourselves. There is no switch in our listener's head that says, "Before 10 a.m., I want entertainment. After 10 a.m., I don't." Without entertainment value in our presentation, we teach listeners to change the channel when the

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music stops because they're know what's gonna happen next - the announcer will launch into value-free chatter, followed by a stop set the length of "Stairway To Heaven."

• *Give your cynicism away.* Passion and enthusiasm are force multipliers. You are the cheerleader, the pump. Some days it's tough being the pump, but like we said before, if this job were easy anyone could do it. So get up and stay up. Your cast will love you for it.

Let's go back to the movies. Your actors won't play their scenes well if you don't work with them regularly. They need to know: 1) what the big picture is all about; 2) what role they play in the movie; 3) why their character is crucial to the film's success; and 4) the difference between an average performance and a great performance. You can't expect them to figure this out alone. Even the greats can't do this by themselves. They need you.

The benefits of making time for this important work are clear. Since music comes and music goes, you develop talent who gets you through the thick and thin cycles of great songs, personalities who have durable relationships with listeners

who spend more time listening as a result, presenters who are interesting to listen to all by themselves, the kind of people you gravitate to at parties. This feeds that hard to define but winning quality called *stationality*.

Speaking of interesting people to listen to, my old friend **Bob Rivers** hosts a top-rated morning show at **KZOK** in Seattle. Years ago we were hiking in the Cascades when Bob shared a vision. "I don't think I can compete much longer doing a music-based show. People are gonna get their music from a lot of different places in the future, not just the radio. It's time for me to take a real risk and do a personality show, something that nobody else can do."

Bob observed then, as I hope you do today, that music is becoming a commodity that can be accessed by a growing number of channels and devices. In this environment, our presentation is more important than ever before. I can copy your playlist and come right at you, maybe even beat you with your own music if I have a marketing

budget. But I can never copy the unique way your personalities present the package, the way they relate to the audience, the personal relationships they have with the listeners, the way those listeners think of your announcers as friends and family. That's your edge. Sharpen it.

John Silliman Dodge is a radio Swiss Army Knife. He's announced, produced and programmed formats from metal to kids to classical. John pioneered the modern classical approach at WCRB/Boston. Today he gives interactive training workshops and consults radio stations on announcer performance and staff motivation. John also announces for Sirius Satellite Radio. Email john@sillimandodge.com or visit www.sillimandodge.com.



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