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Christa van Raalte & Richard Wallis

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# The good manager in TV: tales for the Twenty-first century

Christa van Raalte and Richard Wallis

Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK

## ABSTRACT

The UK Creative Industries provide meaningful employment to more than two million people (Creative Industries Council, 2022) with opportunities for self-actualisation and satisfaction beyond what many jobs can provide. This is so particularly within the television industry where, since 2015, new streaming services have massively expanded demand for content and consequently employment. Such opportunities, however, have been heavily dependent upon a freelance workforce, whose experience is often characterised by financial insecurity, poor work-life balance, and lack of coherent career structure or support, within a system that predicates against diversity. This article sets out to address some of these issues and their solutions by offering, and problematising, the concept of 'The Good Manager in TV'. In 2021 the authors followed-up an earlier survey of management practices in unscripted TV production across the UK with a series of in-depth interviews with individuals who, in another context, would be characterised as 'middle managers'. Our data suggests that the challenges faced by the would-be good manager in TV can seem overwhelming, evoking the predicament of Brecht's Good Person of Szechwan. Yet it also points to solutions to those challenges. This article reviews our findings in order to answer the following questions: What does it mean to be a good manager in the volatile, project-based, context of TV production? What are the challenges faced by those who aspire to fill the role? How can such challenges be addressed across this evolving creative industry?

## KEYWORDS

Television; management practices; working conditions; industry culture

## Introduction

In April 2019, Tim Davie, Director-General of the BBC and Chair of the Creative Industries Council, hailed the UK's creative industries as 'undoubtedly a real success story, worth over £100 billion per year, employing over two million people and already growing at twice the rate of the economy as a whole' (Davie 2019). Whilst not untrue, this kind of celebratory rhetoric tends to overlook the inherent vulnerabilities of a sector so wholly dependent upon a casualised labour force. Even at the time, there had been widespread consternation about skills gaps and shortages risking the

**CONTACT** Christa van Raalte  [cvanraalte@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:cvanraalte@bournemouth.ac.uk)  Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, BH12 5BB, UK

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sustainability of this success story. And within a year, the UK had gone into the first Covid-19 lockdown.

Many industries were hard hit by the pandemic, but the extent of the lockdown's effect on television's largely freelance workforce was devastating. Complicated pay-as-you-earn, sole trader, and personal services company arrangements resulted in widespread ineligibility for government support. In April 2020, the freelance producer/director's organization Viva La PD claimed that half of this sector's freelance workforce was seriously considering leaving the industry (Viva La 2020). Although recovery did follow – largely due to the huge increase in demand for content – the crisis prompted much soul-searching which evolved into a broader industry-wide conversation about the nature and experience of work in television.

It was against this background, and in collaboration with the industry's union Bectu, that the authors of this article undertook an in-depth survey of almost twelve hundred television production professionals working in the unscripted sector in editorial, production management and craft roles, as well as a number (17%) in senior management positions. The research, which culminated in the report *State of Play 2021: Management Practices in UK Unscripted Television* (van Raalte, Wallis, and Pekalski 2021a) depicts an industry characterised by long hours, difficult working conditions and insecurity, poor communication, bullying, discrimination, high levels of poor mental health, lack of support, lack of diversity and a work culture in which management, where it exists at all, is inept at best.

Although our investigation was prompted by the pandemic, it became clear that the concerns being identified were hardly new. Indeed, our findings are corroborated by much of the academic literature focused on this industry over some two decades. Covid-19 was not the cause but the context in which these concerns about the nature and experience of work in the television industry began to gain broader attention. The Edinburgh Television Festival of that year opened with a panel discussing the need for reform. Other, similar research has highlighted the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable workers (Wreyford et al. 2021), mental health (Wilkes, Carey, and Florisson 2020), contributory factors such as working hours (Swords et al. 2022) and management practices more generally, the latter identifying, in particular, widespread bullying and harassment within the industry (van Raalte, Wallis, and Pekalski 2023). Meanwhile working conditions impact on diversity – notwithstanding repeated but ill-fated remedial initiatives (see, for example, Lee 2011; Nwonka 2015; Percival 2020; Van Raalte, Wallis, and Pekalski 2021b.) retention (Steele 2022), and business resilience (Wilkes, Carey, and Florisson 2020) across the television industry, as they do across the wider creative industries (Carey, Giles, and O'Brien 2023).

There are a number of longstanding economic, cultural and structural factors implicated in the problematic working conditions that characterise the television industry, ranging from widespread precarity and project-based contracts (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013), to a highly competitive and largely unregulated labour market (Ursell 2000), and a myth of meritocracy that masks persistent tendencies toward elitism and nepotism (Lee 2011). One over-arching consideration, however – and one that has been largely neglected in academic literature focused on this industry – is the role of leadership and management. Yet research in management studies and organisational psychology clearly suggest that these are key factors in job satisfaction and

well-being for employees across myriad sectors (e.g. Anderson and Sun 2017; Arnold 2017; Skogstad, Nielsen, and Einarsen 2017; Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad 2018).

This raises the central question we have set out to address in this article: what does it take to be a good manager in television? Indeed, is it even possible? The question is a serious and important one since many of the problematic structural and cultural factors that lead to poor working conditions in the first place, also militate against the kinds of good management and leadership that might help ameliorate those same factors. We draw principally upon the findings of our Leadership and Management Study: a series of twenty-two in-depth interviews undertaken to explore in greater depth some of the issues raised by *State of Play 2021*. We borrow our title from Berthold Brecht's 1943 parable play, *The Good Person of Szechwan*<sup>1</sup>, in which his eponymous heroine finds that, in a wicked world, her 'goodness' is out of step with the prevailing culture and is ultimately unsustainable. We find parallels in her situation and that of those tasked with managing teams in television production, working within an organisational culture where the short-term nature of individual projects favours quick-fix solutions and muddling through. In this context, little consideration is given to the need for investment in the training and support of a good manager.

### Why managers matter

Research within organisational psychology suggests that the balance between job demands and job resources (JD-R) is critical in maintaining workers' health (especially mental health), motivation and retention - all indicators of a positive work environment - and indeed in minimising negative factors like work-place bullying (Ågotnes et al. 2021). The resources that enable us to meet the demands of our work are many and various, and include factors specific to the individual such as education and training, personal health status and family support. However, they also include features of the workplace such as those enumerated in Warr's 'vitamin' model (Warr 1987), which likens the characteristics of a job to the vitamins required to maintain a healthy body. Large-scale empirical studies in the field have identified correlations between characteristics of the work environment and outcomes for members of the workforce - whether material or self-reported (Anderson and Sun 2017; Arnold 2017). Features of the work environment most closely correlated with positive outcomes for employees include a good supervisory relationship (generally defined in terms of positive management practices) and social support (defined in terms of good relationships with colleagues and supportive working teams). Social support itself, meanwhile, is also closely correlated with positive management practices (Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema 2005, 172); so in effect leadership and management practices impact on the worker experience and outcomes both directly and indirectly. Indeed, Breevaart and Bakker, who examine the different effects of job demands, distinguishing energising 'challenge' demands (such as cognitive demands and deadlines, where well-matched to capacity) from enervating 'hindrance' demands (such as bureaucracy, and conflicting priorities), argue that good management has an important role both in boosting the positive effects of the former and in buffering the negative effects of the latter (Breevaart and Bakker 2018, 339).

## What is good management?

Literature on the relationship between management practices and the psychological wellbeing of employees has been dominated by the theory of 'transformational leadership' since Seltzer, Numerof and Bass published the first academic study on the subject in 1989 (Seltzer, Numerof, and Bass 1989). Transformational leadership is generally described in terms of four dimensions: *idealised influence*, defined as 'being a role model and doing the right thing' which refers to both the leader's actual behaviour and to the way this is perceived by employees; *inspirational motivation*, arising from positive vision and expectations; *intellectual stimulation*, referring to the extent to which a leader encourages innovation and creativity in others; and *individual consideration* which encompasses compassion for and development of the individuals within a team (Arnold 2017, 382)<sup>2</sup>. While there are still unanswered questions relating to the mechanisms of causality and the relative impact of different aspects of transformative leadership, in a comprehensive review of the field, Arnold is able to confirm that studies collectively indicate a positive correlation between transformational leadership and employee psychological well-being, and a negative correlation with employee burnout. Ågotnes et al. (2012), meanwhile, find transformational leadership to be negatively correlated with workplace bullying – another key indicator of poor employee wellbeing<sup>3</sup>.

Conversely, 'destructive' leadership practices, (so termed by Skogstad, Nielsen, and Einarsen (2017) and Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad (2018)), are correlated with poor employee outcomes. Indeed, the literature suggests that the negative impact of 'toxic' leadership outweighs the positive impact of effective leadership (Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad 2018, 253). This applies both in the case of tyrannical leadership (characterised, for example, by 'arbitrariness and self-aggrandisement, belittling of subordinates, lack of consideration, a forcing style of conflict resolution, discouraging initiative, and non-contingent punishment' (ibid: 256)), and a passive, *laissez-faire* approach (characterised primarily by the absence of positive behaviours or characteristics). Indeed, in situations where employees have a need for support, or active intervention, avoidant '*laissez-faire*' leadership can be just as destructive as an actively tyrannical style (Skogstad, Nielsen, and Einarsen 2017, 167).

Leadership and management practices themselves are found to be highly susceptible to the working environment. Einarsen et al. for example, have identified a number of contextual factors that may play at least as big a part in determining the kind of leadership practices observed as personal characteristics and beliefs, including work-related stress or frustration, the expectations associated with a given role, and organisational culture (Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad 2018, 264). Researchers recognise that the personality of the individual 'leader' will always influence management style: Johnson et al. (2012), for example explore how collective, relational and individual levels of identity respectively can shape leadership behaviours, with those leaders more strongly focused on individual goals than the success of the organisation, or interpersonal relationships, most likely to demonstrate abusive behaviours. Even this work, however, acknowledges the possibility of within-person fluctuations in response to external factors including organisational culture and training. Breevaart and Bakke, meanwhile, explicitly turn away from the study of 'between-person

differences' of leadership 'style' to focus their own work on 'within-person differences' in leadership behaviours, emphasising the potential for effective training and development, and for skilled leaders to deploy different leadership strategies in different situations as appropriate (Breevaart and Bakker 2018, 339f).

Taking a similarly practical approach, Skogstad et al. identify a range of 'primary, secondary and tertiary interventions' that organisations can employ to reduce the occurrence and impact of destructive leadership and encourage good management practices (Skogstad, Nielsen, and Einarsen 2017, 183). Primary interventions aim to prevent destructive leadership practices, and include an informed approach to recruiting and training leaders, the establishment of a culture that supports positive management practices, and strategies to keep managers' workplace stress under control. Secondary interventions focus on positive HR policies that recognise and promote a duty of care. Tertiary interventions focus on victim support. The responsibility for good management, in this formulation, is placed squarely in the court of the employer.

### Management practices in contemporary UK television

The findings of the *State of Play* survey suggested something of a crisis in relation to management practices within the television industry. Respondents raised a range of concerns from, at the one extreme a low-level lack of confidence in the competence of managers and management practices in general to, at the other extreme, widespread bullying and harassment. Only 41% of respondents thought teams were well managed most of the time. Those who had management responsibilities themselves were particularly damning. As one Series Director told us:

Generally good management is the exception, especially at owner-managed companies. The list includes bullying, shouting, swearing, being poked in the chest, micromanagement, excessive presenteeism and long hours culture, lack of boundaries, blame culture, poor communication, poor scheduling and budgeting, not backing decisions and failure to manage expectations of the commissioner (SoP.34).

A similar view is reflected in a series of recent reports on mental health in the industry commissioned by the Film and Television Charity (FTVC). The first identified the key role of managers in supporting workers, but found most were too busy or preoccupied with their own challenges to support staff (Wilkes, Carey, and Florisson 2020, 23). The second found that the 'most commonly requested intervention to support improved wellbeing was not actually more mental health support – it was, in fact, better line management' (Film and Television Charity, 2021b, 10), a finding repeated by the third report in the following year. In the absence of appropriate training, experience or examples, it was suggested that 'individuals rely on strategies of impersonation and improvisation to survive' (Film and Television Charity 2021, 3) - strategies that sometimes work but more often serve to perpetuate bad management practices, to the detriment of the industry and those who work in it.

By talking to managers themselves about their experiences, we set out to better understand the specific challenges to good management in television and to identify effective strategies the industry might adopt to improve management practices and thus the wellbeing of the workforce.

## The Leadership and Management Study 2022: methodology

Although the respondents to our *State of Play 2021* survey represented a range of experiences in terms of industry discipline and seniority, most were experienced professionals and 70% reported having management responsibilities as part of their current role. As such, the survey served as an opportunity for the team to invite respondents with management experience to take part in in-depth interviews to explore their experience further. 308 respondents provided contact details in answer to this invitation, from which the team selected a purposive sample of 34 individuals with a range of professional specialisms, all of whom had significant management responsibilities. Of these, 22 were successfully contacted, and it is from our interviews with these managers, building on the findings of the wider survey, that this article derives. Demographically our sample was 54% female, 75% heterosexual, 90% white and 100% non-disabled; the majority, as might be expected given their seniority, were over forty years old<sup>4</sup>. Semi-structured interviews were conducted lasting approximately an hour each, and transcripts were analysed to identify recurring themes. These were developed into a simple code book to ensure consistency of coding and NVivo software was employed to help map key patterns in the data.

## Findings from the interviews

Collectively, the interviews we conducted confirmed the picture of a work culture dominated by 'strategies of impersonation and improvisation' as a means of survival (Film and Television Charity, 2021, op cit.). Our interviewees articulated variable levels of awareness when asked to discuss management style and strategies, and variable levels of confidence in their own knowledge and competence. Despite their lack of training and, in some cases, experience, many felt they were doing a passable job of managing their teams. Most, however, referenced other managers who, in their view, were not – and whose poor practice often informed their own attempts to do better. Thus, for example, one explained: 'I never ever shout at my team. In my early experience I had somebody shout at me in the workplace and it's counterproductive. It's humiliating' (M.21)<sup>5</sup>. Another reported that 'many times more junior people say 'I've never had an exec call me to see how I'm getting on, you know, or to chat through something'... which I find astounding' (M.28). One participant highlighted the deleterious impact a lack of confidence may have, speculating that:

a management style that's abrasive and coercive and abrupt is generally the fault of people not being fully confident about what they're doing, and they use that as a weapon ... to reassure themselves that they are in charge (M.21).

In their own work it was clear that most of our interviewees felt a degree of responsibility for the welfare of those they managed. Recognising the importance of practices such as teambuilding, good communication and coaching, they described trying to be the best manager they could, if at times with mixed success:

I'm not perfect so I - I can at times, get really stressed and not deal with it really well, and I have to admit that. However, I always feel bad if I've made somebody else feel bad when I'm under pressure, so I try not to do that.... (M.10).

Our respondents' capacity for good management practice, however, was limited by a number of obstacles, some operating at the level of the individual manager, others at the level of the industry context in which they find themselves. In both cases there were both practical and logistical obstacles, and others that might be described as affective or ideological.

### Findings: individual capacity - identity, ideology and training

In any other industry context most of our interviewees would be described as 'middle managers', however it was striking that our sample did not think of themselves in those terms. When asked about management style and strategies, one admitted, 'I hadn't really thought about it that much, to be honest'(M.15), and it was clear that they were not alone in having previously reflected very little on how they managed their teams. This was perhaps not surprising given a career path largely predicated on peoples' achievements in terms of creative, production or craft skills - with management responsibilities almost an accidental extra. One participant captured this sense of falling into management roles, remarking how 'strange' it was that 'if you're good at your job ... you get promoted and then... all of a sudden you're managing other people. But actually, you know, it takes you away from the thing that you are good at, to begin with' (M.20).

Managers had received little in the way of training or support to enable them to become 'good at' this very different and demanding role. The lack of access to management training had been highlighted by respondents to the *State of Play* survey: of those with management responsibilities, 70% had received no management training at all, meaning that even experienced managers felt at sea in certain contexts, while others admitted that they were making it up as they went along. This picture was confirmed by our interviewees, of whom only two of the twenty-two had received any management training, and only one felt that this had been adequate. The lack of training emerged from the interviews (as from the wider survey) as a major concern at all levels of the industry, not least as it appeared to be 'baked in' to the business model:

I think the poor management absolutely comes down to the fact that people have positions of power without ever having any training whatsoever... and I include myself in that. I've never had any management training at all. Because I'm a freelancer, who's going to give me training? (M.28).

To a degree, management training was seen as a casualty of largely freelance working patterns – it was often noted for example, that people who had had staff contracts at the BBC or, more recently, large streaming companies, might have had the benefit of training. However, its neglect across the wider industry was primarily attributed to what might be described as a pervading ideology of creativity, wherein management skills are simply not recognised as such. As one participant told us: 'I think there's an assumption that... if you're good at your job you'll automatically be good at managing people and it's just instinct' (M.20). Most of our interviewees, however, had not found this assumption to be justified. While some were resigned



to the fact that 'you have to make it up as you go along' (M.9), more admitted to feeling unprepared for the most challenging aspects of their role:

how to manage teams and how to get the best out of teams, and how not to manage things..., how to deal with bullying, how to deal with difficult dynamics, contracts with people - there's no guidance whatsoever for that... (M.13).

A particular deficit was in the area of mental health. Managers not only felt that they lacked the skills and understanding to address issues arising in this area, they often had no idea where to go for information or support. Respondents clearly saw these deficits as common across the industry, not particular to themselves, or to new or inexperienced managers. One, for example, was adamant that 'there should be a lot of training even for people who've managed for years and years. It doesn't mean they're good and it doesn't mean it hasn't changed' (M.18).

The lack of management training, even at high levels within the industry, was seen as reflecting the fact that good management is not valued by decision makers. As one respondent baldly put it, 'they don't care enough if I'm honest' (M.30). Another saw the failure to value management skills as symptomatic of a failure to value the people who make programmes, compared with kit: 'I've been trained [in] how to use a camera. I haven't been trained, for instance, [in] how to deal with a colleague who's having mental health issues' (M.20).

While it was clear our participants often felt they lacked the appropriate experience, training or guidance to support them in their management roles, it was equally clear that many of the challenges they faced were inherent in the structures and culture of the industry itself.

## Findings: structural and cultural context

Deficits in individual capacity were heavily outweighed, in our participants' accounts, by a structural and cultural context that presented them with multiple obstacles to good management practices. Again, practical challenges were compounded by affective or ideological factors, while for many of our participants the attitudes and actions of key decision-makers, both at commissioning channels and within independent production companies (generally referred to as 'indies'), appear calculated to exacerbate both.

Practical, logistical challenges were exemplified by the recurring theme of the 'unachievable goal', whereby managers were simply asked to do too much with too little, creating high levels of stress as well as a seemingly inevitable succession of additional problems impacting time, resource, and by extension the wellbeing of staff:

If you accept the job... it's now your responsibility to make this happen. Even if everyone knows it's not possible. So, and that does happen a lot, I'd say ... your job is to kind of convince other people to be on your team, and then they have been given some of the responsibility for this unachievable goal. And then you can get cross with them, because it's not possible. And your boss is cross with you. And that's how it all goes horribly wrong (M.10).

Ideological challenges, meanwhile, were exemplified by a kind of creative exceptionalism whereby abusive or discriminatory practices and behaviours, that would be considered unacceptable in another industry, were excused and even enabled:

There's a sort of historic, cultural issue, which is ... eccentric behaviour is tolerated to greater degree - there's this assumption that if you're a creative person you're going to be versatile you're going to be eccentric, you know, you're not going to abide by normal societal rules.... I think it's nonsense (M.20).

The picture painted by our respondents was a complex and entangled one, which we have separated for the sake of clarity into issues primarily associated with perceptions of insufficient resource, insufficient support, the action and attitudes 'at the top' of television organisations, and managers' views on the need for change.

### *Insufficient resource*

The experience of our respondents was that production budgets were often unrealistic because the downward pressure from channels was not resisted by production companies, either because 'they [the owners or executives] don't necessarily work out what can be done' for the money available (M.24), or because, in a competitive market, they would knowingly sign off unrealistic budgets 'just to get the commission' (M.31). There was a strong sense, moreover, that budgets had been shrinking over time, with channels wanting 'the same for half the money' (M.10), resulting in 'high pressure work environments' which in turn fostered negative management behaviours (M.20). Under these circumstances some managers felt forced into making unreasonable demands of their teams: 'most people aren't horrible for the sake of it, but they just don't have the money or the time so they have to sort of squeeze people more than they'd like to' (M.8). Indeed, it was not uncommon for managers to feel that they themselves were too 'squeezed' filling in the gaps to focus on their role:

as series producer I'm supposed to actually just oversee and go out and check everybody's doing their job but when you're actually having to carry equipment ..... because you haven't got enough staff ....(M.4).

Time was a universal concern for our participants. Having insufficient time for production was primarily a function of inadequate budgets, but was exacerbated by poor prioritisation of resources as well as poor preparation – itself a result of schedules that allow too little time for pre-production. Participants placed the blame for this firmly with the commissioning channels who, as one explained, 'waste so much time before they sign off the money and always run the clock down until you really need to start shooting, then everybody has to be recruited within a week' (M.12).

Squeezed budgets and tight schedules, along with the pressure to deliver, caused managers considerable stress, which was itself experienced as an obstacle to good management practice. One participant admitted to feeling less able to resolve problems under pressure: 'if we're in the middle of a shoot and things are just going a bit mental, to be honest, I'm probably more stressed and a less effective manager' (M.7). Another was aware of the impact of their own stress on their teams, as well

as on their management style: 'under different circumstances I probably would manage in different ways. But there is a big pressure, so it means it does get passed down the chain a bit' (M.24).

The same factors impacted on managers' ability to mentor and develop members of their teams – something many felt to be especially important in a working environment with no formal career development structures: 'I don't feel like I have enough time to properly manage people and mature people in perhaps the way that they need. And that's something that really upsets me' (M.9). Again this was seen as a deteriorating situation with potential long term ramifications for the industry:

I'm quite enthusiastic about bringing people on and giving them opportunities when I can but that's getting less and less possible as you get tighter budgets because you just don't have the time to train people up which is a shame (M.4).

Time and resource also severely limited any attempts by our participants at equitable recruitment strategies. Many were acutely aware how current practices, based largely on personal contacts, recommendations and closed social media groups, limited the talent pool, as well as undermining diversity,<sup>6</sup> and would have liked to see more transparency with jobs 'properly advertised' and a 'proper interview process where interviewers are asking people the same questions' (M.20). In practice, however, such an approach would require resources they did not have, as well as a radical change to the way in which projects were routinely 'green-lit' by commissioners with very short turnaround times: 'often you need somebody in your team and you need them tomorrow' (M.10).

### **Insufficient support**

Again, these practical obstacles were exacerbated by cultural assumptions and expectations. In terms of recruitment, for example, some managers saw the current system as inevitable or indeed preferable given their tight production budgets and deadlines, which meant they needed staff they knew they could rely on both to perform their role and to get on with the rest of the team. The valorisation of a small number of 'talented' individuals, meanwhile, was reinforced by channels who would often have a 'list' of people they preferred or even required producers to use in particular roles. Conversely, there was no expectation that growth and development should be a consideration, or by extension, that there was value in feedback as a vital mechanism for reward and improvement. In this competitive, creative environment, there was an expectation that individuals would be self-motivated and to a large extent self-sufficient, with managers repeatedly citing the need to avoid 'micromanaging' staff. However this was not always balanced by a recognition of the need for regular feedback - a need suggested by the responses of workers completing the *State of Play* and *Looking Glass* surveys, both of which describe a chronic lack of feedback that can leave staff feeling unsupported, and inadequately briefed. As one of our interviewees explained, 'there's no structure in place anywhere I've seen, to have proper feedback for the team' (M.24) - a deficit they described as 'damaging' to individuals and resulting in opportunities for learning being lost.

Meanwhile managers themselves often felt unsupported, with the lack of practical structures appearing to reflect a broader cultural issue in this respect. One participant admitted, 'Sometimes it gets a bit much. Particularly if you're series producing, you've kind of got nowhere to go...' (M.33) while another observed, 'I've never worked at a production company where there's been HR support ever... there's nobody to have a quiet word with if you're finding things difficult' (M.12). When it came to dealing with problems in their teams, participants found that company cultures and practices varied a great deal. Although some companies were supportive of managers' efforts, others did not wish to engage and effectively restricted or undermined managers' attempts to do the right thing by their staff, with one such instance described as 'really tough and really disappointing, because I still felt I'd let the staff member down because I couldn't resolve it' (M.18). Overall, there was a sense that the industry harboured something of an ideological resistance to positive management practices:

TV can feel a bit like the Wild West... it's largely unregulated....And as far as I'm aware I've never worked for a company that's had any sort of clear understanding of its values, you know,... what are the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.... (M.20).

This, it was felt, became apparent when indies encountered complaints about their treatment of staff, as they clearly didn't have appropriate systems in place and didn't know how to respond. Such instances, high profile or otherwise, exposed fundamental cultural issues within the industry.

### *Attitudes and actions 'at the top'*

Our 'middle managers' were vocal in their criticism of those in television's top jobs who too often provided neither a positive role model nor the necessary support for positive management practices to flourish. There was a distinct sense that 'the amount of interference from the broadcaster has grown...'; and that micromanagement by commissioners 'makes things more difficult and slows production down' (M.18), with one respondent expressing frustration about 'not being able to be clear enough with my team, to give them direct specific instructions... because I didn't have those myself'; which they felt had a negative impact on morale (M.15).

Our respondents felt that their ability to do their own job well was often impacted by actions on the part of production company heads and commissioning editors that they interpreted variously as disingenuous, ignorant, incompetent or deliberately obstructive. On the one hand, they claimed 'the production execs and the heads of production are signing off schedules that they know can't be delivered' (M.11); on the other, some commissioning editors 'have never made anything, and have never... been on location... [or] sat in an edit'; so that they had no idea of the impact of their decisions or demands (M.12). Many were frustrated at the cumulative problems caused for themselves and their teams by

commissioners that don't know what they want; channels that don't understand what they've commissioned; time frames that have been set by people that don't understand the process; budgets that have been written up by people that aren't involved in the process of the project, so they have made shortcuts that they haven't flagged up with you...the list goes on (M.21).

Others were more cynical. One respondent echoed a commonly held view in suggesting that industry leaders were deliberately exploitative, 'thinking about cost effectiveness' in the knowledge that 'they know that they can drive [production] teams into the ground because they want another job at the end of it'; with no formal standards for staff welfare, they concluded, 'the lack of accountability is huge' (M.13). Meanwhile several managers shared stories of being actively blocked by their employers when trying to address issues of bullying on behalf of team members, to allow staff the space to deal with bereavement or to put measures in place to improve mental health outcomes. At times this blocking took the form of indifference and inaction, but at times it was rather more aggressive, with one participant providing this alarming example:

We were filming till 10 o'clock at night, and we were asked to get up and start filming at three o'clock in the morning the following day. And we said we thought it was dangerous.... and we were sent a letter, a legal letter saying you're going to go on the shoot the next day... (M.11).

### *What needs to change?*

When asked what changes in this structural and cultural context would enable better management practices, our respondents identified two key factors. The first was a realistic allocation of resources consistent with the expectations of a given production brief. Some lay the responsibility for this at the door of commissioners, while others focused on the indies who simply needed, as one female participant put it, 'to be more ballsy', although she acknowledged that this, 'needs to be standard across the board' (M.9). The second was some form of regulation to counter the market-driven race to the bottom on welfare, although, in terms of a mechanism to deliver this, opinion was divided between a set of statutory requirements, a voluntary code of conduct for production companies (or a set of minimum expectations broadcasters might sign up to), and a return to more powerful trade unions enforcing contractual terms and conditions. None had much faith in exercises like the annual survey of 'best places to work in television', with its focus on 'fruit bowls and yoga', as opposed to the 'professional' treatment of freelance staff (M.20).

Many of our respondents expressed concern for the future of the industry, seeing HR-related reforms as tokenistic in a context where it remains common practice to issue 'buy-out' contracts requiring staff to waive their rights under the 48h working time directive – described as a 'totally immoral' practice that effectively delegates risk to 'the people who are most financially vulnerable' (M.7). Others, however, discerned a positive shift in the culture, with employers far more aware of their legal obligations, for example, in terms of discrimination and thus more prepared to invest in HR support and management training. Notwithstanding the power structures within which they work, some respondents remained optimistic about their own ability, as good managers, to create positive change: 'I think people can make a difference..., you can make small differences and lots of small differences can end up being a big difference' (M.10).

## Discussion

Our analysis of the interviews as summarised above leads us to make a number of observations about the practices and perception of management in television and about the wider context pertaining to both. In relation to the prevailing attitudes towards management in the industry and the capacity, development and support of individual managers we note that:

- Managers in television production, on the whole, do not primarily identify as such, but rather foreground their role in relation to the 'creative' process of production. This reflects a broader industry tendency to overlook and under-value management skills.
- In as much as management skills are perceived as having value, they are principally focused on the supervision of time and on budgetary control: it is about 'delivering projects on time and on budget' rather than about the good management of the people who are the industry's key resource.
- A focus on the individual – especially in a 'creative' talent-driven context – may promote and facilitate leadership that is focused on immediate individual goals (and associated project/s) rather than the success of either the organisation or other individuals and interpersonal relationships (as suggested by Johnson et al., 2012)
- While the damage done by tyrannical leadership styles and micromanagement are acknowledged, the deleterious effect of poor (or laissez-faire) management, in particular, is under-recognised and insufficiently understood. Neither is it helped by a culture in which masking a lack of confidence and presenting a positive front is taken to be necessary to career survival.
- As good management is not the priority of the individual hire, the hiring company or the commissioning body, there is little investment in training, particularly for freelance staff who make up the majority of 'middle managers' working in production.

In relation to the wider context in which these untrained and often inexperienced managers are required to function, we note that:

- Shrinking production budgets and impractical schedules not only create serious issues in relation to staff wellbeing but put managers under stress to an extent that can compromise their ability to manage well, and that in many cases can serve to increase the stress felt by their teams.
- A lack of time or resource likewise limits managers' capacity to provide constructive feedback, intervene where issues or conflicts arise within the team, or support the development of junior staff.
- A 'just in time' approach to greenlighting (not only for new projects but also for repeat commissions), together with limited resource for this purpose, often makes it all but impossible for managers to employ open, transparent or equitable recruitment strategies, with diversity being a predictable casualty.

- Managers often have little or no recourse to support, including clear HR policies or procedures: this remains a particular problem in small indies, notwithstanding the fact that most of these belong to larger parent organisations. Where they do take steps to intervene in situations they perceive as prejudicial or deleterious to staff wellbeing, they may be met with indifference or active resistance from employers.
- In a highly competitive sector where market forces create a palpable downward pressure on staff wellbeing, these are not balanced by adequate regulation of working conditions or terms of employment.

The industry's tendency to overlook and undervalue management reflects, and is arguably a consequence of, the altered model of employment over recent decades: the shift of responsibility from the employer to the individual and the short-term, project-based nature of work. Indeed, years of neglect in this respect are manifested in a lack of management training or expertise among commissioners, senior executives and the owners of independent production companies. This deficit in senior staff may, in turn, serve to perpetuate both poor management practices and the ongoing failure to recognise, support and invest in good management. Thus, it appears that the lack of priority given to management skills and their development is both a cause and an effect of the lack of management training in the industry, and is thus a striking practical barrier to improving individual capacity in this respect. While it is clear that the industry, the wider workforce and managers themselves could benefit greatly from management training at all levels, it is also clear that this has to be accompanied by a degree of cultural change. If some of the issues identified in relation to the wider working context are not addressed, there is a danger that even appropriately trained managers will feel disempowered and ultimately assert themselves in destructive ways.

The training and support of good managers in television cannot be delegated to individuals but must be embraced as the responsibility of the organisations responsible for commissioning and producing television programming. The primary, secondary and tertiary interventions outlined by Skogstad, Nielsen, and Einarsen (2017) are helpful in conceptualising these responsibilities, emphasising as they do the close relationship between primary interventions such as recruitment strategies, training provision and direct support for managers, secondary interventions involving supportive HR systems, and the 'back-stop' provided by tertiary interventions that offer recourse for workers impacted by poor management practices.

Notably, there has been a tendency, in terms of recent industry developments, to start at the end of Skogstad's list with facilities for victims to report instances of bullying, for example,<sup>7</sup> and most recently the provision of generic HR support materials for managers working in small companies.<sup>8</sup> There would appear to be a greater reluctance to engage with direct, 'primary' interventions. This is not surprising given that most of these are either expensive to resource (such as accessible, high-quality training), or require some serious rethinking of how companies hire and support their managers and, indeed, how they conduct their core business. Skogstad et al. for example, not only suggest that companies should provide ongoing leadership education, but also that they should ensure workplace stress is kept to manageable levels

and that the wider culture supports good positive leadership styles, neither of which is an 'easy fix' in the current working environment. (2017 op cit.)<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

The title of this article evokes Brecht's seminal work *The Good Person of Szechwan*. The gods sent to visit the earth, in Act 1 of the play, recognise the challenges faced by the protagonist Shen Te, surrounded as she is by people who do not value her goodness, and whose actions only serve to make her efforts at virtue more and more difficult to sustain. They acknowledge that she cannot be expected to keep her 'goodness' up in a world that neither recognises nor rewards it. (Brecht 1943 Act 1.) Similarly, a sector that neither values nor rewards good management cannot expect to see good management flourish.

The analogy serves to foreground the wider social, economic and industrial context in which the problem of poor management is just one feature of a problematic workplace - just one symptom of a wider malaise. Indifference, or even active resistance, to good management practices reflect a systemic failing in an industry that does not value its workforce - an industry that treats as disposable the very 'talent' that make its products so central to UK culture and such a successful contribution to UK exports.

Specific interventions such as the provision of accessible, affordable training are important. They need to be accompanied by cultural change, however, to be truly effective. Ultimately, middle managers cannot be made responsible for working conditions and worker wellbeing in a system that is fundamentally detrimental to both. The best trained managers, and those most highly attuned to workers' needs, can only do so much in the face of the impossible brief and an ideology that supports unhealthy work cultures.

Given the current global context, the economic pressure to produce ever-cheaper television while maintaining production standards is unlikely to abate. If the workforce (and ultimately the industry) is to survive these pressures intact, they will need to be counterbalanced by a range of policies and interventions that recognise and protect the individuals (including managers) who staff the industry. This will almost certainly need to include some form of regulation, or incentivised guidance with regard to working conditions alongside investment in management skills and the development of resources and processes to support good management in television. Unless and until this happens, even with the very best of intentions the goodness of the good manager in TV is bound to falter. In the words of Brecht's gods, 'no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand'.

## Notes

1. *The Good Person of Szechwan* is a play by German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht with Ruth Berlau and Margarete Steffinfirst. It explores the possibility of individual goodness in a social context that does not allow for goodness. The play was first performed at the Zürich Schauspielhaus in 1943.



2. Arnold here draws on a range of sources, one of the most influential being Avolio et al (1999). It should be noted that some researchers in the field identify five dimensions, distinguishing between 'attributed' and 'behavioural' idealised influence (Kanste et al 2007).
3. In some circumstances transactional management also proves effective, but many of the features of transactional management lend themselves better to a context characterised by permanent employment contracts and formal system of appraisal, promotion and reward. Kanste et al. (2007) found transactional management less effective for agency staff on short term contracts compared with transformational management strategies.
4. Clearly this final sample is not demographically representative of the industry. While no comparable statistics are available, however, the researchers' experience would suggest it is fairly representative of middle management.
5. Responses have been anonymised interviewees identified by numbers M.1 – 34, based on the original target set.
6. Participants made very little reference to issues of diversity in their interviews other than in the context of recruitment, where many acknowledged the exclusionary nature of current practices.
7. For example the FTVC Bullying Advice Service and 24 hour hotline, and the proposed role of the new Independent Standards Authority in development at the time of writing (Yossman 2023).
8. Exemplified by the recently launched ScreenSkills HR Toolkit (Screenskills, 2023) and the FTVC 'Whole Picture Toolkit' (Film and Television Charity 2022b), which focuses on mental health specifically.
9. In recent months, the BFI has successfully raised £1.5m to address the improvement of hiring and management practices in the UK Screen industries (BFI 2024). The approach and impact are yet to become clear.

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