
C H A P T E R 1 0

DEVELOPING A CREW

USING PEOPLE WITH EXPERIENCE

The title of this chapter speaks of “developing” rather than “choosing” a crew because even when experienced crew members are available, you should still do some experimental shooting together. This verifies not only that equipment is functioning, but that you understand each other. It is quite usual to discover that one camera operator’s close-up is another’s medium shot. A brief and unambiguous language of communication will become especially important when you are “grab” shooting, that is, making camera-position changes in response to a spontaneously changing situation. With no possibility for rehearsal or repeats, a wide margin exists for fatal misunderstandings.

Successful framing, composition, speed of camera movements, and microphone positioning all come about through mutual awareness and adaptation. This happens when people understand each other’s values, signals, and terminology. While shooting exercise footage, expect to discover a wide variance of taste and skill levels, as well as variations in responses, technical vocabulary, and interpretation of standard jargon.

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN CREW

Let us suppose that you live remote from centers of filmmaking, must start from scratch finding and training your crew, and need to work up your own standards. We will assume that you have access to a camcorder, microphone, and a video monitor. How many and what kinds of people will you need? What are their responsibilities?

All the crew need to appreciate—or better yet share—your values. So before working together on anything so personal as a documentary, inquire into not only each person’s technical expertise and experience, but also their feelings and ideas concerning documentary, books, plays, music, hobbies, and interests. Technical

acumen is important, but a person's maturity and values are more so. Knowledge deficiencies can be remedied, but you won't change someone who dislikes your choice of subject or who disapproves of your approach.

CREW MEMBERS' TEMPERAMENTS ARE IMPORTANT!

A documentary crew is very small, two to six persons. A good crew is immensely supportive, not only of the project, but also of the individuals in front of the camera, who are usually being filmed for the first time. The crew's interest and implied approval becomes a vital supplement to that of the director. Conversely, anyone's detachment or disapproval will be felt personally, not only by you the director but also by participants, who are highly aware owing to the unfamiliar work you are asking them to do.

I was usually assigned wonderful crews when I worked for the BBC but occasionally got an individual with problems. Typically it was lapses in mental focus, but more than once I got someone actively subversive. Being under pressure and far from home unbalances some people or exacerbates insecurities and jealousies. This is hard to foresee, and an appalling liability in documentary, which hinges on good relationships.

If a potential crew member has done film or other team work, speak to colleagues. Filming is so intense that work partners quickly learn each other's temperamental strengths and weaknesses.

In each crew member look for

- realism
- reliability
- the ability to sustain effort and concentration for long periods
- a deep interest in the processes and purposes of making documentaries
- someone who knows and values films you particularly respect

In all film crew positions, beware of those who

- have only one working speed (it's usually medium slow, and when faced with a crisis these people usually slow up in confusion or go to pieces)
- forget or modify verbal commitments
- fail to deliver on promises
- habitually overestimate their own abilities
- let their attention expand detrimentally beyond their own field of responsibility
- see you only as a stepping stone toward something more desirable

CLEARLY DEFINE THE AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY

No crew functions well without clear definition of roles and responsibilities. This should include plans to cope with emergencies such as a predictable absence. For example, the director of photography (DP) normally takes over when the director is absent or occupied. Crew should, in any case, be discouraged from taking any and every query to the director when the DP can handle the answers. A director should not have to decide whether someone should put another coin in a parking meter.

When first working together, maintain a formal working structure in which everyone takes care of their own responsibilities and refrains from comment or action in areas of responsibility of other crew members. As you come to know and trust each other, formality can be relaxed. If, on the other hand, you start out informal and then need a tight ship, the change will be mightily resented.

A small film crew—director, camera operator, sound recordist, grip, and production manager—also may consist of prophet, visionary, scribe, strongman, and fixer. Someone will always assume the role of jester or clown because every crew develops its own special dynamic and in-jokes. The pleasure that comes with working together well is the best intoxicant you can imagine and is strongest under pressure. And there is no hangover the morning after.

Careful selection of partners makes anything possible, because a team of determined friends is unstoppable.

CREW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Here is an outline of each crew member's responsibilities and the strengths and weaknesses you might look for. Of course, in real life many of the best practitioners are the exceptions, so this list is fallible. To complete it I have also included a summary of the director's role.

DIRECTOR

The director is responsible for nothing less than the quality and meaning of the final film. He or she must conduct or supervise research, decide on content, assemble a crew, schedule shooting, lead the crew, and direct participants during shooting, and then supervise the editing and finalization of the project. Because profits are seldom in view, the documentary frequently has no producer, so the director must also assemble funding before shooting and hustle distribution afterwards.

A good director has a lively fascination with the cause and effect behind the way real people live; a mind that searches tirelessly for links and explanations, is social, and loves delving into other people's stories. Outwardly informal and easy-going, he or she is methodical and organized but quite able to throw away prior work when early assumptions become obsolete. A good director has endless patience in stalking the truth, and in doing it justice in cinematic terms; is articulate and succinct; knows his or her own mind without being dictatorial; can speak on

terms of respectful equality with all film craftspeople; and is able to understand their problems and co-opt their efforts into realizing his or her authorial intentions.

This sounds impossibly idealistic, so here are some of the negative traits that make directors all too human. Many are obstinate, private, awkward beings who do not explain themselves well, who change their minds, and who are disorganized and visceral. Most can be intimidated by bellicose technicians, have difficulty in giving appropriate attention to both the crew and the participants, and tend to desert one for the other. During shooting, sensory overload catapults many into a Woody Allen condition of acute doubt and anxiety, in which all choice becomes a painful effort. Some cannot bear to deflect from their original intentions and appear to crew members like the captain who insists on sinking at the wheel of the ship.

Directing frequently changes perfectly normal people into manic-depressives who suffer extremes of hope and despair in pursuit of the Holy Grail. If that is not enough of a puzzle to crew members, the director's mental state often generates superhuman energy that tests crew members' patience to the limit.

The truth is that directing an improvisation intended to crystallize life itself is a heady business. It often means living existentially; that is, fully and completely in the present and as if each moment may be your last. The exigencies of directing often bring on this state, whether you like it or not, and particularly so after an initial success. Thereafter you confront failure and artistic/professional death every step of the way. But like mountaineers who feel most alive when dangling over a precipice, the director feels completely alive during the dread and exhilaration of the cinematic chase. Like stage fright for actors, this is a devil that never really goes away.

But aren't fear and excitement the portents to everything worthwhile?

CAMERA OPERATOR

In the minimal crew, the camera operator is responsible for ordering the camera equipment, for testing and adjusting where necessary, and for being thoroughly conversant with its working principles. (Never begin important work without first running tests to forestall Murphy's Law: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.") The camera operator is also responsible for lighting arrangements, for scouting locations to confirm electricity supplies, and for supervising the setting up of the lighting instruments.

The camera operator is responsible for the handling of the camera, which means taking an active role in deciding camera positioning (in collaboration with the director), and controlling all camera movements, such as panning, tilting, zooming in/out, and dollying.

A good operator is highly image conscious, and preferably has training in photography and fine art. You hope for a good sense of composition and design, and an eye for the sociologically telling details that show in people's surroundings. A good operator picks up the behavioral nuances that reveal so much about character. In "grab-shooting" only the operator can really decide what to shoot moment to moment. While the director sees *content* happening in front of (sometimes behind) the camera, only the operator sees the action in its framed, cine-

matic form. The director may redirect the camera to a different area, but must be able to place almost total reliance in the operator's discrimination.

For this reason a camera operator must be decisive and dexterous. Depending on the weight of the equipment, he may also need to be robust. Keeping a 20-pound camera on your shoulder for an 8-hour day or loading equipment boxes in and out of vehicles are not for the delicate or fastidious. The job is dirty, grueling, and at times intoxicatingly wonderful. The best camera people seem to be low-key individuals who don't ruffle easily in crises, practical and inventive people who like improvising solutions to intransigent logistical, lighting, or electrical problems. Look for the perfectionist who will cheerfully try for the best and simplest solution when time runs short.

Many experienced camera personnel have an alarming tendency to isolate themselves in the mechanics of their craft at the expense of the director's deeper quest for themes and meanings. One such replied to a question of mine with "I'm just here to make pretty pictures." He might have added, "and not get involved."

Having a crew of frustrated directors can be a problem, but worse is to have one of isolated operatives. The best crew members comprehend both the details and the totality of a project, and can see how to make the best contribution at any given moment. This is why a narrow "tech" education is never good enough.

GAFFER

The gaffer is an expert in rigging and maintaining lighting equipment, and knows how to split loads so lighting runs off light-duty household supplies without starting fires or plunging the whole street into darkness. Good gaffers carry a bewildering assortment of clamps, gadgets, and small tools. Resourceful by nature, they sometimes emerge as mainstays of the unit when others get discouraged. During a night shooting sequence in England, I once saw a boy stumble behind the lights and hurt his knee. Because he had been told he must be silent while we were shooting, he doubled over and clutched his knee in mute agony. The kindly electrician (as the gaffer is called in Britain) swooped silently out of the gloom and cradled him in his arms until the shot was finished.

Because the gaffer is usually the only person whose attention is free when the camera is running, he may be the only person with a whole and unobstructed view. Directors in doubt, therefore, sometimes discreetly ask how the gaffer felt about a certain piece of action.

Gaffers are usually chosen by the person responsible for lighting (the cinematographer or videographer), and the two will often work together regularly. An experienced gaffer gets to know a cinematographer's lighting style and preferences, and can even arrive ahead of a unit to prelight. Teams of long association even dispense with much spoken language.

SOUND RECORDIST

Among students, sound recording is considered easy and unglamorous, and is often left to anyone who says they can do it. But badly recorded sound disconnects the audience even more fatally than does a poor story. Most student films sound like studies of characters talking through mashed potatoes in a labyrinth of

echoey bathrooms. Capturing clear, clean, and consistent sound is deceptively demanding and lacks the glamour to induce most people to try.

The recordist, who is responsible for checking equipment in advance and solving sound malfunctions as they arise, needs patience, a good ear, and the maturity to be low man on the totem pole. Lighting and camera position are determined first, so the sound recordist must hide mikes, cause no shadows, and still achieve first-rate sound quality. Shoots become a series of aggravating compromises that caring sound people tend to take personally. Many end up bitter that "good standards" are routinely trampled. But it's always the disconnected craftsperson rather than the whole filmmaker who gags on compromise.

Because the sound recordist should listen not to words but to *sound quality*, you need someone who can truly hear the buzz, rumble, or edginess that the novice will overlook. The art of recording has very little to do with recorders and everything to do with the selection and placement of mikes, and *being able to hear the difference*. No independent assessment is possible apart from the discerning ear. Only musical interests and, better still, musical training seem to instill this critical faculty.

The sound recordist, often kept inactive for long periods and then suddenly expected to "fix up the mike" in short order, needs to habitually make contingency plans. The least satisfactory is the person who only begins to think when setup time arrives and who then causes groans by asking for a lighting change.

When documentary work is mobile, the recordist must keep the mike on the edge of the camera's field of view and as close to the sound source as possible, without casting shadows or letting the mike creep into frame. With a camera handheld and on the move, this takes skill, awareness, and quietly agile footwork.

GRIP

A grip is responsible for fetching and carrying, and also has the highly skilled and coordinated job of moving the camera support to precisely worked-out positions when the camera takes mobile shots. Grips should therefore be strong, practical, organized, and willing. On the minimal crew, they will help to rig lighting or sound equipment. A skilled grip knows something about everyone's job and in an emergency can do limited duty for another crew member.

PRODUCTION MANAGER (PM)

The PM is probably a luxury on a minimal crew, but there are many whose business background equips them to do this important job surpassingly well. The PM takes care of all the arrangements for the shoot. These might include finding overnight accommodations, booking rented equipment at the best prices, securing location or other permissions, making up a shooting schedule (with the director), making travel arrangements, and locating food near the shoot. The PM monitors cash flow, has contingency plans when bad weather stymies exterior shooting, and chases progress. All this lightens the load on the director, for whom these things are a counterproductive burden.

It is hardly necessary to say that the good PM is organized, a compulsive list keeper, socially adept and businesslike, and able to scan and correlate a number of

activities. She must be able to juggle priorities; make decisions involving time, effort, and money; and be unintimidated by officialdom.

EQUIPMENT SELECTION: DRAWING UP A WANT LIST

In this book, and at this time of technological revolution, I can give no equipment recommendations. If you own or are borrowing equipment, you will in any case have to work within its capacities. I can, however, make broad recommendations:

- Sit down as a group and brainstorm over what you think you need. Make lists and include basic tools. Invariably something will need corrective surgery on the job.
- Plan to shoot as simply as possible, aiming for straightforward solutions rather than elaborate ones.
- Any decisions about the style of the movie—how it looks, how it is shot, how it conveys its content to the audience—are best developed organically from the nature of the subject. The best solutions are usually elegantly simple.
- Insecure technicians sometimes try to forestall problems by insisting on a need for the “proper” equipment, which usually means the best and most expensive. This can be a costly gesture to neurosis because initially you face basic conceptual and control difficulties, and can seldom profit from the sophistications of advanced equipment.
- Learn all you can about the technical functions in the shoot so you and your PM can decide what outlay is truly justified. Some extra items will be lifesavers, but others cost money and are never used.
- Read all equipment manuals carefully; there is always vital and overlooked information there. At the end of this book, there is a bibliography of sources for detailed information on lighting, sound recording, and so on.

No film was ever made without equipment problems, so do not be discouraged at design defects. Remember it is human ingenuity more than equipment that makes good films. Film history, so rich in creative advances, was after all made with hand-cranked cameras made of wood and brass.

PREPRODUCTION CHECKLIST

During Preproduction, Remember

- Logistical and mental preparation is the key to coherent moviemaking.
- Find a subject in which you can make a personal, emotional, long-term investment.
- A documentary shares a way of seeing and evokes feelings. It is propaganda and not a documentary unless you invite the audience to weigh evidence and judge human values.
- Avoid situations where you are expected to give up editorial control.
- Make requests sound natural and rightful, and you will often get the moon.