

Assistants’ Advice to Showrunners

We asked twenty current and former TV assistants what advice they would offer showrunners as they set up their writers rooms. Here’s what they had to say:

RESPECT BOUNDARIES

“Setting a normal working schedule boosts morale and allows people to plan accordingly. It’s one thing if the room goes late because a pitch got thrown out, but that should be the exception not the rule. If people can expect that typically the room is 10am to 6pm, it makes a world of difference.”

“Don’t procrastinate and stay late and make your staff stay, too.”

“Don’t use your assistants as emotional support and therapy. Don’t overshare about your life and feelings.”

TELL US THE END DATE

“Let assistants know when they will be wrapped on the show. It’s extremely upsetting to find out with a week’s (or less) notice that you don’t have a job because the showrunner didn’t really know when they hired you what your end date would be.”

SET EXPECTATIONS

“Showrunners set the tone for the room. If they treat the support staff with respect everyone else will.”

“The showrunner I just worked under for my first staff writer position made it VERY clear how the writing staff was to treat the assistants from DAY ONE. He made sure we all knew to treat them with respect, to only ask them do things that were appropriate/show related, and to think of them as fellow writers right off the bat. He gently encouraged all of us to reward their hard work by offering to read and note their samples and reminded us that they’re paid very little, so the connections they make and the notes they receive are what they’re actually working for. As somebody who started as a PA, I respect this approach tremendously and would love to see other show runners do the same.”

“Make sure assistants know what they can and can’t do. Tell them if they can pitch, or go in the room, contribute jokes on punch ups, etc.”

“Before the room meets for the first time, discuss transparently what is expected of the Writers Assistant. Every room operates differently. For example, should the WA quote or credit specific ideas in the notes? What format do you want for the notes document at the end of the day? Deciding up front will save hours of work.”

GIVE APPROPRIATE CREDIT

“When the time comes to build outlines and beats documents, discuss beforehand who this responsibility belongs to. There’s a difference between copying off the whiteboard and writing.”

IF YOU ASK, LISTEN

“If there’s only one person of color, do not treat them like a token. And when you talk about things that the minority person can speak to, listen to what they have to say.”

SUPPORT TEAM-BUILDING

“Have an optional gathering that you pay for: a concert, a movie, an escape room. It builds team unity and allows you to see each other outside of work. Our bosses did this, and it made me love them very much.”

“Don’t pit the support staff against each other. It creates a very toxic workplace.”

HANDLING FINANCES

“Never put your staff in a position to use their own money for things. Asking for reimbursement causes a lot of anxiety.”

“Don’t complain about money in front of your support staff. We make a lot less than you.”

TELL US WHO’S IN CHARGE

“Make it clear on day one who to talk to about workplace issues.”

DELEGATE THOUGHTFULLY

“The number one thing for a new showrunner to understand is that there will suddenly be more than they can manage. They will be expected to put out constant fires, approve everything, and make sure the writing is getting done. Best practice is to deliver crystal clear game plans to the room, support staff and production. Delegate authority where comfortable, at least to the degree where a strong second or producing director or line producer can make an educated guess on something while they wait for an answer.”

“Hire a full support staff (showrunner’s assistant, writers PA, script coordinator, and writers assistant). Each one is a full-time job.”

“If you can’t hire full support staff, let your support staff know if they’re expected to do double duty on certain things. Clearly define the duties so there isn’t last-minute chaos.”

SEEK AND GIVE FEEDBACK

“Have an open discussion about feedback. Check in after the first week to break any bad habits or to make any changes.”

“Ask about assistants’ writing. Ask to read their work. If their work is not a fit to eventually be staffed, TELL THEM. It is more productive for them to know (and have the option to leave) than to stay in hopes of something that will never happen and eventually become resentful and frustrated.”

“If someone spends a season or two working as a support staffer and you’ve decided you don’t think they’re staffing material, you **MUST** tell them so they don’t continue holding out hope.”

KEEP PEOPLE HEALTHY

“Advocate for your assistants to have **INSURANCE**. First season shows often don’t have it and it doesn’t cost that much, but it’s life-changing for assistants.”

“Make sure they know they do not have to come in while they are sick.”

“Discuss time off and expectations. Allow for a system of coverage if someone has an appointment, illness, etc. Open this dialogue before the assistant has to ask for time off. Some people have weekly medical appointments they can’t miss. Work with them.”

KNOW HOW MUCH WE MAKE

“I also think understanding assistant pay is important. For example, my current boss had **NO IDEA** we don’t get paid over winter break until he saw a thread about it on Twitter and asked me.”

“Don’t ask your support staff to work for free. Ever.”

INVITE ASSISTANTS INSIDE

“Introduce your support staff to writers/producers at the beginning of meetings/when the writers’ office opens.”

“If your assistants have free time (which they often do), allow them to use it to observe in the writers’ room. Set clear expectations, such as if they are allowed to pitch or not (just letting them listen is okay!) and let them come in. Let us remember why our job is exciting, and what we’re aiming for.”

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