

10 The script meeting

Listening and feeding back

Note giving is an art and a craft. It must happen in an atmosphere of earned trust and approval if it is to avoid defensive resistance. It must be specific and concrete. 'Make it funnier' will not do. Nor will half understood jargon from a weekend screenwriters' course. Talk of 'narrative arcs' and 'epiphanies' and the writer will politely nod and go home to look longingly at the gas oven.

(Tony Garnett, producer)¹

The above quotation from veteran producer Tony Garnett highlights the frustration that some writers and producers feel when they get script notes that have not been properly thought through, or where the notes are trying to impose unsuitable solutions. How to give effective script notes and feedback is one of the most complex skills of managing development.² It varies massively between different producers and executives, and also depends on the nature of their relationship with the writer. The case interview section of this chapter describes the suggestions of some development executives on note giving, but below is a summary of key points that have been consistently raised by interviewees. For simplicity, the word *producer* will be used throughout this chapter, but the advice applies equally to anyone who is managing the writer during this process, including development executives and script editors.

Most feedback is through a combination of discussion and written notes, but it is worth distinguishing between the start of the process and the end. At the beginning of a project there are major notes that require face-to-face discussions and the building of group trust and a unified vision. These notes will be around key issues like genre, character arcs and story structure beats. However, later drafts may well have a lot of notes around smaller issues of detail, like feedback on dialogue drafting or stage directions on specific pages. These could be dealt with more by email, especially where there is already a good relationship.

How to give notes: a summary

- Be consistent – keep returning to the vision of the type of film you are all trying to make, and refer everything back to that.
- Try to ask questions rather than provide answers. It is the writer's job to find the answers.
- Respond as quickly as possible to the newly delivered draft, because it shows you value the writer's work. Or at least explain that you will read it immediately, but you need to gather other people's feedback before a larger meeting.
- Don't expect solutions to be found within that one meeting. The writer needs time to go away and muse on the problems.
- Be positive as well as finding problems – writers need to know what works as well as what doesn't. Otherwise they may cut the bits you thought worked.
- Be concise – this means reading the draft through several times and thinking the notes through, not just coming up with vague generalizations.
- Be coherent. The producer and development executive should agree their notes in advance and provide a single coherent set of notes to the writer. It is not the writer's job to try to resolve your disagreements. If passing on notes from third parties, such as financiers, make sure that you have fully understood them (it is hard to champion what you don't believe or understand), and filter out what you do not agree with. It is also the producer's job to resolve any big contradictions between the views of different third parties before passing them on to the writer, unless it is a very major issue.
- Use the first person to introduce your notes, such as: 'I felt that ...' or 'It seemed to me that ...'. This makes your view personal and one of many, and is therefore less combative than saying 'This bit doesn't work'.
- Don't confuse symptoms and causes. If you identify the bit that isn't working for you, then the writer can work out how that has been caused.
- Don't just read the marked up changes since the last draft – it is important to get the flow of the new version. For example, the writer may have resolved a problem in a scene by changing the lead up to it in previous scenes, rather than changing the scene itself.
- Opinions vary on how many notes should be provided in writing before the meeting. Many producers and executives would rather talk it through, and then provide the written notes at the end. Another technique is to prepare for the script meeting with a very general email or enthusiastic phone call, to give the writer time to think around key issues before the meeting.
- It is vital for the producer or writer to follow up the meeting with written notes, to make sure everything is clearly agreed and understood.

Sometimes people take away different impressions from the same meeting. This also protects the writer if the producer later changes his mind.

- Encourage risk-taking – make sure the writer knows they can try difficult solutions and ideas, and that you trust them to do that.
- Encourage freedom – don't be too prescriptive. Creativity is about play and fun and exploration.
- Keep positive energy and momentum throughout the meeting, and especially end it on a high note. Remember that the writer has to *want* to go and write the next draft, not be despondent.
- Whoever is being paid by whoever, remember that you are really partners on the journey to tell this story.

To conclude: be consistent, questioning, positive, concise, coherent, use the first person, encourage risk-taking, don't expect instant solutions, and keep up the momentum.

But what about talking about the marketplace? It has already been shown that creative people are often not motivated by money or financial concerns (even if they do want paying), but there is no right or wrong answer about how much the producer talks to the writer and director about the market and marketability of the film. It is up to the producer's relationship with them and his individual personality. Some writers and directors like to imagine at the start what a poster for the film could look like, and what the tag line could be; and some don't want to think about that sort of thing and want to discover it for themselves on the journey of making the film.

It is also worth remembering that each delivery of a new draft is the continuation of a discussion. For example, the French writer-director Radu Mihaileanu (*Train de vie, Vis et Deviens*) sees the delivery of the draft of the script to the producer as part of the collaboration, not as something that should be evaluated solely in terms of good or bad. The main thing the creative producer has to do is to give that draft a very careful reading, and then use it as a springboard for further discussion and collaboration:

It is hard work to be a creative producer. You have to do a very attentive reading of the script. We [the writer] have been working for months with the details, with the doubts. ... We finally deliver. We don't want to hear just if it is good, or bad. Instead we want discussion. Ask us questions. We have worked for such a long time on our own, now we want guidance.³

Box 10.1 Working with writers: script discussions and steps towards successful rewrites (Travis, 2002)⁴

- Express enthusiasm!
- Find the genesis of the story and discover the writer's underlying vision or motivation: what is compelling him to write it?
- Find *points of agreement*. Go back to them when you need to, if you are disagreeing over something, and then work forward again.
- Go *from the general to the specific* (start with overall themes and premise, then major events, then characters, then sequences, scenes and specific moments).
- Identify *black holes* in motivation or plot, and then correct them, or cover them up or be explicit that they are there and carry the audience with you.
- Explore different *what ifs*.
- Make an effort to understand a writer's reluctance to make a particular change; you may gain greater insight into the script or the writer's motivation.
- Be devil's advocate to your own suggestions, especially if the writer accepts them too easily.
- Let the writer rewrite – then re-read the result several times (it may be surprising because it is different to what you had in your own mind's eye, but it may be better).
- Be aware of *the ripple effect*: where an apparently small change in one place can cause other details to unravel.

Replacing a writer: If it is really not working and the rewrites are not delivering, then work with the existing writer to identify and try to resolve problems; identify and agree when an impasse is reached; agree that a new writer may need to be brought in (ideally to work with the team, rather than completely replace the writer) and try to keep the existing writer involved and collaborating if possible – they still have a lot of experience and value to bring. This may work for example if there is the need for a dialogue polish or comedy pass.

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