

# WINNER

## Emmis New York Market Manager Deon Levingston

**H**ow often does a manager reject someone who walks through the front door and says he wants to sell advertising for the radio station? That's exactly what happened to Deon Levingston when he decided he wanted radio to be his career. Levingston was living in Indianapolis when WIBC told him he didn't have enough sales experience — which he didn't. So what did Levingston do? He went around the corner to the car dealership, sold cars for four months, then went back to the station and asked for a sales job again.

Being aggressive goes a long way if your goal is to be a seller, but you need to back that up with dedication to the medium and with skill. Deon Levingston is loaded up with all of those. When he finally landed a selling job in radio, his ascent to the top was rapid, and it would soon take him to the number one radio market in the U.S., New York City. After a short stop managing a sales staff with the enemy (television), Levingston was back in Indianapolis, working for Emmis at WTLC.

Eventually Emmis sold WTLC to Radio One, and Radio One asked Levingston to run its Indianapolis cluster, which he did for two years. When Inner City Broadcasting was looking for a new manager to run WBLS and WLIB in New York City, Vice Chairman Skip Finley placed a call to Ron Ruth and asked him if he knew anybody. Finley reports that Ruth responded, "Do I know anybody? I know somebody named Deon Levingston who reminds me of a younger, smarter, better-looking version of you — except you're in slow motion."

On that recommendation, Finley and Inner City President/COO Charles Warfield went after Levingston and persuaded him to come to New York. He arrived in market number one on November 8, 2004, three days after his wife's birthday. Three years later, WBLS was back on top.

Warfield says he's very proud of the person he and Finley brought to the Big Apple. "The success of the station speaks for itself," he says. "However, what isn't so obvious is how hard he has worked to recruit and develop the staff, position the station, and connect the station with our listeners and the community."

Finley says hiring Levingston was "one of the few decisions we all agreed upon — and one of the best decisions we made." He goes on, "We've watched him build WBLS into the biggest, best Urban radio station in the country. It's kismet that he and our friend Jeff Smulyan are back together, and I know the best is yet to come." Smulyan says, "Deon knows that if you care about your people, they will do remarkable things." And Warfield adds, "Deon has become an excellent leader within our industry. His success in New York radio is due to his relentless commitment to excellence from himself and those he works with. He tirelessly gives of his time and the full support of the stations in service to the community. There is no one better prepared to lead Emmis' efforts in New York."

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WORKS UNDER YOU  
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WORKS WITH YOU."**

### Why did you decide to get into radio?

I don't know what I would be doing right now if I wasn't doing this. For about four months after I got out of school, I sold cars. I sold cars because I went to WTLC and they told me I didn't have enough experience in sales. I figured the best way I could get sales experience was selling cars. After selling cars, I went back to WTLC and said, "Now I have some sales experience. Can I become a seller?"

They said, "No, you can be an intern on our sales staff." That wasn't going to work, because when I graduated from school and moved back home, my father greeted me at the door and explained to me it was now his house, and he had fulfilled his obligations as a parent by getting me through college. I was not allowed to go upstairs to what had been my room, because that was now his. I could live in the basement for six months. After six months, if I stayed, I would have to pay rent and pay for food.

Very quickly I realized I could not be a sales intern. Paul Levingston was not having that. I remember asking, "Where's mom?" He said, "Your mom can't help you with this one."

### People could go to jail for that these days.

It's probably the best thing that ever happened to me, because at that time, your world is rocked, but it puts a sense of urgency into you, realizing that it's starting for real now. So I sold cars for that little time, trying to get a radio job. I've been in radio since then — since 1989 — and I cannot believe, every single day I get up, that I get paid to do it still.

### It sounds like you wanted to be in radio from the beginning. How did you know that?

I didn't. I went to school for legal communications, because several members of my family are attorneys. I planned to be an



Seen here are (l-r) WBL5 Director/Interactive Sales & Marketing Koren Vaughan, PD Skip Dillard, Keyshia Cole, Deon Levingston, and WBL5 APD Cynthia Smith.

attorney. I went to Ohio University, and I got a legal communications degree. When I was getting ready to graduate, after I had already applied to several law schools, I decided I didn't want to go to school for three or four more years, and I didn't want to be an attorney — which sat really well with my parents, which is probably the other part of the story of my dad meeting me at the door.

My best friend, Jerome Moore, was a broadcast management major. Jerome had an interview at WPGC. He said, "Why don't you come along with me on the interview? Maybe one of us will get the job." At that time, we were college students. We didn't realize that you don't just show up with somebody extra for a job you're being interviewed for.

Jerome had also interviewed at WTOP the day before. He got the WTOP job, and he said, "Why don't you go to my WPGC interview? You might get a job." I was like, "No, it probably doesn't work like that." So I went back home to Indiana and told that story to my dad. My dad said, "I'm going to

send you down to WTLC. I know the general manager. I'm going to set up an interview with for you." I met the GM and the sales manager. I just loved the energy of the station. I decided this is what I really want to do. I never looked back.

### How did you get an LSM job?

I'm becoming successful at WIBC, thinking that I want more out of what I'm doing and this is going to be my career path. One of my best friends, Delon McCoy, calls and says he was offered a job as a GSM in North Carolina for a Fox affiliate. He asked me to be his LSM. I had never sold television. Delon said, "I work for an independent TV station and you work in radio. I think the sell for this Fox station is going to be the same way I sell my independent TV station, which is very similar to the way you sell radio."

I spoke to my wife, and within three months, we moved across the country. It was my first opportunity to manage people. That's when I realized that I got true excitement and passion out of seeing the success

**"WE'VE ADMIRER DEON FOR MANY YEARS. WE HATED TO LOSE HIM, AND WE ARE ABSOLUTELY THRILLED THAT HE'S BACK AT EMMIS. WE THINK HE IS GOING TO DO A REMARKABLE JOB IN NEW YORK. HE HAS DEMONSTRATED THAT HE IS ONE OF AMERICA'S BEST BROADCASTERS AND HE HAS ALWAYS FIT PERFECTLY INTO OUR CULTURE. WHILE THERE IS NO TRUTH TO THE RUMOR THAT WE VALUE DEON SO MUCH THAT WE PAID \$131 MILLION TO GET HIM BACK, WE KNOW HE WILL CONTINUE HIS REMARKABLE RECORD OF SUCCESS BACK IN OUR COMPANY!"** — *Emmis Communications Chairman/CEO Jeff Smulyan*

**“HE’S MY MENTOR AS MUCH AS BOSS. WHILE HE’S ALL ABOUT REVENUE, HE KNOWS WHAT EQUIPMENT WE HAVE IN OUR STUDIOS AND HE KNOWS OUR PROGRAMMING STAFFERS BY NAME, DOWN TO THE WEEKEND COLLEGE STUDENT RUNNING THE BOARD. YOU CAN’T OUTWORK HIM OR HIS CREATIVE FLOW, AND THAT’S WHAT INSPIRES ME ABOUT HIM MOST.”**

— *WBLS/New York PD*  
*Skip Dillard*

of others. That is when I decided that it was going to be my career path.

**And back in radio, something opened up at WTLC.**

About two years later, WTLC had an opportunity, and it was a good time to move. The stations I was working for had been sold, my wife was ready to go back to Indianapolis, and I had worked for Emmis before [Emmis owned WTLC]. I went back to Indianapolis and worked as the LSM until Emmis sold the stations to Radio One. Radio One combined WTLC-AM and FM with WHHH and WYJZ and their low-powered television station.

I have been on both sides of an Emmis sale now. The first time Emmis sold to Radio One, I was LSM for Emmis and I became the DOS for all the stations that were purchased. This time we [YMF Media] are selling our [New York] stations to Emmis, and I’m becoming the market manager for Emmis.

**Talk about the differences between working for Radio One and Emmis.**

I have to say that, as a young manager, I got experiences that I now, 15 years later, look back and [realize I] took for granted. When I worked for Emmis in Indianapolis, we were in the corporate building. I can remember one specific conversation with [CEO] Jeff Smulyan that about an AE that, unfortunately, we were going to have to let go.



I was really wrestling with it. Jeff looked at me and asked me about my bench. We were both on elliptical machines at the time, working out, and I said, “What?” He says, “Don’t you have a bench?” He said that you should always be anticipating that someone may be getting another job offer, they may leave, something like this may happen, and you’ll have to replace them. You should have a bench of three to four people that you can go to when you need to replace them.

I was like, “I have to get my bench ready.” Looking back, as a young local sales manager, I was having this discussion with the CEO of the company. Twenty years later, it’s a principle I still use and still remember.

**And at Radio One?**

We had been sold to Radio One. Emmis had a very nice facility in Indianapolis.

Clear Channel had Bob & Tom on WFBQ, one of the best stations in America. Charlie Morgan was running WFMS, one of the best Country stations in America. I had all of these great competitors around me. Our facility wasn’t as nice. It was my first job as a market manager.

At 4 a.m. one morning, I had a discussion with [Radio One Chairperson] Cathy Hughes. I was explaining some of my challenges. She said to me, “You know, Deon, I had the same problem. We were a one-station AM, but I made sure every single employee knew I had their best interest at heart. I told them all the time that my job was to prepare them for the next job, whether it was with me or not. I celebrated birthdays with them. I celebrated other major occasions. I let them know I would train them better than any training they could get.”



Levingston at an event with Skip Dillard.

**“YOU HAVE TO CONTINUE TO SEEK OUT KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER PEOPLE IN THE INDUSTRY, AND OTHER INDUSTRIES AS WELL. IF YOU DON’T, AT SOME POINT YOU BECOME IRRELEVANT, AND YOU WILL BECOME IRRELEVANT BEFORE YOU REALIZE IT. IT IS VERY HARD TO BECOME RELEVANT AGAIN.”**



Justin Timberlake and Deon Levingston.

She said, “You know what? I might have been able to keep them three more years, then one of the big groups would take them away. But they would always tell their friends that Radio One is where they got their training from, where they got their knowledge from.”

### Some pretty high-level training.

To this day, we celebrate birthdays every month. We do cross-training, where I bring department heads in from different departments to talk about what they do, so everybody in the station can understand what they do and see if there are opportunities for them to move into other places. I tell my staff their job is to prepare our people for their next job, whether it is with us or not.

Cathy Hughes taught me that at 4 o’clock in the morning at a managers’ meeting, sitting in a lobby in DC somewhere. I think I’ve been really lucky to work with some of the best people in this business, and they spent time with me to develop me. I didn’t realize it at the time. Fifteen and 20 years later, I know what kind of impact it had on me and my success.

### What would you say to LSMs, GSMs, young GMs who might not have that kind of opportunity?

Seek knowledge. The biggest mistake our business has made is scaling back on the RABs, the NABs, and on letting people attend those conferences where they can be with people of like skills and hear what good practices are outside of their company. When I initially worked for Radio One, we were not members of the RAB. I paid for the RAB Convention out of my pocket. I paid for the

RAB for our whole staff out of my pocket, for a couple of years. I realized I had to seek out places where I could continue to grow.

Success is a journey. You are on the path. Wherever you are on that path, that path doesn’t end. You have to continue to seek out knowledge of other people in the industry, and other industries as well. If you don’t, at some point you become irrelevant, and you will become irrelevant before you realize it. It is very hard to become relevant again.

### At some point, there was a discussion about your going to New York City from Indianapolis, which is a fairly big market jump. Talk about that.

Yes. We were doing well in Indianapolis. I was approached by Charles Warfield and Skip Finley about moving from Indianapolis to New York. I will never forget that meeting, because what they said to me that really made a difference, and made me go home and tell my wife I wanted to do this, was, “You have been very successful in the markets that you are in.” They said, “This will be like no challenge you have ever had before. There is an opportunity here that could change your life either way. You may move here and you may fail. You may move here and be exceedingly successful. But either way, you will gain a wealth of knowledge in the process.”

Skip Finley is one of the most blunt and honest people you will ever meet. Charles Warfield is one of the most polished. You put them together and you get one hell of a presentation. When I came to New York, I came with my eyes wide open. It was very interesting, when I moved to New York from

Indianapolis, WBLS had not been ranked number one in the market since 1980. It was an iconic station not performing up to its capabilities. Within a three-year period, the station was number one again. It was the number one-billing Urban station in the country, and we won a couple of Marconi Awards for being the best Urban station in the country. That was a fun challenge, and there were a lot of great people I got to work with to do it.

### In 2009, PPM comes around, and your world changes.

A couple of things happened with PPM. They are still trying to figure out exactly what the best sample size is. And there were some other issues in New York, as far as representation and other things. New York is a very unique market because of size and the way the population lays out. Arbitron rushed to the market with a product that was flawed. To this day, PPM still hasn’t received accreditation in NYC. I think there were some built-in challenges for specific formats — Hispanic and Urban — as far as representation and as far as sample size, that continue to be challenges.

I think of BLS as a cruise ship that has been turned a couple of times. When I first got to the market, we did a perceptual study. People said, “Bring back my old BLS that I remember.” We did that and did extremely well. Then PPM came in, and we made it a very female station, because that’s what people expected and liked. In this market, under the diary, black women listened considerably longer than black men. When PPM came in, there was a drastic switch and black men were listening more than black women. Literally, within a one-book, one-month period, we went from being the number one-ranked radio station in NYC to the number 13 or 17th-ranked station. We had to change the ship and turn the ship around again.

### When you saw that book, did you see millions of dollars going away?

We saw millions of dollars going away. It was a significant impact on our bill-

ing because our ratings were significantly impacted. Also, it condensed all the ratings of all the stations together, which didn't allow the station to leverage its personalities to the point we had in the past. Wendy Williams and Steve Harvey were iconic figures. Combined with the ratings, we had leveraged them considerably to generate a lot of revenue. As they lost those ratings, we lost some of that leverage.

Any reasonable person understands that one day, the station doesn't change from being number one to number 13 or 17. The population didn't shift. The music didn't shift. A new competitor didn't come on. All the things that impact a radio station did not happen — only the way it was measured changed.

### How did you get your team through that?

I'm very proud of our staff. We kept the lion's share of the staff together, because we coached them through where we were going. We laid out a plan for how we were going to rebuild the ratings. We had rebuilt the ratings, not to where they were, but to where we could be profitable and where we were competitive.

We sat down with the programming staff and changed the ship around. We sat down with the sales staff and made sure we were staffed in the right way to do that. But those were very hard decisions in which we got input from everybody involved. I think it is very, very important in our business to realize that no one works under you and no one works for you. Everybody works with you.

### How is WBLS doing right now, as of today?

As of today, BLS is the number two ranked 6+ station in New York, and in America. It's number two, depending on the month, ranked adults 25-54 station, in NYC. In our demo, we do considerably well. In our 6+ ranking overall, we do considerably well.

### Have you been able to rebuild the revenue to where it was when you first got there?

No. That is what's amazing. We've rebuilt a lot of the ratings, but it is still not at the level that the revenue was. Understand, the market has changed. New York was a far bigger revenue market six years ago than it is now, and PPM has condensed the ratings. Your rank may be there, but your ratings are not there to the same level, which condenses your ability to maximize that completely.

## Sidelines

**WHAT ARE YOUR HOBBIES (OUTSIDE OF RADIO)?** My hobbies have changed over the last couple of years. I have a black belt in tae kwon do and used to really enjoy sparring. My new hobbies are my kids. My son plays college football, and I made it to every game except one this season (we had a major station event on that Saturday). My daughter plays club soccer, and I made it to every game except one this year (I was in South Dakota for my son's football game).

**WHO IS/WAS YOUR ROLE MODEL, AND WHY?** My dad, Paul Levingston, was my role model. He always told me to treat everyone the same and that titles don't matter in the bigger picture of life. I don't think I've had a business card with a title in over a decade.

**WHAT ARE YOU READING RIGHT NOW?** *To Sell Is Human* by Daniel Pink.

**FAVORITE TV SHOW?** My favorite TV show of all time is *Andy Griffith*. In college my favorite TV show was *Andy Griffith* and my roommate Tom Quash's favorite show was *I Love Lucy*. They came on right after each other from 9-10 a.m., so we scheduled our classes to start at 11 a.m.

**WHO IS THE MOST INTERESTING PERSON YOU KNOW (OUTSIDE YOUR FAMILY OR WORK)?** I would have to say my friend Geno Shelton. In almost 30 years of friendship I've never heard him say a negative thing about another person. God is still working on me, Geno; I'll get there one day.

**IF YOU HAD 30 MINUTES, A TAPE RECORDER AND YOUR CHOICE, WHO WOULD YOU INTERVIEW, AND WHY?** I've been asked this question a lot in my career and I always said Jesus. But as I wipe the tears from my eyes tonight, I have to say my dad. And I don't have any questions for him. I would just hold him for 30 minutes.

**NAME THREE STATIONS YOU LISTENED TO AS A KID.** WOWI in Hampton, VA. Magic in St. Louis, and WBLS, especially Mr. Magic on WBLS in college. It's funny — if you had a radio station mixtape, you used to cover the name of the station or the jock, unless you had a Mr. Magic tape. Then you wanted everybody to know it was a Mr. Magic tape from WBLS.

**WHAT ONE GOAL HAS ELUDED YOU?** The Marconi for Legendary Station of the Year for WBLS. WBLS has won several industry awards, including Urban Station of the Year, but we have never won the award for Legendary Station of the Year. No Urban station has ever won that award. Considering that the term Urban was first used to describe WBLS, I can't think of a more legendary station.

**MOST PROUD CAREER ACHIEVEMENT?** I've had a lot, from returning WBLS to number one in New York City for the first time in over 20 years to signing Steve Harvey on WBLS, which launched *The Steve Harvey Morning Show* — now the number one morning show in America.

**WHAT IRKS YOU THE MOST ABOUT RADIO?** We are not proactive enough, and we keep letting other people and other industries define us.

**WHEN YOU DIE, WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY ABOUT YOU?** I hope people say I was fair and I gave something back to our next generation.

### Is PPM good or bad for radio?

(Laughs) Being on the NAB Board and being on the Nielsen Advisory Council, that is a dicey question. I have to answer very carefully.

### You don't have to answer it carefully. When did you start playing the politician?

PPM has allowed radio to do some things that it couldn't do in the past — from giving you instantaneous feedback to some things you can do with MScore and Media Monitors. PPM has had a very negative impact on the landscape of radio, especially Urban and Hispanic radio. It has changed communities, as far as those stations. It has changed the viability of companies. The number of African-American- and Hispanic-

owned broadcast companies has changed tremendously.

I also think it was rushed to the market before it was adequately tested or prepared. After the cat was out, everybody tried to figure out how they could fix it without putting it back in the bag, which is kind of where we are at now, as Nielsen continues to try to figure out how to correct a lot of the situations that PPM has caused.

### And it has not increased radio's revenue?

No. I think it is very naive to ever stand up in a room and say that "70 is the new 100." All you have to do is the math. I have never been anywhere in my life where 70 cents equals 100. I did an example once, years ago, where I asked somebody to give

me a hundred-dollar bill and I gave them \$70 back and walked away. Everybody in the room was like, “Where is my \$30?”

When Arbitron came out with, “Hey, I know the numbers have changed. This is a new system. In this new system, 70 equals 100,” it was very naive to think that would translate out.

Also, the thought that you are going to change completely the way that you measure a medium, but you are going to leave the terminology the same because you don’t want to confuse people, is also very naive. If you are going to change the way you measure the system, you should change the terminology to measure the system. I think those are some of the things that created the hurdles that we are now dealing with in PPM.

### How important is digital in the life of the WBLS listener?

We are probably the most engaged radio station in America. We are consistently building out that engagement and that platform. When I first got to the station, we had one part-time webmaster. We now have an interactive director, a webmaster, two full-time shooters, one full-time social content editor/content producer. So we have five bodies in our interactive department. That’s for BLS and LIB.

As we transition to become Emmis/New York, the staff of WQHT (Hot 97) has 17 people back there. Anyone that believes that you don’t need a presence for the longevity of your station hasn’t been paying attention to what’s going on outside our doors. The world is changing, and the way people consume our medium is changing. It’s why talking about activating chips on cell phones is so important. Who walks around with a radio anymore? Radio listening is now mainly done either in your car or maybe at work.

### How important is it to actually get one rating system that can identify listeners over the air and online? How close is that?

Nielsen says that they are getting close. They say they are closer than Arbitron was. There are some advantages to Nielsen’s buying Arbitron. You go from one \$400 million company to one \$4 billion company. You go from 50 engineers to 1,000 engineers. How that plays out over time, we don’t know. You would hope that those

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additional resources will move this process along tremendously.

I have been very outspoken that we don’t get the streaming measured right. The reality is that we are in a format, specifically with our stations, in which our listeners tend to be trendsetters. We are one of the most-consumed streamed stations in the United States and in the world. Formerly Arbitron, now Nielsen Audio, doesn’t capture that measurement at all.

### Is there money in digital, or is it all smoke and mirrors?

It’s out there. I think where we have struggled in radio is we keep going to the same radio buyers to try to get to it. There are other people inside agencies that are placing digital. I think also that we’ve been behind in the product that we give out digitally. I am very proud of the product that WBLS delivers digitally, and I am very proud of the product that Hot 97 delivers digitally. When you deliver a quality product, there is money there. Audio, compelling content, video — when it all rolls together, there is money there.

### Emmis comes in and buys WBLS and WLIB, and here is Jeff Smulyan again in your life. You can’t shake the guy.

It was very interesting. As YMF sold off Columbia, SC and Jackson, MS, and then we sold off our AM stations in San Francisco, and then we received some offers for New York, I told my wife, “I’m going to be the shortest-serving president in the history of being the president.” [Levingston was appointed President of YMF Media in December of 2013.] She said, “Why?” I said, “Because our success had worked me out of a job.”

We sold off the other properties, and the success of BLS and LIB had people looking at wanting to purchase this property. As we got down to the final offers and everything was done, I received a phone call from Pat

Walsh and Jeff Smulyan. They said, “We’ve completed the process. We would like you to run these stations now.” I think I might have laughed a little bit during the process.

I said, “I thought I had worked myself out of a job, and now it seems I am going to be in a position to lead two of the most iconic brands in the world, Hot 97 and BLS.” These are legendary, iconic brands, and this is a great challenge for me going forward.

The one thing about this business is, it never stays the same. There is always a new challenge out there. That is the fun part of what we do. After 25 years of doing this, I could tell you I still get up every day the same way I did when I was a 22-year-old, ready to run to work.

### What is in your future?

That is a damn good question. My future is really to make these staffs one big family. These staffs, unfortunately, represent what has happened to our industry in the last few years. The Emmis/New York staff, which in the last three or four years went from a three-station cluster to a two-station cluster to one station — they see several people who they worked with for 10, 15, 20 years become unemployed.

On the other side of the room, you see the BLS staff, who worked for a family-owned broadcaster for 40 years, go through bankruptcy and then we get sold. It’s about getting this challenge to where we become one big, successful family. Unfortunately, what has played out in this building in the last four years has played out in a lot of buildings across America in our industry.