Katharine Graham's rules of toughness

Legendary *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham developed her tough leadership style during battles that almost sank the newspaper in the 1970s.

Plagued almost daily by printers’ and pressmen’s slowdown tactics and bullying tactics from their unions, Graham worried nightly whether the next day’s paper would get out on time.

Finally, Graham decided to toughen her stance against the unions, training backup pressmen in the event of a strike and threatening disciplinary action for slowdowns. One day, when a printer marking up an ad had made only two marks in eight hours, he was fired.

But the firing sparked a wildcat strike, and Graham felt compelled to rehire the printer.

In hindsight, she called that rehire a serious mistake. By caving in, she’d shown that if she were kicked hard enough, she’d give way: a dangerous precedent.

Sure enough, a few years later, on the night their contract expired, the Post’s pressmen set fire to one press, severely damaged the others, beat up their foreman and walked out. The paper’s unionized reporters were so upset that they crossed the picket line. Graham shipped the paper out by helicopter to be printed, and eventually started her own presses running again.

The lessons Graham said she learned:

- Leaders have to be tough. The pressmen’s rampage “straightened our spines,” she wrote.
- Appeasement never works.
- Removing poor performers boosts morale.
- Standards and discipline benefit customers.

— Adapted from *Personal History*, Katharine Graham, Alfred A. Knopf.