



Leadership Starts With Being a Fly on the Wall

By Michele Decker, CPSM

We all know that good leaders have followers, right? But, what about managing up? What if your opportunity to lead is based on your ability to persuade those who have 10 times more influence than you?

Gaining traction as a leader early in your career is possible—and here's how. Whether you're looking to take on additional responsibility or you have a supervisor who is absent, you can find value in managing up. And A/E/C marketers are often uniquely capable of this type of leadership due to their innate ability to understand social settings (i.e., soft skills). Here are some tips to get you started.

Realize that everyone has to master the art of influence—even your boss.

We all have someone that we desire to convince or persuade of something. For example, marketers need buy-in from their company leaders. Firm owners need buy-in from their partners. And our clients must appease a governing board, capital partner, or customer. The reality? Honing our skills to provide value and influence the people who have the needed resources are an important part of any professional development plan. Do you know your supervisors' goals and challenges? What keeps them awake at night? How can you go above and beyond your assigned tasks to enhance their work?

Adopt a learning mindset. The path to leadership is a journey ... one that never ends. The best leaders are students, eager to expand their minds and see things in a new way, and they accept they will always manage up because nothing is truly achieved alone. This vulnerability is what makes natural leaders students at heart and someone others want to follow. How open are you to learning? Is it possible you don't know everything? How often do you seek to learn about your supervisor's strengths and limitations? The more we exhibit a curiosity to learn, the more likely our senior executives will understand our rock star marketing passions.

Know yourself and seek to understand others.

As a kid, I was obsessed with Nancy Drew books—so much so that I could determine the outcome by the first or second chapter. Was it just luck of an eight-year-old? Perhaps. Or perhaps I figured out the writer's style and hidden language to anticipate how she thinks.

We all have similar stories—experiences when we've used our ability to understand people and circumstances to anticipate events and determine outcomes. This is where the innate ability to understand social settings I mentioned previously applies.

It's no mystery that marketers score higher than non-marketers in their ability

to understand themselves and read others. As many marketers are also part of the millennial generation, one of the best millennial traits is this endless curiosity with oneself. For example, most millennials are familiar with personality and aptitude tests such Myers-Briggs, Top 5 CliftonStrengths, DiSC®, or EQ score. We should use these assessments to identify our strengths and weaknesses, observe the same amongst our teams and leadership, and endeavor to complement our respective skills and traits. What if you identify strengths in people that they can't see in themselves? What if your enthusiasm for their strengths elevates their perception of themselves and puts them on the path of success? How can you balance out the strengths of your team?

Speak the same language. Most of us have heard the story of "The Tower of Babel" ... or lack thereof. It's the project that never happened because no one could speak the same language. This story's failure was rooted in divine intervention, but I hate to say it, we mortals continue to fail to reach our potential by not effectively communicating.

Every day, our attention spans can handle less. There's so much noise in our worlds that digital detox and single-tasking are emerging in our everyday dialogue. What



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if you could get better results by picking up the phone instead of emailing? What if your email conveyed a message in three sentences? If your supervisor's Myers-Briggs ends in "J," it's likely she needs numbers before making decisions. How might checking in with your boss more or less frequently determine different outcomes? Time is a commodity—be selective with how you use someone's time. Most bosses will not be able to articulate their preferences if you ask them, "How would you like me to communicate with you?" Instead, you must listen in other ways.

Build with resiliency in mind.

Resiliency is about seeing around corners (impossible) and hedging for the worst (unnerving), while staying focused on the best (life-giving). "Only the strong survive" is not just a saying, but a motto in this business. It's our responsibility to stay

positive, keep charging forward, and pick people up when they fall. Be dependable and create value beyond expectations. The best path to resiliency begins and ends with doing your job—and doing it well.

In closing, A/E/C is a relationship business, and managing up is your most immediate path to success. Extend the olive branch today. Request feedback—show that you don't have all the answers, but you are eager to find them. Be honest, always. Provide solutions, not problems. Always try to see the situation through someone else's lens.

Remember, leadership is not about you. It's about building something for someone else—and you can do that early in your career by "managing the manager" and influencing those with power. Don't forget, this all starts with listening and being a fly on the wall. ■