

Leading From Where You Are

By Nancy Usrey, FSMPS, CPSM



There are many interpretations of leadership—and just as many ways to demonstrate it. We experience leadership in different ways throughout our lives.

First, in the guise of direct authority: parents, teachers, coaches, bosses. Soon, we recognize the charismatic pull of peers we are inspired to follow—group leaders, team captains, organization officers. As our worldview gets broader, we acknowledge the business icons, market leaders, and politicians whose actions and words affect how we live our lives. When you think about it, all of these people wield influence.

Our SMPS board of directors has spent the past two years researching what leadership looks like in the A/E/C industries. Leadership doesn't necessarily mean holding the top role in your firm. For many of us, it's being in a place where we can transform the way our firms work.

In talking with our members, I have heard many stories of individuals who found themselves in unusual positions in their firms. We share three of them here. These individuals admitted to initial discomfort for a variety of reasons, yet they invested themselves in their roles. They developed new relationships and found subtle ways to earn trust. Each found internal strength and tapped their industry knowledge to guide them through challenges to a solid place of influence.

Leader as Change Agent



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Barbi Stiles, FSMPS, CPSM, found herself without a job when her previous firm's office shutdown in 2016. Tapping her network, a colleague needed someone willing to focus on business development and lead the charge for the transportation division of WGI.

Stiles took the challenge, and quickly realized there was little structure currently in place. Being new to the firm and in a position that had not existed before, she recognized the only way to succeed was to establish credibility with 110 transportation-focused people in seven offices, as well as with the firm's partners and clients.

Taking stock of the situation, she set bi-weekly sales calls and began tracking pursuits. She insisted on developing capture plans and rehearsing for presentations. Stiles facilitated the division's first annual business development plan and in one year doubled the division's hit rate.

The firm's CEO realized that growth depended on achieving similar results across all the firm's markets. He challenged Stiles to take on another new role, that of vice president of business planning. She would replicate the structure she created in the transportation division within each of WGI's other five divisions. The ultimate goal was increased profitability resulting from every division, deploying a similar business development process with a single voice and vision.

While she had complete support from the CEO and a new president, Stiles initially expected her proposed process and expectations for accountability would encounter pushback, but her strong results created converts.

Results

Six months later, all divisions now have fully functioning business development plans and business development managers (BDM). Along with Stiles, they come together regularly to determine how to cross-sell shared clients.

While developing her role, Stiles and the CEO built a list of things to do. All are complete or in progress. Her credibility is established, not only within each team,

but within the firm. When she places ideas on the corporate table, they are considered, not dismissed, although they may be postponed or delayed. And, she is an officer and shareholder of the firm.

Advice and Lessons Learned

- Get everyone on the same page regarding the end goal. How you get there can differ. Help them see how different approaches work for other teams.
- Be honest and open about the pros and cons of change. Letting people know you don't have all the answers, and collaborating with them to address challenges makes them more willing to listen and accept.
- Trust yourself and your knowledge. Believe in what you know works and apply it. Persevere. Be firm. Know that sometimes you have to put your foot down.
- Figure out early how to react to something that doesn't work so you aren't surprised. Have a Plan A, a Plan B, and even a Plan C.
- Realize that demonstrated results are powerful, so find an early win.
- Have a thick skin and a sense of humor.
- Look at leadership like business development. Build a relationship with the individual first. Listen openly and respond respectfully with knowledge. Be flexible and adapt your solution.

Leader as Influencer



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In her career as a marketing professional, Donna Jakubowicz, FSMPs, CPSM, has led teams as large as 50 with all the resources she needed. She had expected

her next position to be chief marketing officer or senior director. Instead, she found herself in a unique one-person role, part of the marketing group, but forced to creatively source help to accomplish her job. She says the challenge has created the perfect situation to influence the culture and processes of the firm.

On her first day at Wade Trim, Jakubowicz learned she would have an office near the people services and finance departments. How could she be part of the marketing group, but not sit with them? But it turned out to be the perfect location. Defining her new job as brand manager meant first learning about the firm and where it was headed. Here, she was forced out of her comfort zone and into the pulse of the firm, making it easier to see how the firm operates and gain access to resources and information from every area.

Before she joined the firm, leaders recognized external activities could be more intentional so they elevated thought leadership to a brand tactic. Jakubowicz worked with the operations leads to identify thought leadership topics and opportunities to present at conferences and to develop articles for publication. Then she created a calendar for tracking these activities. Challenging the staff and influencing content has paid off with increased technical recognition and brand awareness outside the firm and pride within.

Additionally, she saw the opportunity to improve the firm's stewardship program, which includes corporate contributions and employee volunteer activities. Corporate stewardship now adds value to the brand, and the new processes provide a measure of financial control and increased internal and external awareness.

By intentionally becoming a connection between marketing, people services, finance, and operations, Jakubowicz has

improved collaboration between the teams and helped them discover the impact they have on the firm's brand.

Results

Jakubowicz reports to the chief business development officer who reports to the CEO. For the first time in 20 years, she doesn't have staff, so there's no obvious person to whom she can delegate work. She made a point of getting to know employees and assessing their interests and skills, so she could get things done efficiently. As a result, more people are engaged in different activities and feel a connection to the firm's brand.

Her boss introduces Jakubowicz as "our expediter," a nod to her ability to leverage resources to get things done. In a short time, she has improved brand awareness, strengthened culture, and provided opportunities for staff engagement. But more importantly, she created a role that influences how the firm operates by changing processes and setting and achieving goals.

Advice and Lessons Learned

- Put aside your perceptions about titles. Focus instead on your ability to influence direction and outcomes. That's where power lies.
- Maintain your network connections. You never know when they might turn up the perfect opportunity for you.
- Recognize that discomfort often creates opportunity. Embrace it, find the positive, and then leverage it to your benefit.
- Finding creative ways to achieve goals forces you to assess what's important, streamline the process, and sell the benefits. The resulting collaboration can change attitudes and morale.
- Sometimes, an outsider's perspective is necessary to jumpstart internal change.



Butte Regional Transit Operations Center, Chico, CA. TLCD Architecture. ©Tyler Chartier Photography, tylerchartier.com.

Leader as Internal Seller-Doer



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Sometimes a firm doesn't really know what it wants or needs. That's what Susan Merrigan, FSAME, FSMPS, CPSM, learned when a recruiter called her to talk about a marketing manager position in Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's (SOM) Washington, D.C., office of 45 people. An executive business development and marketing director with responsibility for profit and loss in her firm at the time, Merrigan recognized the described position was comparable to a typical senior coordinator.

Highly educated with advanced degrees, Merrigan had also achieved fellow status in the Society of American Military Engineers and SMPS. In a business world focused on technical licensure, she intended to be a principal by the time she was 45. The more questions Merrigan asked about where SOM wanted to go, the more the recruiter realized the firm needed more than what they were asking for. If SOM wanted Merrigan, they needed to change their approach to the position.

Merrigan also had some thinking to do. SOM is run as a partnership of licensed architects, not by a CEO and COO. That posed a challenge for a career-minded,

non-licensed leader, but she decided to take the chance.

As the only marketing person in the D.C. office, Merrigan went back to the basics. While using her experience with large pursuits to produce SOQs and proposals tailored to client needs, she also assessed where else her knowledge and experience could have an impact.

She started by applying her business development experience to the firm's process. Naysayers claimed her approach wasn't working; Merrigan needed data to prove otherwise. The firm had implemented Salesforce software before she arrived, but wasn't using its power. Merrigan volunteered to take on the tool. Her determination to find data led her to assemble a small group to overhaul the software system to make it useful for business development. Two years later, she's one of the firmwide administrators and trains others to use the system. Her leadership in that first effort positioned her for others. She now runs business development meetings for the New York and D.C. office partners and leadership.

Merrigan used the data to prove you couldn't just look at marketing expenditures in a vacuum; you also need to consider the return on investment. She built dashboards for leadership so they could easily see business and sales results. She also implemented a formal go/no-go process in Salesforce to manage expenditures and increase hit rate. By taking small steps, Merrigan is driving the way people within the firm look at marketing and business development.

Where others might have walked away from the opportunity at that point in their careers, Merrigan saw the marketing manager role as an entrée for her to transform a business with her experience. Her curiosity, followed by research and performance, and backed up by facts, has elevated her influence in the firm.

Results

Merrigan brought a different way of looking at things to SOM, applying business principles to marketing and business development activities. She saw

opportunities to save money in areas like pursuit planning, labor costs, and printing. And, she approached each opportunity with the end goal of demonstrating why the proposed solution works. As a result, the firm is implementing consistent approaches and processes across all offices.

The office's managing director recognized that Merrigan's efforts have gained visibility for the office within the firm. Project Managers in several offices see value in the ways she has helped them use data to get the people and resources they need to efficiently win and deliver work or to support growth.

Merrigan is brought into leadership meetings, even though she's not an associate. When she asks questions, people listen. They know she is leading them to success. Merrigan has transformed her business through leadership from a role she never saw on her career path.

Advice and Lessons Learned

- Corporate culture can steamroll best practices. Work with human nature to help people see that "the way we've always done things" is not always the best way to achieve the desired results.
- Facts are hard to refute. Use them to tell your story and prove your point.
- When you add value, you garner respect. It doesn't matter whether you have a license, a title, or education.
- Sometimes you have to abandon your idea of a career path and focus on what you can do where you are.
- Take charge. Create your network. People will help you succeed in your job when you help them.
- Build success one step at a time. Keep your eye on the end game.

We may not have the title, the office, the perks, or the salary we think a leader should have. And yet, each of us has the ability to decide to be a leader and to influence decisions from where we are. It's a journey that takes time, but perseverance generates measurable, transformative change. Change your perspective and find your inspiration. ■