

# Leading No Matter Where You Sit

Today's young professionals have much to contribute to the workforce, especially to the business world, and they are on their way to becoming ethical, principle-based leaders.

I recently spoke with a colleague who complained about seemingly endless, mindless training he was enduring in a new job position. “[My new company] thinks [new graduates] are incapable of figuring things out for ourselves,” he said. “These trainings are a stream of avatar-based games sprinkled with company policies. I don’t feel like I’m being treated as an adult.”

To an extent, I concurred with his assessment. Much has been written about this new generation of “entitled,” “self-serving,” “children of helicopter parents,” (see [www.aspeneducation.com/article-entitlement.html](http://www.aspeneducation.com/article-entitlement.html)) and how employers must accommodate this prevailing culture among young workers by continuing to hold their collective hand as they enter the workforce. Nevertheless, I told my colleague that managers will respond to perceived needs: Employees who earn the trust of their managers by acting with integrity and working diligently are likely to be treated “as adults”; employees who fail to exhibit such

characteristics are likely to be grouped with the popular stereotypes of the Millennial generation.

So how can we young professionals rise to the occasion, counter these adverse perceptions, and become leaders in our fields? Leadership principles of integrity and trust will be evidenced as young professionals demonstrate a capacity to get things done, focus on the vision of management, and treat peers, subordinates, and superiors with kindness.

## Get Things Done, and Do Them Well

As a new hire in an auditing and consulting firm, I quickly learned that my education—though excellent—hadn’t prepared me to know exactly how to deal with all the complex accounting, personnel, and other challenging issues I faced every day. I still remember a particular assignment I received early on from a manager who told me specifically, “I don’t know the answer to this question. You’re going to have to research some options and present to me the best ones in a memo with your recommendation of how to proceed.” Initially I was clueless regarding the answer to the technical accounting issue, but I felt

empowered by my manager’s confidence.

I worked on the memo diligently and carefully for long hours in the subsequent days. When I presented the options I had identified along with my recommendation, the manager seemed pleased and told me he would contact me later with any follow-up questions after speaking with more senior management. I felt like celebrating the memo’s completion but then remembered that this memo was only a small piece of the vast project that remained to be completed, so I jumped back into other facets of my assignments.

This experience taught me much about working through obstacles when the answers are unknown—and knowing how to learn is perhaps a greater asset than knowing a particular skill. We build the trust of managers when we work through challenging situations with confidence that we can get things done and do them well.

## Focus on Management’s Vision

Another colleague from a different firm—I’ll call him Nate—struggled to adapt to his new work environment. When Nate started his new position, various leaders stressed to



all of the new employees the need to become “chargeable” as soon as possible—that this should be their number-one priority. When Nate was staffed on a new project, he discovered that the project involved a type of work that didn’t interest him or play to his strengths. He explained this concern to the project manager and was released from the project. A few days later, he was given a new project but discovered that, though this work better aligned with his background, the team he joined didn’t have a good reputation for work/life balance. He again spoke with the project manager and was released from the project.

Within a few weeks, Nate was confused as he found himself the subject of negative scrutiny from firm management. “I thought you said I should actively manage my career,” Nate protested to the senior managers. The senior managers reexplained to Nate their top priority of having employees bill hours to clients. They further gently reminded Nate that, though he should feel in command of his career, he was an employee of the company and needed to develop skills that would allow him to become useful and profitable for the company.

Today, Nate is thriving in his current project and better understands the need to align his goals with management’s goals. This doesn’t mean that Nate is a pawn for management; rather, he knows that he owes a duty of loyalty and diligence to his employer and is now focused on developing valuable skills and delivering actions in accordance with management’s clear directives for him.

### Be Kind

In my current situation, I work for managers and others who oversee several diverse projects concurrently, all while consistently contributing to marketing and business development. A few of these managers consistently impress me with their ability to remain calm and be kind to subordinates and peers in e-mails, phone calls, and meetings. One

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manager in particular—I’ll call him Kevin—in spite of a heavy schedule with multiple and increasing responsibilities, always takes time to meet with those who would like to talk about their concerns. Kevin listens intently and gives candid, helpful feedback. Further, in e-mails and phone calls he thanks people for their contributions (even when contributions are of questionable value) and always asks, “How are things going with you?” then waits for a response. Despite the otherwise intense environment, people want to work—and do good work—for Kevin. His kindness motivates people to work hard for him.

Of course, to be kind doesn’t mean to be a doormat. Kevin is focused and successful in his

work. But treating others with respect—a kind word, a thank you when appropriate, and other similar gestures—goes a long way toward easing people’s concerns and helping them to be successful. Indeed, regular kindness in public and in private is a characteristic of “Level-5 Leadership” as outlined by Jim Collins in the landmark tome, *From Good to Great*.

As we work diligently to get things done, focus on the strategies and vision of our leaders, and consistently exhibit kindness to all, we will eschew the selfishness perceived to be common among our generation of young professionals. Never before has the business world needed ethical, principle-based leaders as it does now. I believe this rising generation is capable of exhibiting the same integrity and trust shown by great leaders of previous generations. **SF**

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