

Finding Your Path to Leadership

Eight Actions to Shorten the Journey

By Michael J. Reilly, FSMPS





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Photo by Brad Feinknopf, www.feinknopf.com.

For Douglas J. McKeown, the journey to firm principal and later CEO proved more curved than straight. His dream job early on was forestry, a dream interrupted when he couldn't find a job in his chosen field after graduation.

He took his dad's advice and pursued an MBA, then worked for three years at a chemical company, where he learned how to sell. McKeown's career path eventually took him to Woodard & Curran, where he was hired in 1992 to start up a new division. A few years later, he was promoted to director of marketing. In 2007, he succeeded company co-founder Al Curran as CEO.

Aurora F. Cammarata, VP of marketing and business development for Timberline Construction Corporation, cites a linchpin moment that started her rise from production-level marketing coordinator and manager jobs. "I knew the company badly needed more local visibility and relationships," she said. "So I offered to take on dual duty by adding client and business development to my inside role."

During conversations with McKeown, Cammarata, and others who made the passage from marketing professional to firm principal, I learned that each took distinctly different paths to leadership. What they share is a similar set of beliefs, behaviors, and values. In this article, six leaders offer candid advice for their colleagues on the way up.

Choose the Right Company

Debra Barbour, Associate AIA, principal with ZGF Architects and a self-described "first generation marketer," is proud of her firm's long-held respect for the strategic value of marketing. Barbour is an advocate for marketing engagement across the full spectrum of operations: client relationships, competitive strategy, project team effectiveness, and talent development.

She also believes success is sparked when the marketing professional finds the right company and cultural fit. "Work with an organization where people are open to surrounding themselves with individuals who bring great ideas," Barbour advises. "We live in an era of complex business change, and traditional roles are changing. No one person or discipline can do it all or see it all. Instead, we benefit from complementary skill sets and by blending the strengths and experiences of multiple disciplines to make the whole team perform better."

By choosing the right company culture, marketers can confidently build strong connections across the firm and take some risks. "It's essential to have the ability to work with and establish relationships with a variety of people outside of the marketing department," states Mark Tawara, FSMPS, CPSM, Hon. AIA, chief operating officer of SSFM International. "From architects and engineers, to clients, to your finance staff, and even your receptionist, it helps if you are able to connect with and rely on as many people as you can inside your organization as well as externally."

Communicate Your Value

Never assume that others in the firm, including senior leadership, will notice your good work. Assume they will not, and make it a priority to spread the news on how you and your team provide tangible value to the organization every day.

"I always take it for granted that people understand what marketing is doing," McKeown says. "It is a surprise to me when they have no idea."

Barbour agrees. "Most marketers wear so many different hats that people can't get a fix on what you do."



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The solution: market yourself internally. Display in large graphic form the current projects, proposals, research, and communication initiatives the group is working on. If your team is producing a video, display an excerpt on a large screen in the marketing department. Take full advantage of the firm's internal social network to post marketing updates and images.

When reporting on marketing activities and success metrics, make it clear what your accomplishments are and how your work supports the larger business goals and objectives of the company.

Participate in Revenue Building

Gregory A. Beckstrom, CPSM, principal with American Engineering Testing, Inc., cites the career advantages of affiliating with the revenue side of the firm. "If your company focuses on operations to build revenue, get as close to operations as your role will allow, so you can be part of the value stream. If your company needs backlog, find ways to support business development efforts. If finances are tight, help save or find money through participating in cost reduction and efficiency initiatives."

Beckstrom's advice pertains to marketers at all levels. "I urge young marketing people to help generate revenue. Don't just throw the proposal over the cubicle wall and say 'Here it is, now it's your problem.' Become an owner of the proposal process. Earn that ownership by attending client events, trade shows, lunchtime talks, and networking events."

"Look for ways to get close to the lifeblood that drives the company because when things get ugly, you want to be involved in the solution and not be part of the problem."

Collaborate at a Deeper Level

Sandra L. Grande, Associate AIA, a ZGF principal who leads the marketing team in the firm's Los Angeles office, believes in the power of building trust through greater collaboration. "Trust is so important in enabling and empowering your team. When you have it, you can be completely honest and transparent with others. None of us have the right answers at all times, so an openness to giving and receiving feedback enriches the process and inspires people to be their best."

As firms gain experience with seller-doer models, Cammarata sees a growing realization that success comes from knowing how to use both the business development professional and the seller-doer as a collaborative team. "It's not one or the other, in my view. We work differently than seller-doers, who are more comfortable

within the existing relationships they have with clients. We can connect more easily with those who may not know us, and we need to team with the seller-doers to make it work."

To advance team camaraderie, Cammarata reminds marketers to give credit to others as often as possible. "We need to be the conductor of the orchestra, always motivating and sharing credit with the whole team."

Continually Build Knowledge

With the constant crush of deadlines and internal client requests, marketing pros are more time-challenged than ever. But in order to help the firm develop more strategic and creative approaches, marketers need to consistently learn, participate, and establish a strong network.

The first level of building knowledge is within your own company. "Get out of your comfort zone: Go to the project sites, see the work, and talk to the clients," says McKeown. He encourages his marketing team to go to presentations, attend pre-bid meetings, and get to know who the decisionmakers and influencers are.

The next level is knowing the client's world. "Whatever business sectors you and your firm are in, do everything you can to understand all aspects of the business. Ask a lot of questions, research their industry and follow the trends and economic influences surrounding the business," says Barbour.

From her earliest days in marketing, Cammarata made it a priority to connect with clients on marketing activities. Award entries, articles, project metrics, and photography provide great reasons to talk with clients. "Understand the process, understand the client" is how she describes the benefit.

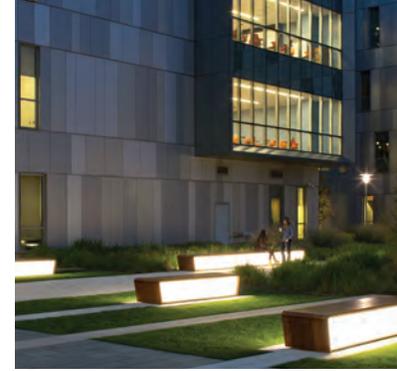
Learn the Business Side

Knowing how to set a fee, how to anticipate the pricing strategy of competitors, and how to negotiate for your firm will extend your influence and value. If you work in an engineering or construction firm, master the data-driven tools familiar to your team. "If you present a report or recommendations, make it easy for your audience to relate," says McKeown.

A well-conceived spreadsheet or data chart will connect with engineers and technical professionals, and help you to make your case. "Use their language by including measurable goals or citing tangible concepts such as predicted market growth or the projected revenue potential of a new service," he says.

“Find a mentor—someone who can view you from a different perspective—inside and outside the organization.”

—Deb Barbour, ZGF Architects



Describing his take on making the leap from marketing to operations, Tawara cited the benefit of learning an entirely new discipline. “As COO, one of my biggest responsibilities is to ensure that the firm is profitable. Because of this, I have had to learn more about income statements, cash flow, utilization rates, and multipliers than I ever imagined. It was a huge learning curve. But once I caught on, I could help our managers make sense of the numbers.”

Reinvent

One of the perils of the marketing role is getting bogged down producing proposals and putting out fires. “If this is your life, your career growth could be in jeopardy,” warns Tawara.

What’s the best way to elude this hazard and advance your value? “Provide more than traditional marketing services by becoming a resource to others within your company,” Tawara suggests. “Whether it’s graphic designer, database expert, photographer, or technical writer, find ways you can become billable to projects and clients as opposed to just being considered overhead. This not only makes you more marketable, it also helps with the firm’s bottom line.”

In addition to seeking opportunities for billable time, Barbour points out the need for marketers to reach out and coach young technical staff on professional development and business skills. “People left the industry during the recession and now we have new people coming in from different parts of the world. They are bringing pieces of what is needed, and we can help them learn the other pieces by sharing what we know.”

Work Differently

High achievement types are wired to think that if they work harder than others, they will be recognized and rewarded with greater leadership opportunity. But hard work and long hours often lead only to more hard work and longer hours, especially in a high-demand role such as marketing.

To avoid this trap, busy professionals need to think and work differently. Instead of measuring output in terms of time, start measuring the outcome. It might surprise you to learn that much of that time (and overtime) is spent on low-margin tasks such as long-shot proposals, quixotic award entries, or lengthy email exchanges—actions without any real outcome.

Exceptional leaders learn to minimize low-margin activities and shift their time to more important tasks. They also maintain high standards for themselves and others.

“Focus on the quality of the work you are producing,” advises Grande. “Don’t be afraid to speak up and suggest positive changes that will improve outcomes and ultimately bring recognition and respect.”

By taking on too much and resisting potential solutions such as outsourcing important tasks, overburdened marketers can lose any recognition gained by hard work. Know when to ask for help and be open to delegation.

Summary

Humility, integrity, and generosity are qualities repeatedly cited by the leaders I interviewed. These are the characteristics of people we want to work with and learn from.

“There is a completely different model of marketing that works for clients and firms today,” Grande says. “In the past, marketing was held close to the vest. To be successful and engage others, we need to open it up, teach more, and be a more transparent leader.”

For marketers seeking to earn leadership recognition, there is no better time than the present. The sweeping changes in business require new leaders ready to apply fresh skills, mobilize diverse teams, and motivate talented soloists to work in harmony as an orchestra. Make the journey. ■

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