Lessons Learned: If I only knew then...

By Janet Ward

When I entered the profession in 1978, the phrase “enrollment management” was non-existent. One worked for admissions, financial aid, student accounts, or registration and records, and each department worked independently from the others. Most professionals specialized in one area (e.g., admissions) and then spent their entire career in that field. My own career has traversed the enrollment spectrum; along the way, I’ve picked up several kernels of wisdom.

LESSON ONE: BUILD YOUR BRAND

Whether you are starting your first professional position, moving up the career ladder, or entering a new institution, it is important that you control your brand. For what do you want to be remembered? How will you choose to work with your staff and colleagues? As you work through challenges, disappointments, and crises, your words and actions will be remembered and judged by others. You have a choice, either to “take control of your brand” by taking responsibility for your words and actions or allowing others to create it for you.

Become a lifelong learner: Change is inevitable. Successful enrollment professionals have an innate desire to continually learn new techniques, processes, tools and become skilled at adapting to change. Learning is tied to achieving your institution’s business objectives. This can be accomplished by streamlining a process to reduce overhead, re-aligning staff assignments to maximize productivity, or enhancing the experience of higher education consumers (e.g., prospect, admit, enrolled student, alumnus, parent, donor).

Character matters: Honesty, ethics, sound decision-making, and how you treat others combine to tell your story. Your words, actions and principles must consistently transcend any situation. You are the same in any situation, regardless of the pressure you are under. This requires developing the ability to work effectively in various situations with various personalities while managing differing points of view.

LESSON TWO: BECOME AN ASTUTE OBSERVER

I started my career as a manager of off-site community college programs. Asked if I wanted a typewriter on my desk (my boss had one on his), I told him that I would rely on the support staff for this function; after all, I had noticed that the other program managers (all men) relied on the administrative assistants when they needed to have something typed. I believe as a result of my choice, my male colleagues more readily accepted me as a partner and an equal in the operation of the department. I believe that if I had placed a typewriter on my desk, I would have been
perceived—and treated—as a member of the secretarial pool. And while the secretarial pool’s members were all wonderful women, I wanted to be treated as a manager.

“Walk the floor” to understand your business and people. Listen. One of the greatest lessons I learned early in my career was the value of taking the time to rotate through every position within the department. Not only did I learn each function firsthand, I also learned about and from each staff member—challenges, what did not work, ideas to improve operations. As a result, the staff and I grew to trust one another and to work together to implement needed changes. For example, a staff member who was instrumental in the marketing a specialized program needed to improve her public speaking skills. How did I motivate her? I challenged her, you face your fear by taking a public speaking class, and I would confront one of mine. I felt proud when she received top honors in her course and even more so as she became a more effective admissions counselor.

**LESSON THREE: LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

Expectations are part of the job: set clear performance expectations, and hold staff accountable from the outset. I put my performance expectations in writing and then refine them after seeking staff input. Once finalized, the expectations become part of the annual review process; staff members are held accountable. Remember that your staff will expect you to meet any expectation you set for them. If you want your staff to be punctual, then you must be punctual. If you want your management team to effectively address personnel issues, you need to demonstrate these skills and teach them to your team and serve as their mentor.

Choose to act rather than react: Others will observe how you handle difficult situations, and many will emulate your behavior. My personal philosophy is that much of life is out of my control: organizations change, technology changes, and staff come and go. The only area I know I can control is how I choose to act or what I choose to say. When confronted with a demanding situation, I compose my facial expression so as not to give away what I am thinking while I consider the alternatives. Once I have made my choice, I carefully phrase my response. Words are powerful, so choose wisely such that your viewpoint will have the best chance of being heard. Many arguments could be avoided if we simply imagine ourselves in the other’s position, consider his thoughts and feelings, and then respond in a way that takes his needs into account.

Be transparent: be kind, and be firm. Working with people can be one of the most exhausting jobs. As the size of your staff increases, so will the variety of personalities you encounter. You need to become both an effective manager (about the task) and supervisor (about the people). Most staff members appreciate a boss who is consistent, transparent, kind, and firm. Being transparent means not having hidden agendas or “playing favorites” in the office. Keep your staff informed about what is happening on campus. The only information I don’t routinely share with my staff pertains to personnel matters.

Be kind. Life is a journey, and each of us, at different times, will benefit from a kind word, encouragement, or forgiveness. As the saying goes, “what goes around comes around.” If you want to be treated with kindness, then be considerate of others.

Be firm—the counterpoint to compassion. The challenge for any leader is to find the right balance between the two. We all make mistakes. A good leader encourages staff to step forward and acknowledge what failed so that training may occur to ultimately improved services, programs, operations. If training has occurred and errors continue, then be firm and handle the situation appropriately; this may require you to dismiss the employee (though I believe everyone deserves a second chance). Too many times, I’ve seen poor performance excused; the result has been that the entire department—and/or “downstream” processes—pay the price for on-going ineptitude. Be firm when you need to be. After all, leaders have to make tough decisions.

**LESSON FOUR: THE ART OF GETTING THINGS DONE**

Learn the political landscape. To be effective within your department or college, you need to understand organizational politics—“the art of getting things done.” In a healthy organization, true leaders are able to find common ground (despite diverse points of view on a variety of topics) and focus on furthering the institution’s mission. Leaders remain open to exploring new ideas; operate transparently and hold few institutional secrets; and base decisions on sound principles and good data.

Movers and shakers propel our institutions forward. These individuals are able to influence others, build an action plan, and then implement the plan so as to achieve the
desired business objective. Movers and shakers may include frontline staff, managers or executives; it is more about the person than the position. Movers and shakers should be highly prized as they know how to get things done.

Manage your time well: Time is a precious commodity that, once lost, cannot be recaptured. If it is managed effectively, significant progress can be made toward achieving goals. Effective time management starts with your calendar. Review the past few months and consider how your time was spent. Then consider the following questions:

- Did you allocate time to such value-added activities as planning, assessment, staff development, and your own professional development?
- Did your meetings result in tangible outcomes or action plans that moved the organization forward in achieving its business objectives?
- Did you control your calendar by scheduling uninterrupted work time at your desk (e.g., no phone calls, no e-mail, etc.)?
- Is your staff cross-trained so that every critical business process has a back-up—that is, if one person is absent, can operations continue unimpeded?
- When you leave work at the end of the day or for vacation, do you “disconnect” (i.e., leave work at work)?

If you answered yes to all five questions, then congratulations: you’ve demonstrated that you are the boss of your time. If you answered no to any of the questions, then you have some work to do to improve your time management skills. Here are some techniques I’ve found effective in managing my time and multiple projects:

- Create a master task list with start and end dates that includes recurring projects for you and your staff. Review the list every Monday, marking off those that have been completed and following up on any that are past due.
- Before leaving work on Friday, review your own task list and prioritize what you’ll focus on in the coming week.
Each week, inform your staff that a specific day/time on your calendar has been blocked off for planning. Unless a crisis requires immediate action, do not accept phone calls or check e-mail during this time.

Whenever you facilitate a meeting, be sure to provide an agenda in advance that is focused on achieving specific business objective(s). After the meeting, send out minutes that highlight the key discussion points and action steps as well as who is responsible for each. If you are invited to meetings that do not adhere to this format, encourage the facilitator to adopt it—and/or consider opting out of the meeting in the future.

Schedule a planning day each month when you work from home, uninterrupted. This can be a great opportunity to catch up on reading.

Consider closing the office at specific times during the year for staff development that is focused on improving operations and the student experience, or learning new technology.

**LESSON FIVE: ENJOY LIFE’S JOURNEY**

I learned one of my greatest life lessons from my father: Life is short, so live each day with zest and energy. At points in my career and life when I have felt under-valued, I have learned to close that chapter and move on. Know when it is time to dust off the resume, and have the courage to act. You never will know what you are capable of unless you try.

Balance work and play. Some of my colleagues are amazed when I go on vacation and disconnect completely from work—no e-mails, no phone calls. I am able to do this for two reasons: I have built my leadership team so they can handle any situation; they know I trust their judgment. The second reason is self-discipline: I choose to disconnect by not checking my e-mail. With the benefit of rest and a change of pace, I return to work re-energized and ready to invest myself fully in the work of the university.

Leave work at work. When at work, give your best effort; when you leave at the end of the day, turn work off. Do not check your e-mail. Do not take work home with you (you may have to make rare exceptions). Invest in yourself. Learn a new hobby; find something you are passionate about and pursue it. Take time to exercise, eat nutritionally, and get a good night’s rest.

Finally, laugh more, and celebrate the simple joys. In the blink of an eye, you will be approaching retirement and, I hope, looking back over a career filled with accomplishments, joy, and friendships.

**About the Author**

**JANET WARD** is Associate Vice President for Information and Data Management at Seattle Pacific University. During her 30 years in higher education administration, she has worked at public two-year institutions and at a private four-year institution where she has experienced how factors tied to leadership, organizational structure, mission, federal regulations, market competition, and technology influence changes on campus. In an effort to help prepare new professionals as well as those seeking advancement opportunities, this article describes several lessons learned along her journey.