

Pay It Forward...

Career Advice from an ASPA Member

John R. Bartle

I am pleased to offer some advice to students and young professionals in the ASPA network. Here are a baker's dozen of pointers that I hope will serve you well.

- **Communicate.** Almost all great leaders, and many lesser leaders, communicate well. Good oral and written communications are essential and require hours of dedicated practice. Make this investment; otherwise you will never realize your full potential.
- **Listen.** Most people like to talk, and many talk too much. You almost always can learn more from listening carefully than from talking. Good listening skills improve your ability to understand a person's interests and therefore to craft a solution.
- **Do your homework.** In many meetings I have seen relatively junior people wield disproportionate influence simply because they have done their homework. If the subject of the meeting is a written document, read it carefully more than once. Read the footnotes and appendices, and examine the data carefully to determine whether it is correct and supports the conclusions. If the subject is not a document, do what it takes to get as much information as possible.

- **Be kind.** All people deserve your respect and attention. People lower in the hierarchy have an amazing amount of "ground level" knowledge about how things work—or don't—and often some good ideas about how to fix things. Establish a relationship with them and listen to their ideas. Similarly, citizens with poor access to power deserve to have their voice heard. Listen to them and help them make their case. You might be the only person who is in a position to do so.

- **Ask for help.** Many senior people are eager to mentor a younger person. Find one or more mentors with whom you are comfortable. Then when you are asked to do a new task, ask for help from your mentors and other people you know who have done the task. You may not do it exactly their way, but you will have a map to guide you.

- **Continue learning.** Successful leaders never quit learning. Develop a reading program to broaden yourself. History and biographies are two great starting points because most every situation you will encounter has a historical antecedent. See how leaders of the past dealt with similar problems and try their approaches.

- **Do the right thing.** It is usually not hard to know what is the right thing to do; it is often far more difficult to do the right thing. Summon your courage and do it.

People will remember your integrity (or lack thereof) more than they will your successes. As Mark Twain said, "Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest."

- **Seek a solution, not a win.** If you are competitive, it is easy to get caught up in wanting to win the battle just to win. Avoid this. Park your ego and work toward a solution.

- **Make no enemies.** Partisan politics and office politics can cause people to break into factions. You will be a valued employee and friend if you talk to people from both camps and try to blur these divisions. Abraham Lincoln once said to an angry dissenter, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

- **Balance family and work.** Your family and relationships are more important than your job, so be sure to balance work with family time.

- **Join one or more professional associations.** Most professional memberships are inexpensive relative to the pay-off in terms of professional development, networking, and leadership opportunities. Most have student discounts, and often your organization may be able to pay some or all of the cost. Try out some different associations and find at least one you are comfortable with.

- **Go beyond the call of duty.** In work or in professional associations, many people will not do much extra work. Do not over-commit yourself, but do go out of your way to do some good for the organization, or society more generally. You will have accomplished something important, and others will take notice.

- **Listen to Ol' Satch.** The legendary baseball pitcher Satchel Paige had some rules for staying young. One was: "Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you." Enough said.

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