Creating Influence through *'Being There'*

BY ASKING FOR HELP AND OFFERING IT TO OTHERS, YOU CAN ADVANCE NOT ONLY YOUR CAREER BUT ALSO THE CAREERS OF OTHERS AND THE PROFILE OF THE INFORMATION PROFESSION.

BY ULLA DE STRICKER

"**W**e all need somebody to lean on …"

When Bill Withers wrote these words for his hit song "Lean on Me" (readers too young to have heard it when it was on the charts may enjoy it online), he was onto something: The people we lean on—that is, whose help we seek out and whose opinions we trust—often end up exercising influence, even though influence may not be on their minds.

Achieving a reputation as being someone who carries our profession forward through influence does not require performing spectacular acts or taking heroic measures. All it takes is the determination to "be there" for colleagues, business connections, stakeholders, and so on.

We can each develop such a reputation by constantly asking ourselves two questions: Am I leaning whenever possible on my colleagues to grow as a professional? Am I likewise offering others the opportunity to lean on me?

Social Capital: A Key Element

One key ingredient in developing and exerting influence is social capital. Social capital is variously defined as some combination of credibility, popularity and respect—for example, the credibility you have as an expert, the popularity you enjoy as a successful relation-ship manager, and the respect others have for your opinions, expertise, and contribution. People with social capital "matter"—not through rank or title but through the earned admiration of others. Thus, a person in an entry-level position may be an influencer because he or she has garnered a reputation as an expert, spearheaded a popular and successful initiative that was not necessarily in his or her portfolio, or shown in some other way the ability and willingness to make some-thing positive happen. Having social capital means others will go out of their way to support you and will forgive minor flaws if necessary.

On a personal note, I believe I built social capital in my early years when,

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during my business travels, I volunteered to speak to local professional groups and when, year in and year out, I assisted students and colleagues with preparing their resumes. I hope I'm still building it when I hold various roles in SLA and when I engage with individuals who approach me for collegial input. From that bank account of contributions, I have developed (so I'm told) a reputation as someone who can be counted on to help.

I use my social capital to connect people who may benefit from finding each other, to ask for help when I need it, and, in general, to navigate within the profession with a view to assisting our future influencers. And what have I discovered? Social capital appears to be inexhaustible and self-renewing. What a deal!

What is Influence?

How do information professionals who are considered influential define their influence? Following are some examples of how influence plays out, according to those who have led influential careers.

First, influencers look beyond the status quo and, notably, have a better proposal up their sleeves. For instance, they reach out to IT personnel and work hard with them to deploy the latest and most powerful desktop tools for the benefit of clients. They are always on the prowl for new or better ways to enable their clients to help themselves where appropriate (this includes making sure clients know the "value tricks" of the new tools).

Influencers also look for ways to contribute their skills and experience throughout their careers, in any and all ways that may be opportune. Exercising influence can

be as unobtrusive as developing a reputation as a go-to expert or quietly nurturing relationships, or it can be as noticeable as campaigning intensely for an initiative or getting others excited about a vision. Authoring blogs, offering to speak and teach at local events, and writing book reviews for the local chapter bulletin are all examples of quiet but effective ways to exert influence.

Taking a stand confidently and refusing to bend in the face of criticism or opposition are marks of influencers. So, too, are expressions of the trust others put in us, such as when they request we manage a project or elect us to a role in an association or volunteer group.

Some aspects of influence have characteristics in common with trailblazing (being the first to propose, adopt or do something) and with entrepreneurship ("just doing it" without any safety net). As a personal example, I was not thinking about exerting influence when, years ago, I convinced a manager of the need for a program at a local educational institution and then created such a program. I did it because I thought it needed doing.

Gaining Influence When New

These traits or characteristics of influence are helpful in defining what it is and how it works, but how can new information professionals acquire influence? To point the way for new professionals to become influential, I have compiled some advice.

One approach is to contribute actively and frequently to the body of knowledge our profession possesses. Share your discoveries, experiences and opinions through a Web site, blogs, or formal publications and add to the universe of

our discoverable knowledge.

Another approach is to look for relevant value in, and borrow and adapt ideas from, other professions (such as management, accounting or journalism) to enrich our own scope of activity. Take the business approach to decision making—step back from the view that "librarianship as we define it through our many services is inherently valuable" and adopt the view that "clients will pay if they perceive a value to themselves." Recognize and appreciate the fact that if you cannot make a business case to a decision maker, your project will not advance.

Work constantly to strengthen networks among practitioners so as to expand the opportunities for individuals to lean on each other. Use your existing contacts ("I'll have Pat get in touch with you") and seek out new ones. Always ask yourself, "Who else should be part of this conversation?"

Something Valuable to Offer

Information professionals historically have not been regarded as take-charge types but rather as steadfast supporters of the missions of their employing organizations. The influencers among us are an exception—they strive to gain visibility for, and increase understanding of, our profession.

Influencers seek out opportunities to generate media coverage, such as by accepting speaking engagements. Influence means reaching out to, and starting dialogues with, representatives from other professional groups to exchange insights and ideas for the benefit of all (expanding job opportunities would be one such benefit).

Influencers also demonstrate that

they are able to achieve goals for their organizations by going beyond providing excellent and responsive service. They seek out opportunities to forge cross-departmental relationships, bring the right people to the project table, and spearhead business initiatives.

Hmm, you might think, that's all well and good for the extroverted personalities, but I'm really not comfortable sticking my neck out. Above all, I don't want anyone to wonder, "Who does she think she is?"

In my view, *every* information professional has something valuable to offer fellow practitioners, clients, the local or practice community, and society in general. If you aren't sure what that something is in your case, you could gain more clarity by finishing statements such as these:

- Actually, I'm pretty decent at ___.
- Given my involvement in ___, I know a lot about ___.
- My work on the ___ board of directors has taught me how to ___.
- Since I've been helping out with ___, I could do something similar for ___.

- I organized the events for ___, so I could be on the program committee for ___.
- I enjoy tinkering with ___, and I could show others how these things work by doing ___.

The goal is to identify something you enjoy doing and feel secure about, then transpose it onto the activities of a professional association or interest group. If you are still in doubt, do what I always tell resume writers to do: Ask a few trusted colleagues what they see as your professional and personal strengths. You may be surprised, but go with what you hear!

Seeing Yourself as Influential

In my volunteer work with students and colleagues, I have come across examples of staggering humility. "Nine years of managing a business—is that relevant in my application?" "What, experience as a hospitality manager should go on my resume?" (These examples are made up, but reflect

what I have heard.) I quickly explain how almost any life or work experience can contribute to painting a picture of a desirable hire.

Similarly, I see evidence that current and future influencers in our profession may not self-identify as such. My reaction is that we need to define for ourselves a goal-accomplishing orientation so as to foster a sense of being able to achieve more. The overarching goal I'm thinking about here is to help the profession grow in strength and thereby generate more opportunities for info pros to have a positive impact on society.

Using SLA to illustrate this process, here are some questions we can each ask ourselves:

- Am I volunteering to support an event in any way? (Taking registrations or organizing a venue are common examples.)
- Do I serve on a committee?
- Do I respond to requests for assistance from another group member by following though until the desired results are on track?

- When I come across an item of interest I feel could be missed by colleagues, do I pass it on?
- Do I participate in and contribute ideas, materials, and resources to discussion groups?

If you answer "yes" to these questions, you are contributing to forming and maintaining an environment in which our professional contributions to society can evolve.

SLA and its subgroups—indeed, all professional bodies—offer participants the opportunity to accomplish one goal, then another, and so on along the path to what some see as "senior" influence. The truth is that achieving "senior" influence results from exercising influence all along the way, starting with, say, being a student SLA liaison at library school. The trick is to go from student rep to local chapter committee member to division committee member and so on. The sequence is unimportant; the participation is all-important.

Influencing Your Way

Now let's go back to the Bill Withers song. First, lean on others—then be someone others can lean on.

SLA offers many opportunities for the information profession's incipient influencers to find their way and flourish. As SLA celebrates a century of activity and looks to the future, I am eager to see how we as a community continue to demonstrate the results of our commitment to support each other. The steps in the process are simple enough.

May I Lean on You? First, know your strengths and weaknesses and especially the areas in which you need to lean on others. Do you need help getting over a fear of public speaking? Are you struggling to develop a business proposal or wondering how to live up to the particular expectations of a new job?

Next, use the SLA network to seek out help. A simple "Do you know someone who can…" typically yields contacts in no time.

Overcome any hesitation you may have about asking for help. Just do it. Asking for guidance is not an admission

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of inadequacy—on the contrary, it shows judgment and initiative. You'd be amazed how many of your fellow practitioners are grateful to have a chance to provide the same help they once received.

Finally, be specific in your request. State the situation you are facing and the outcome you'd like to see, but leave the specific nature of the help you seek open for discussion. "I need to make a presentation next month to the budget committee and I'm not experienced at crafting a compelling story. Can you help?" is better than "Can I talk to you about presentations?" because your colleague can decide right away whether to continue talking or refer you to someone else who is in a better position to assist.

Lean on Me. Once you feel comfortable, stand up and make it clear to fellow practitioners and especially to students that you are available and delighted to provide collegial support. Remember that many people who could benefit from your expertise may have no way of knowing you are willing to offer it,

so advertise it through the many communication vehicles within your SLA chapter and division and through your local and personal networks.

Share your expertise with others by writing, blogging, speaking, teaching, and being a sounding board. Offering to deliver talks and presentations at professional events is a good way to make it possible for colleagues to benefit from what you know.

Propose and promote programs and initiatives to add to the opportunities for professional growth. Make it a personal priority to undertake actions and accept formal professional roles that are "above and beyond" the call of duty. You can do it because you have others to lean on.

Whenever you assist a colleague, request that he or she share that fact with others so as to get the word out. Don't forget how good it looks on your resume when you are able to recite your contributions. **SLA**