

Becoming The Renaissance Administrative Professional





BY MARIE HERMAN

In your first job, you were likely unsure and lacked confidence. You learned the ins and outs of your new responsibilities and eventually mastered the key components of your position. Over time, you built your professional reputation (for better or worse) and began to take steps in furthering your career. You may have reached the top of the ladder with the highest position possible or you may have gotten stuck somewhere mid-level and wondered with frustration what it would take to get to the top. Why do some administrative professionals continually get promoted while others, though capable, are never considered for higher level positions and plum assignments?

One key success factor administrative professionals at the top rungs of the career ladder have is their ability to understand their role in the company and then add value beyond their role. Like Leonardo da Vinci, these Renaissance administrative professionals display critical thinking skills that provide solutions for problems from seemingly unrelated situations. They embrace the philosophy of bringing perspectives (other than their own) to work with them. By bringing a broader perspective to the problem solving process and encouraging others to think creatively when it comes to finding answers, they add value beyond their administrative role at the company.

Renaissance administrative professionals command instant respect, regardless of their level in the office hierarchy. They are the go-to person, the first name that comes to mind for an important project, the ones who seem to have all the answers or can figure out where to get them. They are regularly recognized for their efforts and valued throughout their companies. Their opinions are solicited because they are able to think beyond their role to recognize how the problem impacts not only their own desk, but every desk in the organization.

No one starts out with all these qualities. A surprising number of employees learn enough to be competent and do their jobs, but they never look beyond those parameters for professional growth. They are content in knowing what they know. They don't feel the need to actively seek out additional knowledge beyond what is needed to complete their job. These individuals may remain in the same position for many years, perhaps receiving better titles as a reward for their seniority, but rarely taking on new areas of responsibility and challenge.

If you are a Renaissance administrative professional, on the other hand, you have a thirst for knowledge. Not content with merely being proficient in your job, you want to become an expert. You also internalize the knowledge you acquire and look to apply your newfound knowledge to other areas. For instance, after learning about a function that is available in Microsoft Word, you might decide to test that function in Microsoft Excel to see if it existed and how it worked. You may have looked to your craft room or garage for ideas on how to organize your office supplies. A tip for organizing your paper files may have inspired you to find a new way to organize your emails.

The Renaissance administrative professional recognizes what you learn is almost always applicable to seemingly unrelated areas. When you begin actively looking for ways to apply your knowledge, you'll be surprised how often you discover solutions overlap.

You learn thinking is driven not by answers, but by questions.

You ask questions until the logic behind the request is clear to you. By understanding the thought process in the decision, you are better able to make wise decisions if and when problems arise. You know the criteria needed in order to achieve the best result being sought.

You are proactive by looking ahead and thinking through the likely consequences of actions. "If ____ happens, what will be the

logical outcome?" How can you prepare for that? How can you prevent the problem?

Gayle Quedens, an Administrative Assistant at Datacard Group encourages us to "Become clairvoyant. Be one or two steps ahead of what needs to be done. Be proactive instead of reactive so instead of putting out fires, you're blazing new trails."

Your ability to adapt enables you to respond to critical situations more quickly, as you analyze the problem and search your memory for other situations that apply to this instance. Your broader knowledge base allows you to make better decisions by taking into account more factors that impact the bottom line. Rather than simply making travel arrangements based on price and time, you factor in layover times, weather conditions, plane size, airline reputation, and other more obscure aspects. Your confidence increases with each new challenge met.

You observe the environment around you—how others are rewarded or discouraged in your company, how a decision in one area affects jobs in another area. You recognize decisions made within the company may negatively impact individuals while positively impacting the entire company and you begin to understand the decision-making process.

You actively seek out ways to enhance your role within the company. As Lyn Greenleaf James CAP, an ASC Administrator at Semiahmoo Resort Association demonstrates, "Rather than having the company's growth limited by not having a sufficient budget to hire more employees, or outside contractors and services, I've filled the void with innovative solutions to budget and staff shortfalls, pioneered projects, and proposed novel solutions to problems management hadn't yet identified as problems."

You also practice observing people, from your boss to other high ranking administrative professionals to mentors and others you admire. You don't limit yourself to only these types of employees. You learn about customer service skills from the cashier at the supermarket, attention to detail from the accountant doing your taxes, leadership skills from the President of your IAAP chapter. Learn from those who know.

Your sincere interest in others leads to making a conscious effort to learn more about them: their names, likes/dislikes, general preferences. This close observation encourages your positive reputation and makes you appear to be intuitive because you can more easily anticipate their needs and desires.

You learn to recognize body language to assess moods and attitudes and adjust your own actions and reactions as needed. You begin to develop political savvy and strategic planning skills.

The Renaissance administrative professional recognizes opportunities. At the office holiday party, when everyone avoids sitting at the CEO's table, you understand that this is a prime opportunity to be noticed and become a part of the team. Those who let fear guide them miss out!! On the other hand, your self confidence and knowledge of the company are a strong asset in this situation and allow you to shine.

As Julia Baker CAP, a Secretary in the Geosciences & Structures

Division of the U.S. Army Geotechnical & Structures Laboratory states, "Be sure your supervisor knows you are doing these things. Most of us work independently. Our supervisors don't know the details of the things we do on a daily basis. Truly, to be considered a partner, your supervisors need to know you are being a partner!"

Your expanded knowledge base also allows you to bring additional perspectives to the table at meetings. Every problem or question has multiple perspectives. For instance, when a new product is introduced, the perspectives include sales, engineering, marketing, accounting, executives, the end user, as well as other areas. Each audience is looking for something different related to this product.

Sample Perspectives

The end user asks, "How do I use the product?" Your sales force wants to understand what customers want. The engineers are wondering how much work it will take to modify the product. The marketing department needs to know how to position the product. Your executive wants to make Wall Street happy, and the accounting department wants to know how much it will cost.

The more perspectives you are able to take into account in understanding a situation, the better your questions will be and the more intelligent you will appear. This ability to consider other perspectives will serve you well in all situations you face, from negotiating a job offer to providing on the job service to your executive to supporting your customers.

Lyn Greenleaf shares this example. "In the late 80s, I spent 18 months pioneering a new division within the company. The company was too small to have a marketing department, or to hire someone to do a market research study. As the administrative assistant who talked to

dozens of customers on the phone every day, the word was on the street that the market was shifting. It took time, and baby steps, to show the owner the industry was indeed changing and my proposal was a cost effective way to keep from losing a share of the market."

When you think beyond yourself to the greater issue of how your role interacts with your company and the corporate goals, you are more likely to think long term and strategically.

You have probably seen employees that complained about corporate decisions as though those decisions had been made with the express purpose of annoying your co-worker. They were unable to step back and see the decision had some benefits to the company as a whole. As a result of their poor attitude, they are not a part of implementing the change and

often find themselves left behind while the company moves in a new direction. Their opinions are rarely taken seriously because they spend so much time complaining that others stop listening to their concerns, even when those concerns are valid.

Contrast that with the response of someone who helps you to

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Sample Questions For The Proactive Assistant

What is the core problem?

Who else has this type of problem?

What have they done to solve it?

How does the problem affect our clients/customers?

Do I fully understand my boss's instructions? What's the first step?

What do I do next?

How will I measure success?

Have I double-checked everything?

What's the worst case scenario? How have I protected us from it?

Have I walked through the process step by step?

What would make my boss's life easier?

What would my boss's reaction be?

Is the solution in the best interest of our clients/customers?

How does this news article impact my company?

understand the larger picture of a change and why it will be beneficial to more people. You can approach the change with a better attitude and become a positive change agent. By understanding the bigger picture and your role in it, you are more likely to find your work more interesting and stimulating. You bring expanded value to your role and become a contributing member of the team with valuable input, not just a recorder of actions assigned and words stated.

As a result of your better attitude, enhanced knowledge and skills, you will likely enjoy additional credibility with your co-workers. You may be asked to train and mentor others to help them in their career paths. You may even be called upon to step up to a management role. By teaching others, you are forced to learn the subject more thoroughly, thus ensuring your knowledge remains current.

If you recognize that you want to become a Renaissance administrative professional, but that you aren't there yet, there are some simple steps you can take to begin building this reputation for yourself.

Become Well Read. *OfficePro* and other administrative professional journals, industry magazines, management books, topics of interest to your boss, topics of interest to you!

Think Before You Speak. Check (and double-check) your facts. Don't let others pressure you into giving premature answers. Stop and think before you complain: Am I seeing the big picture? What are two other reasons that would explain what I am seeing?

Seek Self Improvement. Make a commitment to yourself and your career, join Toastmasters to enhance your public speaking skills, expand your role in a professional association by volunteering for a committee or holding an office. Pursue lifelong learning by returning to school for a degree and attending seminars.

Seek Improvement in Others. Provide training to your fellow administrative assistants. Offer to write an article for your company newsletter sharing what you have learned. Consider pursuing a management role. Establish a mentoring relationship to help others. Lead a certification study group.

Ultimately, as you become the Renaissance administrative profes-

sional, you chart your career path by developing your own goals and communicating those goals to your boss, as well as providing updates on your progress in achieving your goals. You recognize that because you are in charge of your own career, you need to take responsibility for your skills and knowledge.

By seeking to add value beyond your immediate responsibilities, you will be well on your way to becoming a Renaissance administrative professional.

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