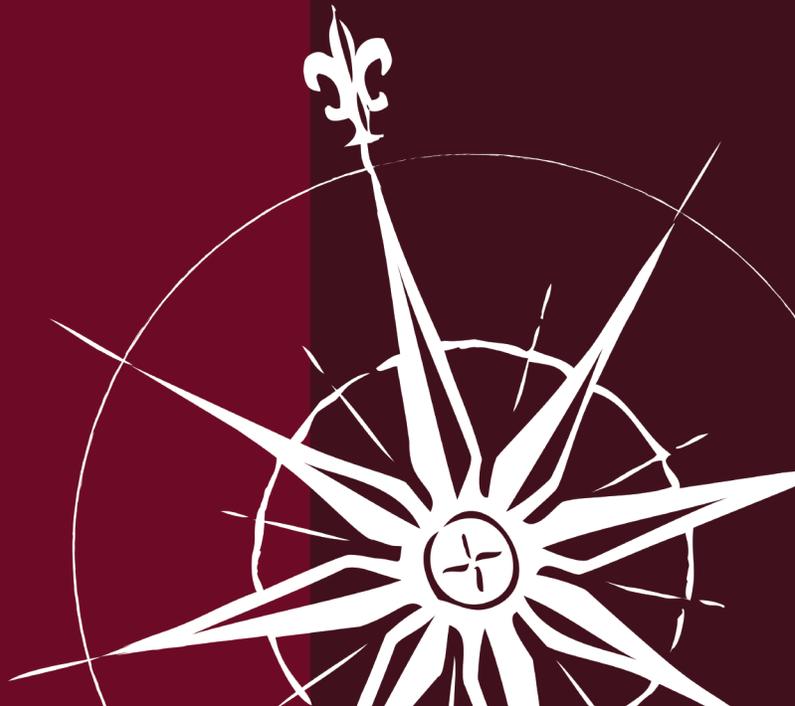


MASTERING LEADERSHIP AT THE MIDDLE LEVELS



THE PLANK CENTER
FOR LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

PLANKCENTER.UA.EDU



Mid-level professionals have advanced through the first year or two of their careers and are now responsible for balancing personal work, overseeing more junior colleagues (often for the first time) and providing strategic counsel to business partners. Below are tips on how to navigate this career stage – and do it well.

HELP OTHERS AROUND YOU DELIVER VALUE AND CREATE IMPACT.

Your key to a flourishing career is not just in your own impact, but in the success of the team around you.

Ask your peers what their passions and goals are. When you hear about an opportunity, flag it for them and help them get ahead. (Hint: they'll bring you with them.)



"The gaps may be reduced through: 1) increased power sharing, or leader empowering behaviors, 2) strengthened two-way communication, and 3) enhanced interpersonal skills in team work, such as conflict management, active listening and change management. Leaders at all levels can benefit from relying less on the transmission mode and more on the reception mode when communicating with employees. These approaches also may help build trust."

- [2019 Plank Center Report Card on PR Leaders](#)

"Honest and transparent relationships offer opportunities to set clear expectations, provide feedback, and teach millennials."

- [The Millennial Study: Perspectives on Integrating the Newest Generation of Top Talent into PR & Communications](#) (Meng, Reeves & Reber, 2015)

"So, take the initiative to build relationships across the enterprise. Become a trusted advisor. Don't wait for others to reach out to you, reach out to others first."

- [Interview with PR Legend Dave Samson](#)

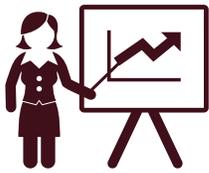
GET TO KNOW YOUR TEAMMATES.



Ask questions beyond day-to-day work, empower them to bring their whole selves to work and spend time together outside of the office when you can.

Ask questions like: How is your work? How are you doing personally? Do you have anything exciting going on outside of work? How is your family? Get to know what makes them who they are. You'll never guess what kind of connections real conversations will make. We're humans first, employees second!





PROVIDE CONTEXT FOR EVERY PROJECT YOU ASSIGN.

Explain how it fits into the broader strategy - understanding the “why” behind a task will help lead to higher quality deliverables.

The more context shared, the more your team members will think strategically, which is always what ultimately drives business growth. Explain your thought process and empower those you oversee or manage to provide their own ideas and recommendations to reach the overall goal.

“To enrich the ecosystem for organizations and individuals, steps in each process must be contextualized and personalized. Contextualize refers to how things fit in or are embedded in company strategy and culture, helping organizations meet their goals. Personalize refers to how steps tie into a Millennial’s personal role and career, which helps satisfy individual aims. Organizations often lean heavily on context, but the combination of the two is far more powerful, and dozens of steps or actions can be taken to contextualize and personalize each process.”

- [“Millennial Communication Professionals In the Workplace”](#) (Meng & Berger)

“To contextualize engagement, organizations can align the job with company goals and strategy, provide a financial tutorial, and require leaders at all levels to model engagement.”

- [“Millennial Communication Professionals In the Workplace”](#) (Meng & Berger)

One significant future theme highlighted consistently across countries:

“Soft” skills of individuals to increase self-insight and reflection – raising the empathy quotient of the profession as a core competency; improving interpersonal skills to manage change and conflict; and creating a greater sense of cultural awareness. All countries rated change management or conflict management skills the highest of 12 approaches to improvement.”

- [A Global Look at Leadership in Public Relations: Minding the Gaps, Creating the Future](#) (Berger, 2014)

BE CURIOUS

rather than irritated or judgmental when outcomes differ from expectations.

If your team member delivers underachieving work, think through what factors led to this result. Lead first with empathy but share your expectations. Consider where you may have played a part in influencing the outcome. Use these opportunities as teaching moments for both parties to get to more clarity. It may mean rephrasing the instructions, even if you thought they were easy to understand. When someone says something you disagree with, default to think “I’d love to learn how they came to that perspective,” and learn something new.



SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLEAGUES AT MORE JUNIOR LEVELS.



This could be on the team, in the office, and/or in the industry.

Encourage entry-level team members to join the local PRSA chapter or an office-wide committee that aligns with their interests. Find opportunities for less senior teammates (or direct reports) to mentor others, lead specific workstreams and give direction to peers/interns when appropriate. If you have a long-lead deadline on a project you would normally lead, allow those below you to take the reins. Give your colleagues a heads-up and invite them to share feedback as they work.

2019 Plank Center Report Card on PR Leaders:

"The grade for job engagement remained a "B-" (5.20 on a 7.0 scale), changed little since 2017. Results from Report Card 2019 continue presenting some concern about a creeping rise of actively disengaged professionals, especially among women."

"Consistent with Gallup's reports, top leaders were more engaged (68.7%) than those at all other levels (54.4%), and engagement was strongest among high-ranking, long-service PR professionals, and weakest among lower-level professionals with less than 11 years of service.

"Organizations and work teams with more engaged employees have significantly better customer ratings, productivity and profit levels, and lower turnover and absenteeism"

"To personalize engagement, employers should provide a trained mentor, deliver regular feedback, assign leadership for a small project, and involve millennials in a community activity or organization."

- "Millennial Communication Professionals In the Workplace" (Meng & Berger)

SHARE STRENGTHS-BASED FEEDBACK.



Point out your colleagues' strengths to help improve confidence and identify work that aligns with those strengths.

Help them identify their passions by recognizing their strengths. If they're excelling in a particular area, they could be a natural-born fit to specialize in that skill. Offer candid feedback while providing positive reinforcement, so others have realistic understanding of what they did well and what can be improved moving forward.

"Give regular performance reviews. Millennials are eager for feedback regarding individual performance from mentors. They also crave recognition, reward, and acknowledgements."

- Millennial Study: Perspectives on Integrating the Newest Generation of Top Talent into PR & Communications (Meng, Reeves & Reber, 2015)



ADAPT.



Remain flexible when it comes to other colleagues' working styles, input and workload to achieve the best results.

Learn your teammates' working and social styles and how to best adapt. Are they analytical, driver, amiable or expressive? Push your teams to take personal index tests to learn more about how they work and how you all can work best together. Think about how your approach may change if someone on your team prefers to arrive at 9 and work into the evening, or arrive at 7:30 and leave at 5. Avoid quick-turn deadlines, if possible, and allow enough advance notice for teammates to plan ahead and meet expectations.

"Provide a dynamic and flexible work environment to millennial practitioners. Flexible options stimulate hard and quality work. Let them work from home or work around non-traditional business hours." Think about how your approach may change if someone on your team prefers to arrive at 9 and work into the evening, or arrive at 7:30 and leave at 5. Avoid quick-turn deadlines, if possible, and allow enough advance notice for teammates to plan ahead and meet expectations.

- [Millennial Study: Perspectives on Integrating the Newest Generation of Top Talent into PR & Communications](#) (Meng, Reeves & Reber, 2015)

SHARE DETAILED FEEDBACK.



"Existing culture and a culture for communication. Such a culture is characterized by: 1) an open communication system where information and best practices are widely shared, 2) listening is valorized, 3) two-way and multiple channels are the norm, 4) employees feel free to speak up without fear of retribution, 5) decision-making is widely shared in teams and work units, and 6) leaders support and value communication."

- [2019 Plank Center Report Card on PR Leaders](#)

Be patient and take the time needed to provide thorough feedback to help the recipient grow, even when you're in a hurry or have a long to-do list. You won't regret it.

Whenever possible, use the Track Changes tool in documents, schedule in-person meetings to discuss assignments after they're completed and use specific examples to explain how the work could be improved next time. Help teammates through the process of editing their own work by showing them how you take a critical eye to every deliverable.



SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS — AND STICK TO THEM.



Leading by example applies to both work deliverables and behaviors.

Be clear on deadlines and urgency for deliverables. Taking the guesswork out of prioritization will reduce employee stress. Our technology-connected business environment often makes people feel the need to be “on” all the time. Unless there is a crisis, empower employees to not feel the need to check in after hours or when on vacation. Create a preferred email/contact policy that is agreed upon by all. For example, any emails after 6 p.m. or on weekends should be labeled “URGENT” or “FOR TOMORROW.” Follow your own rules or no one else will. Setting the example and respecting your team ground rules will show you are not an exception and that all are held accountable.

One area of agreement for men and women, and millennials and their managers, is the crucial importance of organizational culture. Millennial communication professionals said an organization's culture is a primary reason for joining and remaining with an organization, and their managers recognized this.

- [Millennial Communication Professionals in the Workplace](#) (Meng & Berger)

“Millennial-supervisor mentorship programs develop millennials' skills and channel their energy to best serve the organization, while providing the personal relationships that millennials crave. Honest and transparent relationships offer opportunities to set clear expectations, provide feedback, and teach millennials.”

- [Millennial Study: Perspectives on Integrating the Newest Generation of Top Talent into PR and Communication](#)

“Soft” skills of individuals to increase self-insight and reflection - raising the empathy quotient of the profession as a core competency; improving interpersonal skills to manage change and conflict; and creating a greater sense of cultural awareness.

- [A Global Look at Leadership in Public Relations: Minding the Gaps, Creating the Future](#) (Berger, 2014)

Leaders continued to learn and grow while they taught/inspired others; so leadership development is a twofold process of continual teaching and learning.

- [Public Relations Leadership Development Cycle Study](#) (Erzikova & Martinelli, 2017)

COLLABORATE AND LISTEN.

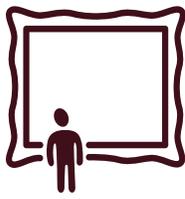


Others have a unique perspective to share, and making them feel heard as a part of the team will go a long way in establishing a positive culture - resulting in stronger work and longer retention.

Listen to understand, not just to hear. You're likely expecting them to know your work style so well that they can read your mind in terms of next steps. Know them so well that you can do the same in terms of working with them. Empower teammates to speak up, particularly if it isn't their natural inclination. Ask direct questions.



CHALLENGE YOURSELF TO THINK BIG PICTURE.



Being able to look beyond the day-to-day activities will bring value to yourself, your team and your office.

Take time to connect the dots from tactics to strategies to focus on a project in its entirety. Reflect on the current situation as well as anticipate for the future. Deepen relationships with senior leaders to better understand business objectives and how your company makes money.

“Organizations often focus on enriching basic job skills first, but they shouldn’t stop there; instead, think long-term, continuous effort, and customize for each Millennial professional. Personalize with continued mentoring and frequent performance conversations, enrich their interpersonal skills (e.g., listening and conflict management), involve them in recruiting new talent, and provide some autonomy time to pursue a personal but organization-related project. Contextualize by pairing Millennial professionals with organizational veterans to lead projects, involving them in industry events, and including them in strategic-thinking and planning initiatives and financial analysis.”

- [“Millennial Communication Professionals In the Workplace” \(Meng & Berger\)](#)

“There was consensus across practitioners that the six PR leadership qualities identified in prior research by Berger & Meng (2013)—self--dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship--building skills, strategic decision--making capability and communication knowledge and expertise—were important leadership skills across all professions/fields. However, several indicated the amount of emphasis on these characteristics could vary by profession.”

- [Public Relations Leadership Development Cycle Study \(Erzikova & Martinelli, 2017\)](#)

BE KIND AND AUTHENTIC.



Being kind and genuine to everyone you work with isn't one way to approach your career path, it's the only way. Every one of these people deserves the same respect and understanding you'd extend to anyone in your personal life, and which we hope others would afford us.

If you make that your code, you'll never burn bridges, and you might find that the goodwill you generate comes back around in the form of an opportunity, the benefit of the doubt, or as the basis of a trusted relationship with a future supervisor. Establish personal values early, and never compromise.

“Organizations and work teams with more engaged employees have significantly better customer ratings, productivity and profit levels, and lower turnover and absenteeism (Gallup Report, 2013).”

- [2019 Plank Center Report Card on PR Leaders](#)

“Brazil, India and U.S.: Leadership is often associated with egalitarianism; an ethical, collaborative approach; and giving back to society, particularly with millennials. Accordingly, trainings that focus on leading an egalitarian--style company and offering meaningful work would resonate with PR students and practitioners in these countries.”

- [Public Relations Leadership Development Cycle Study \(Erzikova & Martinelli, 2017\)](#)



BE A PERPETUAL LEARNER.

Recognize that even as you excel in your career, you still have much to learn - on and off the job. Remember Betsy Plank's advice to be an eternal student and never stop learning, applying and sharing.

Be open to reverse mentoring concepts, especially from those you work around often. Read at least one industry article every day and attend professional events - whether in the PR industry or not - with a goal to walk away with at least one new insight you can apply to your career.



"Most of the practitioners (Brazil, Russia and U.S.) were currently involved in some type of informal leadership development. Most of the Russian respondents indicated they were reading articles and books about leadership. Most of the U.S. practitioners indicated they were mentoring others. Most participants from China said their companies have both formal and informal mentorship and leadership programs."

- [Public Relations Leadership Development Cycle Study](#)
([Erzikova & Martinelli, 2017](#))

FOR SIMILAR RESOURCES, VISIT PLANKCENTER.UA.EDU



THE PLANK CENTER
FOR LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC RELATIONS