



Leaders need “User Manuals” – and what I learned by writing mine

Published on July 27, 2017



<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/leaders-need-user-manuals-what-i-learned-writing-mine-abby-falik>

Founder and CEO Global Citizen Year

[Leaders need “User Manuals” – and what I learned by writing mine](#)

[Finally, I may be the boss, but I’m also a person, a teammate and a messy work-in-progress. I’m committed to always getting better at my job, and to becoming a](#)

[Abby’s User Manual](#)

[My style](#)

[What I value](#)

[What I don’t have patience for](#)

[How best to communicate with me](#)

[How to help me](#)

[What people misunderstand about me](#)

A few years ago I read an article by [Adam Bryant](#), the “Corner Office” Columnist for the New York Times, that led with this provocative question: [“What if you had to write a ‘User Manual’ about your leadership style?”](#)

Bryant describes how transparency about our work style – our preferences, values, quirks and all – shortens the learning curve for others by making explicit things that might otherwise take months, or even years, to uncover.

I was intrigued by the piece and took his prompt to heart. I devoured others’ manuals for insights that resonated, and took a clear-eyed look at what makes me tick.

I sat with questions like:

Which activities give me energy, and which deplete me?

What are my unique abilities, and how do I maximize the time I spend expressing them?

What do people misunderstand about me, and why?

What emerged is my personal “User Manual” which has been an important communication tool for my team, and a learning process for me.

Beyond giving my colleagues a window into my wiring (and, as fellow entrepreneur Aaron Hurst endearingly called it, my “flavor of craziness”), the experience of writing the piece - and refreshing it each year - has had other benefits. It’s an opportunity for self-reflection that probes beneath the surface to get at what **Tara Brach** calls, **“Radical self-honesty, and the joy of getting real”**. (Read it!)

The process is also an opportunity to get honest feedback from others. Once I had a draft, I shared it with my Leadership Team at [Global Citizen Year](#) to see how my view of myself lined-up with their experience of me. **Incorporating their input required me to listen** not for what I wanted to hear, but for **what I needed to hear**.

Today, everyone on our Leadership Team has their own User Manual, and it’s become an exercise we encourage all of our colleagues to adopt.

I’m a strong believer that leadership is a practice, not a position.

My User Manual is one of the ways I practice leading out loud. It’s a living document that describes my innate wiring and my growing edge, while putting it out to the world that I know I am – and aim to always be -- a work-in-progress.

Abby's User Manual

My style

- *I've been hard-wired as an entrepreneur since I was a kid.*
- *I hover in ambiguity and possibility, and am most energized when I'm connecting dots/people/resources that translate challenges into opportunities. I am always scanning for information to feed ideas in my mind, and typically do my best thinking out loud.*
- *My high expectations are matched by my commitment to support people in meeting them. I believe in giving people freedom, flexibility and "stretch" assignments, and equipping them with the tools they need to uncover and develop their potential.*
- *I'm determined to prevent my attention from being hijacked by technology. I never open my computer until I've written my quick list of what I intend to do; *Ihide my inbox* to help me focus, and I've tried to *take control of my phone* by removing everything that's not a "tool" from my home screen.*

What I value

- *I value resourcefulness and proactivity. Be smart, move fast and pivot quickly. Ask forgiveness rather than permission.*
- *I'm obsessed with efficiency: I touch each email only once (respond, delete, delegate, or delay), and live by the law of 80/20 – often prioritizing promptness (ie. 24-hour rule in*

*following up on a meeting) over perfection. I start each day by “**eating my frog**” when my energy and attention are fresh.*

- *I expect my teammates to value efficiency as well. Before doing something “the way it’s always been done,” scan for an easier, cheaper, simpler way to maximize your “return on effort”. Before starting something from scratch, ask if it’s already been tried.*
- *I value scrappiness and feel an obligation to our staff, Fellows, partners and donors to focus our limited time and resources on the “real good” vs. the “feel good”.*
- *I believe work-life alignment matters more than work-life balance, and that strategic self-care – whether sleeping enough, leaving work early to exercise, meditate, or spend time in nature – is the key ingredient to becoming our best, most productive and happy selves. I am religious about spending time unplugged – a day a week, and a few weeks a year.*

What I don’t have patience for

- *If you make a mistake or something is heading off the rails, tell me before the crash. Failure is great (as long as you learn quickly); surprises are not.*
- *I get antsy with hypothetical musings and over-analysis. I learn best through experience and experimentation and have a strong bias toward action.*
- *I default to trust, but if my confidence is shaken, it’s hard to rebuild. Ways to lose my trust: not following through, withholding important information, avoiding hard conversations, or treating others with disrespect.*

- *I am turned off by entitlement, boredom and taking things for granted – it's a privilege to do what we do, and it's our joyful responsibility to take our work seriously, but not ourselves!*

How best to communicate with me

- *Be crisp. Start with the headlines. I prefer bullet points to prose, and .PPT to .DOC.*
- *I love to solve problems, remove barriers and help others move the ball forward. Come to me not just with problems, but with plausible solutions and your recommended course of action.*
- *I value authenticity, honesty and transparency. If I say something you disagree with, tell me. I am hungry to be challenged in thoughtful and constructive ways. I respect people who have the right blend of confidence and humility to know when to question someone (even the boss!), and when to defer to another's expertise.*

How to help me

- *I move quickly and don't always catch every detail (except when it comes to our brand and communications where I'm a painstaking perfectionist). I appreciate help making sure the details are covered, and flagging for me any that need my attention.*
- *Nudge me when it's time to start or end a meeting - but have (some) patience with my flexible approach to time.*

- *Tell me what I need to know, not what you think I want to hear.*

What people misunderstand about me

- *I am an introvert, posing as a professional extrovert. Don't confuse my tendency to work alone in my office with being disengaged. My door's always open.*
- *I speak with conviction, but I'm not set in my thinking. I'm open-minded and always delighted to be shown a better way. I make decisions quickly, but if you give me reasoning or data that points in another direction, I'll happily change course.*

Finally, I may be the boss, but I'm also a person, a teammate and a messy work-in-progress. I'm committed to always getting better at my job, and to becoming a *wiser, kinder and more impactful human.* .

What would your User Manual say? Check out this this piece to get started:
[Five Steps to Create a personal User Manual](#)

#EdInsights #Entrepreneurship #Leadership #UserManual #Innovation #Learnings

For media and speaking inquiries, please contact media@globalcitizenyear.org.