

How to Be a Leader in Your Field: A Guide for Students in Professional Schools

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A profession is more than a job -- it is a community and a culture. Professions serve society by pooling knowledge among their members and creating incentives to synthesize new knowledge. They also help their members to build networks, find jobs, recruit staff, find collaborators, and organize around the issues that affect them. In a world without change or innovation, professions would not be so necessary. But in a world where change and innovation are ever more intense, every occupation needs more of the institutions and culture of traditional professions such as law, medicine, engineering, education, librarianship, public administration, business, and architecture.

Every profession has leaders. In a formal sense, the elected officers of a professional society are the leaders of that profession. Because a profession is fundamentally about knowledge, however, the true leaders of a profession are the thought leaders: the individuals who synthesize the thinking of the profession's members and articulate directions for the future. Sometimes a profession will elect its thought leaders to official positions. But often the thought leaders prefer to lead through writing and speaking, cutting-edge projects, conference organizing, and dialogue. Leadership means both talking and listening, both vision and consensus. A leader builds a web of relationships within the profession and articulates the themes that are emerging in the thinking of the profession as a whole.

In a knowledge-intensive world of ceaseless innovation and change, I assert, every professional must be a leader. This is not a universally popular idea. Some people say, "leadership is fine for others, but I just want a job". I want to argue that it doesn't work that way. The skills that the leader exercises in building a critical mass of opinion around emerging issues are the same skills that every professional needs to stay employed at all. In the old days the leadership-averse could hide out in bureaucracies. But as institutions are turned inside out by technology, globalization, and rising public and client expectations of every sort, the refuges are disappearing. Every professional's job is now the front lines, and the skills of leadership must become central to everyone's conception of themselves as a professional.

But how? It is well-known that simply declaring yourself a leader will not cause anyone to follow you. The process of becoming a leader doesn't happen overnight, but it is perfectly methodical. Here is a six-step recipe. Things aren't really this rigid in practice, but you'll have no trouble varying the recipe once you get used to it.

(1) Pick an issue. You need an issue that the profession as a whole is not really thinking about, but which is going to be the center of attention in five years. The issue could be technical, strategic, managerial, policy-related, or all of the above. It could be a problem or an opportunity or both. It could be a new method or a whole new area of practice. It should be fairly specific,

though, and should directly address the day-to-day work of people in some segment of the profession. The word "technology", for example, is too big to be a workable issue. You can find an issue in several ways:

(a) Talk to dynamic practitioners and notice a pattern in what they are saying.

(b) Talk to people at your school. One purpose of a professional school is to be the early-warning system for the profession -- the surveillance center where emerging issues are articulated, researched, and taught. Many issues that you take for granted as lecture and paper topics in your classes actually represent the farthest horizon so far as most practitioners are concerned. Who to talk to? Start with the people who are excited. They are excited because they have located a high-quality opportunity to do well by doing good.

(c) Talk to people in other professions to find issues that are going to be important for your profession. This could mean simply asking them what issues are important right now, or it could mean explaining the situation in your profession to them in detail and asking them to instruct you. For example, the people who first applied ideas from statistics to computer science became leaders, as did the people who first applied economic analysis to law. Alternatively, identify distinctive intellectual resources that you already bring with you, or that you are highly motivated to learn, and that people aren't really applying in your profession yet. Ransack your field to identify issues that you can transform by thinking about them in that way.

(d) Pick a topic within your profession that you would really hope to be working on someday, and read books and articles about that topic from a variety of other fields, professional and nonprofessional, even if they use different language for it. Be weirded out by the completely different coordinate systems that different fields use. Shake yourself loose from the accreted layers of presuppositions and assumptions that your profession has built up around the topic. Then set an agenda for reinventing that topic using language that people in your profession can understand.

(e) Redescribe one of your profession's existing functions in an abstract way, and then identify several other activities to which the same abstraction could be applied -- including activities that are currently performed by other professions. For example, library cataloguers are really specialists in "metadata services", and many other professions (e.g., publishing) are doing a bad job of things because they lack a serious professional understanding of metadata.

(f) Talk to the people who use your profession's products and services. And talk especially to the ones who are leaders in their own field, so that their situation helps you to predict the future of that field in general. How are their needs changing? What new needs will they have in five years? What are their values and long-term goals? What would it be like for your profession to be dramatically more useful to them? Is your profession really gearing up to maintain and expand its relevance? Now talk to them again. This time, tell them some of the surprising new ways in which your profession might be able to help them in the future, and invite them to think

with you about how their own field might be improved as a result.

(g) Learn the arguments that your field's current leaders employ at budget time. Then devise some new arguments that the people with the money will understand. Use these arguments to start conversations with knowledgeable colleagues about what arguments the relevant people can in fact understand. Try to identify elements of their thinking that you hadn't previously known about. Then convert what is valid in their thinking into issues for the field. Once you stop thinking of the money people as opaque authorities, you will more readily notice opportunities to expand your profession.

(h) Assemble a group of ten other change-minded students in your school and spend two hours brainstorming at least a hundred new ways that your profession could provide people with useful products and services. Assume the technology of ten years from now. All of your ideas should be clear departures from past practice. Doing this in a group is useful because everyone's surprising ideas can help everyone else to think in original directions. Then whittle down your list to the few that are both radical and plausible.

(i) Draw on your own experience, values, and intellect to articulate an issue that nobody else is talking about. Maybe you are simply anticipating concerns that everybody else will be discovering independently in a few years, or maybe you are building something new that wouldn't have happened without you. In either case, if the issue is going to be important to your profession in five years, you'll be doing a public service by getting out in front of it.

(j) Cultivate your powers of being interested in things. Every time you succeed in becoming interested in something new, do three things: Google it, type it into the article indexes for your profession at the library Web site and read a few articles about it, and then have a conversation with someone who knows about it. A good way to convene such a conversation is, "I'd like you ask your advice". Do this for a year. Note that you are now interested in several important things that nobody else is thinking about. Assume that others in your generation will find them interesting once you explain them.

(k) Looking at your profession as it stands today, and perhaps by talking to some of its newer and more iconoclastic members, identify an aspect of current practice that is archaic. Pose the question of what the ideal reform would be.

(l) Write down all the difficulties that seem to recur in your experience of practicing your profession -- anything, however small, that often seems to go wrong. Or else become an anthropologist for a day, and hang out with some people -- students, immigrants, new customers, etc -- who are dealing with your profession for the first time. Experience consternation at the difficulties they run into. Collect a dozen difficulties. Then start making theories of what causes those difficulties. Big, pretentious theories are best, especially if they exaggerate how important the difficulties you've listed really are. Elaborate your theories in your notebook for a few more months until they are really grandiose. Then use the theories to start

generating ideas for innovation and change in your profession. Many of your ideas will have advantages aside from fixing the difficulty that inspired them. Consult with dynamic people to determine which of these ideas (not the theories, obviously, but the ideas) might be plausible as issues for the long haul.

(m) Ask yourself, what is the big fashion in my profession right now, or in my specific area? Fashions usually edit reality, leaving out important issues that will come roaring back sooner or later. Don't be a reactionary by trying to roll back the current fashion to something that came before. Instead, identify those elements of the current fashion that are valuable, and articulate an agenda that remixes those elements with the elements that are being left out.

(n) Learn about a new family of technologies that will have great consequences for practice in your field once it becomes widely available. By a "family" I mean a broad category of technologies such as nanotechnology or grid computing around which new institutions of research and application are forming, rather than a single invention that may or may not build a critical mass of acceptance. In general, build yourself an intelligence system for learning what new research is in the pipeline, so that you can formulate the issues that will become important once the new methods become practical. If you're not interested in technologies, then try government policies instead. Government policies have an immense and generally non-obvious impact on society, thus creating opportunities for people who are aware of them. Keep yourself apprised, therefore, of the pipeline of new policies that fall even remotely within your field of competence, including seemingly small and obscure ones whose significance no one else recognizes, and identify the ones whose impacts are going to be issues for your field.

(o) Look at the history of your profession, identify a force that has been operating continuously to change how the profession works, and imagine what will happen as that force becomes even stronger in the future. A trend that senior practitioners have observed in the course of their careers, for example, usually reflects a force that can be expected to intensify. If the force is positive, spell out its consequences and the practical agenda they entail. If it is negative, issue a call to arms and define a viable alternative. If it is complicated, begin sorting the good from the bad.

(p) Look at the way that work in your profession is evolving, and see if a new "class" is emerging. This might happen, for example, if a new division of labor is creating a group of workers who have common interests that differ from the interests of people who are doing other parts of the work. If the new group hasn't yet developed a collective identity and collective institutions, then you can help by articulating the issues that affect them.

(q) Look at the different sorts of people who are entering the profession in contrast to twenty years ago. What interests, values, and concerns distinguish them from older generations? If you discover that senior and junior members of the profession regard quite different issues as important, and if the junior professionals' issues have not been properly studied, help articulate the agenda for the rising generation.

(r) Identify an issue that has arisen somewhat independently in different organizations or different countries, but where the relevant practitioners haven't yet formed themselves into a network, much less an interest group. More generally, discover two or more groups that ought to know one another but don't, and identify an issue around which the groups ought to be comparing notes.

(s) Identify an intellectual or political trend in the broader society that you generally agree with, and ask what its implications would be in the practice of your profession.

(t) Identify something that people in your field currently do in a haphazard way, perhaps because it is new. Put an impressive name on it, so that people interpret every example of it as particular species of some genus. Interview the people who are doing it, and make a list of issues that pools together everything they are thinking about when they do it. The result will be a theory that helps them to do it in a rational way. If your theory can be summarized in terms of a new idea, all the better.

(u) Work for a dynamic innovator -- that is, not someone who is famous for having dynamically innovated twenty years ago, but someone who is dynamically innovating right now. Learn how it is done. Then go out on your own. Suitable issues are really quite plentiful, and new ones will be easy to come up with once you start to understand the world in the way a dynamic innovator does.

(v) Collect people in your profession who have novel ideas. Combine their ideas with your own in novel ways.

(w) Analyze the processes by which people in your profession learn new things and use them to do their work better. Are these processes rational? What would better processes be like?

(x) Identify five important trends in the world in general, e.g., "China is becoming integrated with other countries" or "computers will be a thousand times more powerful within twenty years". What opportunities and challenges do these trends create for your profession?

(y) Ask yourself, what is the real purpose of my profession, or my particular subfield? What would be a completely different way to achieve that purpose? Brainstorm a list of twenty ways in which work in your profession can be changed to connect it more directly with its real purpose.

(z) Having done many of the exercises listed above, try to characterize your personal thinking style -- or, more precisely, your issue-discovering style. For example, you might discover best when immersed in a crowd of challenging people, or by trawling through large amounts of raw information, or by drawing diagrams. Then invent some methods that really amplify what works for you.

(1) You will probably want to apply several of these methods, working back and forth between them until you have a clear picture of the issues that are emerging. Whenever you can articulate a candidate issue, ask people what counterarguments a tough audience would raise, then use them creatively to make your issue even better. Once you finally settle on an issue, put yourself in charge of raising the profession's awareness of it. If putting yourself in charge feels arrogant, that's just because you're not used to it. Focus on the issue and you'll be fine.

(2) Having chosen your issue, start a project to study it. You might do this in the context of a term paper or an independent study, or you might organize it through the local student chapter of a professional association. Or you might simply do it on your own time. It's hard work, yes, but it's an investment. See if a local faculty member will sign on as an advisor to the project, and if you can use the faculty member's name in talking to people.

(3) Find relevant people and talk to them. First do your library work so you know any conventional wisdom that's out there. Then talk to some working professionals who are facing the issue, especially if they have spoken publicly about an aspect of it. You can find these people by asking the faculty in your school; it's their job to know everyone. If the faculty are reticent at first to unleash you on their contacts, then work your own contacts, for example through your fellow students or the professional society. You can also find relevant people by reading professional publications, attending conferences, and searching Web sites. Tell the people you seek out that your project is pulling together the profession's experience with the issue, and ask if you can interview them. Have a good, focused talk, make serious notes, ask if they want to keep anything confidential, give them your card, and promise to keep in touch. Why are they willing to talk to you? Because you're working on an important issue, and because you're associated with a professional school, which is a center of thinking and networking for the field. Use the symbolic power of the university while you're still associated with it.

(4) Pull together what you've heard. Nobody is expecting you to solve the problems. Real working professionals do have to solve problems, of course, but right now the emphasis is more on questions than answers. You will contribute simply by defining the whole scope of the problems that people are facing. Make a taxonomy and give examples. Talk about what people are doing to address the problems. Focus on practice: the actual decisions that working professionals will have to make, and the full range of considerations they will have to take into account. Most of these considerations will seem obvious taken in isolation, but many people will be grateful to have a complete list in front of them. Remember that professionals, no matter how creative and intuitive they are, have to justify their decisions in a rational way, giving reasons why they have made one choice rather than another. You'll do a service just by laying out the choices and reasons. Talk about the consequences people see for the future. Just impose some order. Faculty in your school can probably help you with this. Write clearly and concisely, and get someone who can write well to copyedit your work.

(5) Circulate the result. Send copies to the people who helped you. Call it a draft or interim report if you want. Give credit to the people whose ideas you've written down. Then follow up.

Get further comments. Now write some short columns for professional publications. Describe your project and summarize the issue. Explain why the issue is becoming important. Concisely present the dangers and opportunities for the profession. Your goal is to lead: to present the profession with a valid issue that calls for action. Again, you don't need to specify what the right action is. You only need to give form to the issue. Make sure your published columns provide a permanent e-mail address where people can reach you, and ideally the URL for a Web page where you've collected materials related to the issue.

(6) Build on your work. Get invited to speak at meetings. Correspond with people who have contacted you after reading your work. Meet more people who appreciate the significance of the issue. If you hear about someone who is working on a similar issue, make friends. Show them that you've read their work, give them due credit, and explore how your projects complement one another. Expand your network to include your profession's clients and peers. As you take in everyone's perspectives, let your understanding of the issue grow and evolve. Come up with many honest ways of explaining the issue and clear answers to the standard questions you get asked. Don't try to convert people who don't get it. You may be a voice in the wilderness for a while, but keep building networks and synthesizing ideas. Your energetic and responsible approach will make you a magnet for intelligent people. As interest in the issue accelerates, build institutions around it. See if the people in your network want to start a moderated mailing list. Organize a panel discussion about it at a professional meeting. And so on. Keep going until the issue either matures or disappears. Then find another issue and start over.

That's the procedure. You should always have at least one issue that you are developing in this way. In doing so, you are helping the profession to think out loud about its problems and potentials, and you are also helping to knit the profession together by establishing connections among the people who are thinking about the issues on the horizon. You are also making yourself a strong job candidate. You are building knowledge, and you are building networks. One purpose of a professional school is to build such networks, and by helping you the school helps itself.

If you've spent your whole life going to school and toiling at normal jobs, then you might find the prospect of leadership nerve-racking. Most schools and jobs are afraid of you, so they encourage a dependent attitude where you wait around for other people to give you things. Of course they don't entirely succeed; no institution can completely extinguish your human agency. Even so, few schools or jobs actively train their inmates to take the initiative by organizing people around emerging issues. Yet successful people have exercised leadership in this way for all of recorded history. The methods of leadership that I have described are not widely publicized, and many courses that supposedly teach leadership skills omit them entirely. But they are out there, roaring at full throttle just below the surface, and you can learn them by watching any successful person in action. I'm just hoping that by reading this you'll learn them a little faster.

As you advance in your profession, you will be organizing people in more sophisticated ways

around more sophisticated issues. As such, it will be important to cultivate your intellectual life. Leadership is such a rare skill that it doesn't matter whether you are a genius in your own right. Leadership is process, and the whole point is that you're not figuring out all the answers yourself. Accordingly, you will need to build a brain trust -- smart and knowledgeable people that you can turn to when you need expert judgements. This is one reason to stay in touch with the faculty at your school, and with the smart people who pass through the school while you are there. Another good way to start a brain trust is to organize a speaker series. Fearlessly assess your intellectual strengths and weaknesses, and then make professional friends whose intellectual strengths complement your own. Your contribution is to facilitate a large-scale movement within the profession.

As you become a leader, you will also face ethical issues. Leadership has a bad name; people associate it with dishonesty, manipulation, and "politics". That's because so many "leaders" prefer to surf on issues, extracting the social energy around them for their own benefit, rather than being a positive and constructive force in the community. Once you've built a network and evolved some rhetoric, you can get away with a lot of selfishness. People will probably even praise you for it. You can settle down to a life of mutual back-scratching with your similarly-networked cronies, going through the motions and never giving a serious thought to the community again. But that's no good. Your job is to model positive leadership. You have no doubt heard it explained that true leadership is "selfless". I haven't emphasized that theme so far, for the simple reason that it's useless to demand that people be selfless leaders until they understand the six-step process that makes them leaders at all. Now that you do understand the process, and especially once you become accustomed to actually doing it, it's time to put some content into it. Use your connections to help people who deserve help. Promote all ideas that you find valuable, whether they reinforce your issues or not. Keep trying to understand your issues more deeply, and ask yourself whether the world is changing to make other issues more important. Don't be an ego freak. And write down what you learn along the way.

Why do I argue that the modern world requires all professionals to engage in leadership? Before the Internet, professionals had to be generalists. Problems would arise, and you had to solve them. Now, however, the institutions and infrastructures of your profession easily bring professional knowledge to bear wherever it is needed. To succeed in your career, you need more than the skills that you got in school -- you need to be the world expert in something. Knowledge is global, it's growing exponentially, and nobody can pack all of the necessary knowledge into their head. So everyone's going to specialize. Specialization doesn't mean narrowness: it means reaching out in many directions, talking to many kinds of people, and knitting together the elements that make your issue matter. "Leadership" used to mean something unique: the army had one leader and everyone else followed. Today, however, knowledge is multiplying so fast that we need more leaders than we can possibly produce. Every leader can feel important, and genuinely be important, and everyone is a leader, including you.

Here are some books and articles that might be useful.

Wayne E. Baker, *Networking Smart: How to Build Relationships for Personal and Organizational Success*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994. A fairly comprehensive book on the networking process, with greater emphasis than most on strategy.

Peter Block, *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used*, Austin: Learning Concepts, 1981. Though written for management consultants, this book has valuable things to say about the feelings that come up in any kind of professional work, and how to use them honestly for everyone's benefit.

Thomas H. Davenport and Laurence Prusak, *What's the Big Idea? Creating and Capitalizing on the Best Management Thinking*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003. This is a book about how to go shopping, so to speak, among the ideas that are available in the works of management professors and consultants -- understanding the nature and dynamics of the ideas and choosing the ones that work best for your organization and career.

Donna Fisher and Sandy Vilas, *Power Networking*, Austin: Mountain Harbour, 1992. This is the best all-around book on the subject of professional networking. It abstracts a long list of guidelines that apply pretty widely across professions.

Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. This is the classic book on negotiating. Its core message is that you should negotiate on the basis of interests and not on positions, so that negotiation becomes cooperative problem-solving. If you lead then you'll need these skills.

Ford Harding, *Rain Making: The Professional's Guide to Attracting New Clients*, Holbrook, MA: Bob Adams, 1994. The way to get ahead is to do something new and tell everyone about it. This is a pretty good introduction to the process, with a focus on publishing an article and developing professional networks.

Linda A. Hill, *Becoming a Manager: Mastery of a New Identity*, Boston: Harvard Business School, 1992. As a professional you'll have probably a manager, and soon enough you'll probably be a manager yourself. Your job is to deal with these relationships in a mutually beneficial way while also maximizing your own autonomy. This is a study of new managers getting used to their jobs, and it's a good source of insight into these issues.

Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. This is a terrific book about the ethical issues that will surround you in the organizational world. Once you understand these issues, you will see trouble coming much further off, while you can still make your own decisions about it.

Tom Jackson, *Guerrilla Tactics in the New Job Market*, second edition, New York: Bantam, 1991. This is an excellent book about finding a job; though it is out of print, you can probably

find a used copy online. Sending dozens of resumes to personnel departments is one approach, but a much better approach is systematic networking and inside research.

W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, *Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005.

This is a business book that describes several methods for inventing entirely new products and services.

Michael Watkins, *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003. This is a good basic outline of the first things to do when you have been promoted to any sort of managerial job, and most of it applies to any job at all.