

maximus insights

the trick to becoming a
senior leader



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I was walking down 48th Street in midtown Manhattan, when a man, well-dressed in a nice suit and shined shoes, with coiffed hair, and a leather briefcase, brushed by me. Then I saw him turn his head and spit out his gum.

I kept my eye on the wad of gum to be sure I didn't step on it. It flew maybe three feet in front of me, bounced off a tree, and then rolled onto the sidewalk. Right underneath his foot as he took his next step. He kept walking without noticing his own bright blue gum stuck to the sole of his shoe.

I laughed out loud.

And then I got to thinking. How often do we all do the same thing? How often do we take an action that we think is in our own interests but ultimately ends up as gum stuck to our shoes?

Sometimes it's obvious. I just heard a story of someone who worked in a senior role at a Wall Street bank. Like the bank, he was highly leveraged; he'd bought an apartment well beyond his means. When he heard he wouldn't be getting a bonus as big as he'd expected, he yelled and cursed and disparaged his boss to other people in the firm. Now he doesn't have a bonus or a job.

But often it's far more subtle.

One of my clients, Barbara, (all identifying characteristics have been changed) is a very accomplished technologist at a financial services company. She runs a large department and is highly respected. I started working with her because she had been passed over for promotion to managing director several times. She received feedback that she needed to act "more senior."

When I spoke with Barbara she didn't know what "more senior" meant, but she figured she needed more visibility so other people would notice her hard and successful work.

So she began to promote herself. She made sure her colleagues knew about her projects, she kept her manager and others "in the loop," she sent more emails updating people on her accomplishments, she stopped eating lunch at her desk and started going out with senior leaders whenever she could. She wasn't obnoxious or extreme about it, but she deliberately sought visibility for herself and her department.

Her approach was sensible but it had the opposite effect. Without knowing it, she was sending signals that she was junior.

Senior people don't try to get visibility for themselves. They try to get visibility for other people. They don't need visibility for themselves; they already have it. They're senior and everyone knows it.

On a plane once, I sat in the dreaded middle seat between a fit man eating a salad and a significantly overweight man eating a South Beach Diet bar. That candy bar is an example of the problem; the man eating it was setting himself up for failure. If you want to be fit, don't do the things that overweight people do to lose weight. Instead, do the things that fit people do to stay fit. Just start acting like you're already a fit person. Eat the salad, not the bar.

The trick to becoming a senior leader is to act like you're *already* a senior leader. Do what senior leaders do *after* they are senior leaders, not what you think you need to do to become a senior leader.

Once she got that distinction, Barbara changed her strategy. She talked up other people, gave them more credit, and tried to get them promoted.

She also changed her focus from her department to the larger organization. Effective senior leaders don't prioritize their own departments over other areas; they think about what's good for the firm as a whole.

At one of my client companies I saw someone in operations push to get raises for his team when the whole company was under a salary freeze. He thought he was being a great proponent of his people, but his managers saw that he didn't understand the whole company's perspective. They saw him as junior and, worse, as not a team player.

At another client company, the new head of a region kept pushing for the needs of that region, even at the expense of the overall firm. Again, that seems reasonable. After all, as the head of the region, what should he push for? But he was ultimately unsuccessful.

If you want to sit around the top leadership table, don't advocate for your area. Understand your area better than anyone, but advocate for the company as a whole. Even if it hurts your area. That's what senior leaders do.

As a leader, the most effective way to be self-interested is to advocate for the interests of the whole. Rather than think of herself as the head of a team, Barbara began to see herself as responsible for the company.

In the past, she had tried to keep all the star performers on her team working for her, even as they outgrew, and got bored with, their jobs. Now, she looked for opportunities in other areas of the firm and promoted her best people out of her team so they would continue to grow. In the past she'd spent more of her time advocating her own opinion, which she thought made her sound knowledgeable. Now she asked more questions and explored other people's perspectives, which made her seem wise and open.

The trick here is that acting wise actually made her wise. She didn't just appear senior; she became senior, adding real value to her company.

Kurt Vonnegut once said: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be." He used it as a warning. It's equally useful as advice.

In the next go-around Barbara was promoted to managing director.

And the guy with the gum on the bottom of his shoe? I can only assume that he hasn't yet noticed. But he's probably still leaving a bright blue sticky trail in his wake.



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