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Careers Advice: Developing Leadership Skills

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Why are leadership skills important?

Developing your career in planning requires you to acquire and develop leadership skills. This applies equally to planners in all sectors. Planners of all types and levels of seniority will find themselves in positions which require leadership skills, be that in coordinating multi-disciplinary teams in the submission of a planning application, working as the case officer determining a planning application or in producing planning policy documentation. Leadership skills are required to carry out key functions as a planner, including the ability to act as a project manager, facilitator and problem solver. They are also required to foster effective team working, which is crucial in ensuring a happy and productive working environment. The importance of developing basic leadership skills cannot be underestimated.

What makes a good leader?

Successful leadership involves managing relationships and communicating within a team to move towards a specific goal. It is closely linked to motivating and influencing others. It should be recognised that there is no one set approach to good leadership. What works well in one circumstance may not necessary work well in another. Therefore, it is important to develop an appreciation of your environment and

circumstances in order to apply the leadership skills that you have required accordingly. Everyone is different, and some team members may benefit from a supportive hands-on approach, whereas others may benefit from being given greater autonomy.

From my experience, key leadership skills required in planning include the ability to:

- engender the respect of your fellow colleagues and 'customers', both in terms of your technical knowledge and skills, but also in how you communicate and relate to others;
- empathise and show compassion towards others;
- manage and organise projects efficiently and effectively;
- foster a strong sense of teamwork;
- ensure that those working with you remain happy and motivated;
- be a good listener;
- empower others around you to fulfil their potential;
- be passionate about your work, and lead by example;
- be professional in your approach to work;
- possess the necessary skills and technical knowledge, whilst acknowledging that you will not always be the 'expert';
- recognise your own strengths and weaknesses;
- be confident and effective in communicating to different audiences;
- maintain your composure under pressure;
- take responsibility for your actions and make tough decisions; and
- promote integrity.

How to develop leadership skills

During my career I have developed leadership skills primarily through observing different styles of management first-hand and gaining an understanding of what works well (and not so well). Courses and training can also play an important role in developing and reinforcing positive leadership skills, but the importance of on-the-job experience cannot be underestimated.

It is important to put leadership skills into practice at all levels throughout your career. It will help you to grow personally as an individual, and professionally as a planner. At the early stages of your career, you can begin to develop leadership skills by seeking opportunities to manage projects, however small these may be. It could be reorganising the filing system or even arranging the team Christmas lunch. If you are keen to learn, and demonstrate a positive approach to managing projects, over time you can start to apply the leadership skills you have learnt to managing larger projects and other staff. It is important to be proactive and seek opportunities from your manager to grow your leadership skills and abilities.

As my career has developed, I have been able to apply skills learnt over time to ever more complex projects, such as the production of local plans. In order to successfully lead a local plan process, you need to be able to apply wide-ranging leadership skills corporately across the council, and externally to key stakeholders. To be effective you need to command the respect of fellow officers, elected members, consultants, developers, community leaders and other stakeholders. It is important to bring others along with you on the journey, because without strong teamwork and support, already complicated and difficult tasks can become impossible. You need to be able to adapt your approach to different circumstances and different audiences, which requires patience and empathy. You also need to be willing and able to acknowledge your weaknesses and learn from your mistakes. There

is no such thing as the perfect leader, and leadership skills will continue to develop over the duration of your career.

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