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SAS® Beyond Measure

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ABSTRACT

Your “work life” is a journey with diverging and converging pathways that require decisions about your career direction each step of the way. My journey includes the enlightenment discovered through others, through expanded learning, and through personal pathways of various degrees of difficulties. Multiple leadership characteristics and attributes require development and acknowledgement in order to become a successful manager and leader. In a quantitative world, it is easy to ignore the “softer” attributes required that are nearly impossible to define by metrics.

This paper shares some of my experience transitioning from a series of technical programming positions through various levels of middle management to executive management. Primarily my career path followed a course in SAS programming focused groups and departments in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries. Nonetheless the principles and lessons learned through my experiences are definitely transferable across industries. I will explore the transition required to transform the technical individual contributor skill set to a managerial or leadership mindset.

INTRODUCTION

Contemplating the thought that I would ever become a SAS programmer much less managing and leading SAS programming departments never crossed my mind. Yet the first decade of my career was that of a technical SAS programmer 8 hours a day, 5 days a week plus some extra time thrown in. Nevertheless this was not the path that I initially had chosen. At my interview that led me into programming I specifically asked if I needed to program as a financial analyst and stated that becoming a programmer was NOT my intention. They “lied” to me and said that programming was not a requirement. I accepted the position and absolutely hated the first 6 months until suddenly the mental light bulb turned on and the mental block was overcome. Like the flip of the light switch SAS made sense to me and the technical programming and problem solving became an obsession.

With the technical programming issues mastered over a period of years there was a contentment and enjoyment with programming that was difficult to abandon. It took a process of several years to wean myself off of writing code to manage or lead a group full time. The choice to transition into a management role was difficult, exciting and challenging. There is the saying that, “Ignorance is bliss” and that described my situation perfectly when taking on direct reports and dealing with all of the issues that a manager experiences. There were many times that I questioned the decision to become a manager and contemplated returning to a technical role. Solving error messages in code was much more quantifiable and easier than dealing with personnel issues and with others career development.

In a corporate world where success is measured by various key metrics which are reported to various levels of management it can be a difficult adjustment to quantify what is required in order to be successful in a realm of subjectivity which is management. How does one measure the trust level you have with your group, your peers, and senior leadership? This rhetorical question is an example of a key leadership attribute that is absolutely required for success, but hard to quantify. There are many subjective assessments that are required to lead effectively where there is no hard data to run a PROC against to provide the answer. My technical skills and individual contributor mindset did not prepare me to be a manager or leader even though they were valuable in understanding technical staff.

Through two decades of management and leadership I have discovered that there are attributes to leadership that are not a mystery which have been identified through years of research. Whether you are leading a technical group or not, these attributes will determine the level of long-term success as a manager and leader. There is not enough time to cover everything I have learned on this experiential journey, but a snapshot may be valuable to those contemplating a transition to management or for those who are already on that adventurous journey.

COMPARING APPLES TO ORANGES

My human nature reveals itself by comparing styles and comparisons of the various supervisors and managers I have had in the workplace. Whether we will openly admit it or not, as humans, we all make comparisons between supervisors or managers within our corporations and workplaces. As careers progress we will also compare current leaders to previous leaders across companies and be able to define what we liked or did not like about the leadership. If you are prone to focusing on the negative these comparisons can result in you sliding off your career

path. Analyzing can be beneficial if we apply what is learned to enhance our leadership, management style, and skill sets by viewing the positive aspects and incorporating these experiences into your leadership skills. My confession is that like everyone else at times I have let the negativity in the workplace affect my performance. But overall the positive experiences and examples of great leadership that I have had the privilege of experiencing has overcome the negative.

THE “PERFECT” BOSS

What is your idea of a perfect boss? What characteristics did he/she possess that really worked for you? Now think back about the supervisor who has had the most positive impact in your career or whose leadership style positively impacted your career and development. It might be helpful to write a couple of sentences about what characteristics elevated this person above others. Now dissect it down further and write five to seven descriptive words or leadership attributes that characterized this favorite boss.

Early in life I had the delightful experience of working with a leader who was energetic, charismatic, and just a natural leader. Everyone gravitated to this person and he was absolutely riveting in his style of management. He could tell you that you were doing an absolutely horrible job and needed to change in such a way that when you left his office you were inspired and challenged to be better. He also praised and encouraged every positive step anyone was making toward improvement and all accomplishments great and small. He also was personable and fun. Back then I thought that is true leadership and I could NEVER do what he does.

I was correct in assessing that I could not be him but I was wrong in concluding that this was the only way to lead. I had to expand my view of leadership. When one compares leaders within and without the company it is like comparing “apples to oranges”. Leaders have different styles that are intrinsically individually slanted and no two individuals are identical. But every exceptional leader will have certain characteristics that go well beyond style points in one’s comparison.

Let’s take those real but still subjective notes that you jotted down and compare them to survey data that has been collected and quantified over more than two decades of research. In a survey taken from “The Leadership Challenge” (Kouzes and Posner, 2007) that asked for responses to the following question: “What values, personal traits, or characteristics do you look for and admire in a leader?” The answers were then distilled into 20 descriptive characteristics. For the sake of brevity, I am only looking at the characteristics that have consistently scored the highest since the initiation of the survey.

The following top 4 characteristics were elevated above the mid-tier responses:

1. **Honest**
2. **Forward-Looking**
3. **Inspiring**
4. **Competent**

The fifth characteristic was “Intelligent” and scored a full 20 percentage points below “Competent”.

How does your list of your most admired leader’s characteristics compare to the top four from the survey data? Are there any surprises on characteristics you rated higher or lower? Chances are that your list does not match perfectly the top 4, but is covered in one of the remaining 16 categories that can be found in the reference.

Another flaw in my thinking earlier in my career was an over-emphasis on charisma, which I thought every leader should possess, and which I clearly did not. However through my managerial experiences I eventually came to the understanding that one can be inspiring without necessarily being charismatic. Additionally as I gained exposure to different leaders in multiple companies it became exceedingly clear that the “perfect” boss simply did not exist. On the other hand there are and have been great leaders who demonstrate excellence. The striving to be perfect results in a dead end path. Conversely striving for excellence with high standards is an achievable goal for you and in how you perceive and compare others.

THE UNINSPIRING

We frequently learn the most from observing or experiencing what not to do again from our own mistakes or from the leadership styles of others. My focus tends to gravitate towards the positive experiences and characteristics in others, but one cannot completely ignore the negative. I have found that your own personal failure or weakness in a situation can become a springboard to growth or it can derail/slow your career. When one works in a technical arena, there will be many manager and leaders without the aptitudes or skill sets to be good, let alone exceptional leaders. The positions in management that they hold are primarily obtained: they were very good technically, were first in when a small group expanded, filled in temporarily when a manager left, or maneuvered through the corporate system to eventually be promoted to a managerial role.

My first taste of management came when I convinced my Vice President that there was enough work to keep more than just me occupied. He agreed and told me to hire another programmer who would report to me. There was no real preparation in supervising someone provided. I had never done a performance review and received no training. I was now responsible for someone other than myself that was completely foreign to my individual-contributor thinking. Yet I took the challenge seriously and through trial and error and with some mentoring developed totally new skill sets required for management. Overall the transition was positive, yet as with most in the transitional state of both SAS programming and managing, there was always the temptation for me to revert back solely to the technical skills. I have found that the effort to become a very good manager or leader should not be underestimated or taken lightly.

Again I have had many good mentors and managers in my work life and feel very fortunate. In spite of this, like some of you, I have occasionally experienced a boss who hasn't been such a good role model. Several early experiences with a poor supervisor or project team lead were part of my motivation to make the shift to management work. You can learn valuable lessons from those who teach you what not to do. From some poor experiences I learned:

1. To trust and delegate versus micro managing
2. To respect everyone versus playing favorites
3. To mentor those who were struggling instead of reassigning work
4. To treat staff as adults versus as students answering a roll call
5. To measure results on performance versus amount of time spent at the office

This sample list is far from exhaustive, but demonstrates the value one can gain from negative experience. I determined NOT to emulate the characteristics demonstrated by poor management. This also provided me the courage to take that first step into a leadership role because there were certain examples of negative leadership I experienced and knew that I could provide a more positive atmosphere to work in. If you find yourself in a difficult or negative leadership experience there still is much to learn if you can get beyond the immediate defensiveness and hurt.

Yet another area of negative leadership is that you may be judged by some on the perfection model versus the excellence model. Yes, you will make mistakes and some will judge you harshly based on their assessment of perfection. Professionally you may be correctly critically judged as you can be, once again, excellent in your approach and still miss your own mark and standards. Rarely is anything a fatal mistake if you are willing to apologize, rectify, and move on. Also if you have been managing or leading the group with excellence – giving your best – most will forgive a non-repeat offender. The positive leaders in my own work life have had much more influence on me than the negative ones but I have certainly learned from negative experiences in leadership also.

CONGLAMORATION OF LEADERSHIP

Wouldn't it be nice if we could just take every positive attribute or characteristic of these outstanding leaders and magically apply them to us? That would certainly be an enchanted experience and make this career journey we are on much more enjoyable whether we lead or are being led. Regardless of having a magical experience, you can incorporate many things you have learned from those who have trail blazed the path before us. This has been certainly true in my own professional experiences where a variety of colleagues, managers, and leaders provided positive examples to follow. The following are 3 very brief examples from 3 different leaders who have positively influenced me.

Courage Under Fire: One of my early supervisors was quite courageous in his efforts to lead a group in the face of many obstacles and outright attack. He was new to the company and was almost immediately under attack for situations he inherited versus created. Courageously he maintained his integrity and continued to lead the various functions reporting to him as if the negativity did not affect him. Eventually his perseverance permitted the group to work more effectively and his personal commitment in the face of personal attacks and adversity resulted in making a positive difference. I asked him how and why he dealt with all the criticism and unfounded attacks. He stated that he understood in the position that he was going to get a lot of "heat" but he was going to succeed or fail by doing what he thought was best. He knew that the critics would challenge anything he attempted to do or change anyway and chose to maintain his own direction and personal integrity.

Be the "Go To" Person: Another leader who I reported to provided an outstanding example of work ethic and leadership when it came to accomplishing the goals of the department. She never asked anyone to do anything that she was not willing to do and had proved herself during every crisis. By far she has been one of the most competent managers in the programming space that I have ever had to date. Respected not only for her leadership ability, but also for her own work life journey which included rising from a data entry operator, to programmer, to manager, to director because of her fortitude to advance her education while raising a family. By this she "walked the talk" and taught by example that you need to work and earn the respect of staff and peers before rising higher. Her style was

very fair-minded with those who advanced and were rewarded based purely on performance, ability, and aptitudes instead of longevity or just playing favorites.

Beyond My Comfort Zone: Lastly, one leader was able to push me in a positive way to achieve more than I thought I could. He placed me in challenging leadership roles with groups that I was not an expert in and then challenged me to be the one to make the positive difference. There were times when “refusing” an assignment may have appeared to be the best option (certainly the safe option) but in so choosing the leadership growth would have been diminished. He stretched me beyond my comfort zone, supported me in the process, and demonstrated the value of taking risks in my career choices.

We all have positive leadership examples to draw from in life, but it can be difficult to identify our development needs and actually implement what we have learned. But it is critical on this career journey to learn from these exceptional leaders/managers who cross your path and that these lessons are implemented and applied in our leadership opportunities. Each of the three examples of leadership was directly applicable in my career when I was in a leadership role and immensely helped me to be successful in the assigned position.

MEASUREMENT QUANDRY

The lack of the ability to measure most of the items on the Characteristics of Leaders list does not lessen the importance. The fact that metrics would be difficult to define for each attribute may actually indicate just how complex leadership is. There are some approaches you could take to receive feedback and have some form of measurement about your effectiveness as a manager or leader.

The three areas of 360-degree feedback, leadership training, and mentoring are examples of how to quantify or at least qualify leadership characteristics and effectiveness. As the title of the paper suggests, it is difficult to quantify leadership attributes and managerial skill in the same way as running a mathematical formula or plugging numbers into a spreadsheet to receive a definitive answer as the result. However as I have stated and illustrated you can gain more knowledge, improve your skills, take advantage of strengths all the while accepting that you are working in shades of gray versus black and white at times. Try to “seize the day” and be open when you can see prospects to improve upon your skills and others.

360° FEEDBACK

It is commonplace for feedback to be received during annual performance review cycles. Usually you do not get to review your own feedback during this process but your supervisor does have all the detail. This is a great discussion point during your performance review to specifically ask about leadership characteristics that may have been stated in the feedback, both positively and negatively. One or two key points that indicate what you are delivering well on and where there may be room for improvement. Much of what you gain from this type of exercise if filtered by your supervisor that is different than having the specific data yet it can provide insight on your supervisor’s position on the comments provided.

I opened myself up to some very direct 360 feed back from my management team in a restructuring exercise for the department. Human Resources interviewed each one of the Directors reporting to me and reported back the good, the bad, and fortunately nobody got ugly. I then had to understand and respond to the anonymous responses at the initial step before restructuring. It was a very vulnerable position to be in, but the openness in the feedback was extremely useful in modifying roles and responsibilities in the new structure. We soared to new levels.

ENLIGHTENMENT TRAINING

There are several tools that collect and analyze information about management styles and leadership characteristics that are prerequisites to participating in the class. Some of the more interesting analysis will compare your rating in a particular area versus those surveyed.

In a recent training class on leadership, a tool was used to collect feedback on several areas of affecting influence. It required input from several colleagues both internal and external to my current company. The analysis compared my perception with those selected to be surveyed on areas including:

1. Empowerment
2. Relationship Building
3. Organizational Awareness
4. Common Vision

There is a saying that, "Perception is reality". The information provided affirmation in areas that were strong or weak based on my input versus theirs. Even more interesting to me was evaluating areas of perceptual differences and determining (or at least speculating) on the reasons why.

The number of tools available seems to be infinite, but when you have the opportunity to participate in feedback about yourself and your managerial or leadership skills, take the survey, evaluate the results, and gain introspective knowledge about yourself. Most importantly determine to apply or implement one or two key points either in how you lead or for personal improvement.

THE ELUSIVE MENTOR

At an entry level or early career positions you can usually discover a peer or manager who is willing to mentor you and assist in either learning the job at hand or the general business requirements. Unfortunately have found that at the middle management level it is unusual to have the opportunity to be mentored as a means of improving your management skills. This may seem to be a dichotomy as your needs as a manager/leader may increase with your new levels of responsibilities. Nonetheless it is important to identify a mentor – not necessarily within the company – who you can consult with on any issue you may be facing. It can be a luxury to have someone who understands your business and position within the company, but not absolutely required. However when you do have a mentor it is imperative that the mentor understands you and provides the most direct and honest feedback to you about yourself or the situation you are facing.

When facing restructuring or challenging personnel issues in my leadership role, I have had fortunate opportunities finding mentors at companies. Sometimes these are contractual relationships that evolved into more of a mentorship role. At other times, it was just someone inside the company with which I connected with and we were able to assist each other with counseling or advice. Once again, when a career progresses you can become a mentor for others or have the ability/opportunity to mentor others.

“GLASS CEILING”

It is unusual as a SAS programmer who remains solely in the technical space to have the same trajectory within an organization the same as a manager or leader. Another way to state this is a director who manages a function or group will probably be more highly valued and compensated than the highly skilled programmer whose contributions are also critical to the success of the department.

Career Tracks: I have developed technical and managerial career tracks for SAS programmers within several organizations. Human Resource groups and executive management understands the value of management and leadership more thoroughly than they understand writing and developing code or systems. Even with the two career paths being accepted and defined, the technical career path tends to top out, hit the glass ceiling, at some point below the Director level. Over all It is easier to become a Director or above on the managerial career track.

Alternate Strategies: There are strategies to remain technical and expand the glass ceiling that you are up against. One option is to move into a SAS programming consulting role. This can be quite fulfilling if you possess extremely good technical skills and also have the personality and communication skills to compliment your technical ability. Another option would be to continue expanding your education with a PhD. in Statistics. Becoming a Statistician is a natural transition and typically provides a higher title and compensation while still remaining primarily in a technical role, but not solely a SAS programmer. Yet another option to consider is to shift into a more traditional software developer role at a company where technical skills are more highly valued for product development.

Compensation: What I have observed in compensation is that one can be quite successful and well compensated by remaining in a technical SAS programming position. Senior Programmers tend to be fairly well paid and respected even if the glass ceiling is slightly lower in the corporate setting. In choosing your own path you must consider your aptitudes for work and the enjoyment that you receive from work. Shifting to a management career track when your strength is technical should be a decision made with self-awareness and being fully informed. The skill set to lead and manage is different and the strengths that you possess as a programmer may not translate to being a good manager. There are advantages to remaining technically engaged such as remaining an individual contributor and being able to devote all your attention to programming tasks, etc.

Difficult Reversal: Lastly it is a fairly normal occurrence to observe or work with colleagues who do shift into a management role and for a variety of reasons simply dislike the management role and fail miserably. Before, they may have been highly respected, rewarded, and valued as a programmer and later feel incompetent and disgraced as they struggle in the management role. With most places not having a convenient option to shift from management back to the technical role, they end up joining another company and reverting back to their senior programming role.

Choose your path deliberately and wisely according to your skills, personality and ambition.

“LOVE IS THE KILLER APP”

This is an intriguing title of a book that I read several years ago. The author Tim Sanders was a presenter at a SAS Executive Conference I attended and provided excellent insights into networking and sharing with internal and external colleagues and customers.

It is clear that the absolutely best leaders love what they do and love the people they work with. Without this key ingredient work becomes bland and dispassionate. It is the key ingredient to love – be passionate – about the work and the positive differences you can make in peoples' lives and careers.

SHARING

Giving is far more rewarding than receiving and reaps far greater benefits than just being the person always in need or always taking from other staff and leadership. When you give, people naturally will give in return. It builds trust and a bond when you care. Self centeredness may have some short term gratifications and successes but in the long run will result in a dead end pathway.

Your motivation for giving will also be transparent to others. If you are sharing with the main intent of receiving, then that motive will be also easily discerned. But if you are giving, sharing, mentoring for the other person's good and their success and because you love what you do and the people you work with, then you build trusting and caring relationships that people appreciate and respect.

Sharing can take many forms, but the easiest is sharing time and knowledge. By providing access and taking the time to listen and mentor is a highly valued form of giving. You can also share access to people and projects both internally within the company and externally to industry experts or contacts. A referral to the right person who can assist the person or solve an issue is highly valuable to a colleague or staff member. Recognizing the success of the person and the project or task they delivered on and completed is also a way of sharing. Share a book that touches on an issue or contains the knowledge that reaches out to the individual need. This is a very personalized or targeted approach for demonstrating your understanding of the issue and providing a knowledge sharing resource.

Traditionally, sharing has focused on the compensation and promotion aspects of career development. This cannot be over looked, as all contributors should share the tangible successes of the organization they contribute to. Giving in other areas as mentioned above can provide just as much and in some cases more impact and motivation than expected raises and promotions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The choice to shift from a technical SAS programming role into a management position requires careful thought and consideration. It is a viable alternative and challenge for those who wish to develop a different skill set required for management and leadership. The best leaders will expand their abilities through mentorship and training and in turn share by giving back to others. There will be a striving for excellence in yourself and others without the requirement of the unattainable goal of perfection.

Whether one remains a technical SAS programmer or moves into management is not necessarily the most important decision to be made in career path development. The characteristics of leadership include being honest, inspiring, forward looking, and competent which are more subjective than measurable. The greatest aspect on the “work life” journey is whether you love what you do, love the people you work with, and reflect this passion in how you lead and manage.

This is truly leadership beyond measure.

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