Fay Vincent: Ten Tips for New Executives

Jokes are risky. Email is forever. Don't answer hypothetical questions. Never complain.

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In my old age, I would like to believe that some of the things I have learned might help those who are now plowing the fields I once worked. So here are 10 suggestions I wish someone had given me when I was 40 and beginning my run as an executive. I made the mistake of violating many of them but not all.

1. The less you confide in others in the organization, the better it will go for you. What you intend as harmless chatter can do serious harm. Keep your speculations and worries to yourself.

2. Be sure to manage down. Spend time with the lower-level employees in your company and try to be decent to all of them. A polite greeting to the elevator operator, a thanks to the mail delivery person and a kind word to the assistants will be appreciated. The making of reputations begins at the ground level. Similarly, keep the ugly aspects of your day to yourself. Do not shout.

3. Leadership is a full-time job and the duty clock is never off. Every little sign is being read and your impatience, disappointment or insecurity will be magnified by those who pass along their readings of you. There is no time for casual and unplanned candor, and messages must be sent only when carefully thought out. Be especially careful about what you put in writing, especially emails—they never disappear.

4. Keep listening to and for advice. Have lunch at least once a week in the office cafeteria, or make a point of dallying near the coffee station, and listen to what others are talking about. If someone wants to speak to you, there is every reason to listen. If criticism is offered, take time to respond with care even if you don't agree with it.

5. The wisecrack you believe is witty often is not. Your sense of humor is easily misread as patronizing and clumsy. If you still think that telling a joke or relating a humorous story is somehow important to making a point, run it past your spouse or a trusted friend first. Humor can be risky. Never joke about serious matters.
6. The important thing is to be sure that the important thing remains the important thing. Explain your strategy frequently and then rephrase it and repeat it.

7. Never complain; never explain. No one listens. Take the blame if something goes wrong. Do not blame mistakes on prior administrations, the weather, bad luck or your competitors. But don't appear defensive. Look forward—unless your resignation has been requested.

8. Trust your professional advisers and accept their expertise. Try not to second-guess the market. There is no such thing as perfect data about anything. Make decisions and move on.

9. Be careful about the use of the word "average"—one can drown in a river the average depth of which is six inches. Taking comfort in what's "average" offers a false sense of security. Assume that the worst might happen, because often it will.

10. It's a cliché, but true: Never do or say anything that you would be unhappy to see written about on a newspaper front page. In dealing with the media, avoid answering hypothetical questions, remember that the microphone is never really off, and never agree to speak "off the record." The only worthwhile public response to a crisis is honesty.

One fascinating aspect of life for an executive in the public eye is that there are so few ways to learn the art of a graceful style. There is no privacy either. But there are rewards and one is generally well paid for the limitations imposed. The media are always watching, and any small misstep in your personal life can be distorted. Those who assume a public leadership role can expect harsh treatment when things go wrong. If things go well, the media's silence should be gratefully accepted.

If all the suggestions above were distilled into one essential message I'd offer to a person newly arrived in public life, it would be this: Tell the truth, at work and in public. But also remember: One does not have to answer every question, either from a colleague or a reporter. The press will accept a demurrer, but a lie almost always is soon uncovered, and the damage to the reputation of the person who lies—and often to the organization he represents—is severe.

If you cannot answer or choose not to, say so and move on. It may seem simple and easy to do, but notice how few manage it.

*Mr. Vincent was the president and CEO of Columbia Pictures Industries Inc., executive vice president of the Coca-Cola Co. and the eighth commissioner of Major League Baseball.*