

Leading by Example and Looking for Opportunity

By [Ken Jacobs](#)

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I recently spoke with David Landis, president and CEO of Landis Communications, one of the oldest communications firms in San Francisco, about his leadership missteps and successes.

What were your biggest leadership missteps during your career?

I promoted someone before they were ready. Many millennials want to be on the fast track and desire defined direction, while being told of the milestones along the way. They want more money and promotions fast. At one point, I gave into pressure and promoted someone into a position way above their skill set. The person wasn't ready, so we all failed. Now if we're considering hiring someone, but they want a position for which we don't think they're ready, we offer them the slot for which we think they're right, and agree to an early review. But we don't give into pressure.

Another was not being as demanding as I should have been when it came to contracts and terms of payment, particularly with foreign clients. It's easy for our people-pleasing DNA to prevent us from acting as solid business owners, and when that occurs, we're not being leaders. While the big multi-nationals with outpost operations can fight the fight after the fact, if you're an American-based small or medium-sized firm, international law doesn't really support you. So you've got to show bravery upfront by having honest, fiscal discussions, being demanding and willing to walk away.



David Landis

And a third instance was years ago, when the founders of Airbnb showed up on our doorstep. We saw two young kids who were filled with enthusiasm about their offering, the sharing economy, etc. I thought it was one of the stupidest ideas I'd ever heard! I asked "What will you do when someone trashes someone's apartment?" They said that would never happen, and I said "Goodbye and good luck!" Lesson learned: It's easy to focus on the negative, on the challenge, on what can go wrong. But if you want opportunity, you have to look for it.

What were some of your best leadership moments?

Three come to mind. The first was during the 2001 downturn, we went from \$3.2 million to \$800,000 in billings. That's because we had placed all our eggs in the retail and consumer technology baskets. Of course, many other San Francisco-based agencies went out of business, and many national agencies closed their Bay Area offices. I made a commitment to our people that we'd get through it. I didn't take a salary for two years, but I paid our people so that we'd be ready when the economy rebounded. And I made the decision to diversify, to never be category-dependent again. We also actively addressed the issue of quantifying ROI, by creating a measurement program called Promised Results, to quantify metrics tied to our clients' business. As a result of those decisions, we survived the last recession with nary a blip. But I'm never going to forgo my salary again!

The second was when I had serious health issues last year and was out of the office for a long time. This forced me to delegate in a way that I never had before, and it gave our people the opportunity to rise to the occasion. It ended up being our best year ever.

Finally, 10 years ago I had a huge fear of not knowing digital and social. I felt almost immobilized. I decided that I'll learn it, I'll make mistakes [and] it will be OK, and I dove in. Now, every one of our client programs includes a major social media component. We've won numerous awards for digital and social work, even going up against the big guys. We now offer a full suite of services, of course traditional PR and media relations, but also search engine marketing, SEO, email marketing campaigns and online newsletters.

How do you prepare your team members to enhance their leadership skills?

Mostly, you do it by example. Get to know your employees as individuals and what their needs are. We had a prospect come in who is a staff executive director at a nonprofit and was talking about pro bono work. I remembered that one of our employees had once asked me about serving on boards. So I connected them. In that moment, the employee saw me not just as a boss, but someone concerned about her having a fulfilling life.

Also, know when to put the staffer first. Our digital guy is in his mid-twenties and has already run two companies. He's constantly being asked to speak at various tech conferences, and sometimes with little warning. It's not always the best for our business that he goes on short notice, but it's important for him, and we want him to know that we want him to follow his passions. That will ultimately have a positive impact on our business.

And third, encourage them to embrace who they are, acknowledge that they're different from me and applaud that they'll have different solutions. Rather than get them to conform, I try to understand their leadership styles and support them. Hire smart people and encourage them to do it their way. Leadership has to be true to who you are. It doesn't come from someone telling you what to do.



Ken Jacobs is the principal of Jacobs Communications Consulting, which among other services, helps PR and communications agencies develop their leaders, via training, consulting and coaching. Find him at: www.jacobscomm.com or [@KensViews](https://twitter.com/KensViews).

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