

## Listening to Yourself Has Its Values



*Elizabeth Levin (Normandean board member and co-author of Boots on the Ground, Flats in the Boardroom: Transportation Women Tell Their Stories), 2017*

Traditionally, hearing voices in your head is cause for concern. And if you're hearing more than one voice, perhaps it would be best to consult a physician. But each of us has a lone inner voice, an inner dialogue that helps us discern right from wrong, bad from good, comfort from fear. And that inner voice is key to professional success.

Leadership is a puzzle. But everyone who leads or aspires to wants to be a good leader. It's one of the most talked about concepts in the workplace today, particularly among young people. What many people do not understand, though, is that the qualities necessary for good leadership are not found in a book, a seminar, or in an app. They are what you learned when you were growing up. Good leadership derives directly from your values. So it's time for people to learn to pay attention to the power of their values.

In my decades of workplace experience values have always proven to be the best predictor of success. Without exception, young people that have demonstrated and stood by their values in the workplace have succeeded. That makes sense. Your values shape who you are and therefore your career, from the earliest choices you make until the day you retire. But let's exit the abstract and make things more concrete. Here are some examples.

I worked with a 26-year-old woman, who worked for a water-resources authority. She was responsible for community engagement in the siting of a sludge facility in a particular neighborhood. Suffice it to say that the community opposed the concept. But she ran the meetings with openness, caring, and respect for the people who attended, despite their potent views and rancor, which they did little to restrain. And they won; she lost. The facility ended up *not* being sited there. But that was no reflection on her. She stood out for her equanimity and compassion. In this very messy process, the fact that she could show that she cared for people and could be fair really helped the agency advance its cause. And she went on to have a terrific career in both the public and then private sectors. Her skillset, so evident early in her career, ended up being an excellent predictor of her future success.

In another example, a recent grad school graduate had joined our firm. On a particular project she determined that two pump stations that were proposed for demolition were actually historic structures and that a different design should be developed to preserve them. She recommended that course of action. But the engineer in charge of the project asked her to change her report and excise that information. He did not want to go forward with her recommendations. We stood behind her, but the engineer wouldn't budge. So the report went out as he wanted, without identifying the pump stations as historically

significant and without suggesting an alternative design. The project stalled for several years, because the historic commission correctly identified the pump stations as historic. Eventually the project moved forward and only one of the pump stations was demolished, but all of the angst, delay, and verbal wrangling could have been avoided had she been listened to. She, too, went on to have a fantastic career. And she stayed true to her values from the very beginning and stood up for what she believed in, despite great internal pressure to capitulate. And she continued to act on her values throughout her career.

But listening to and acting on your values is not their only importance in the workplace. Reading the values of others, particularly your boss, is also key. Ultimately, you must learn to read your organization's values as well. I remember during a recession, a firm I worked for was considering layoffs, but our boss protected us. He convinced the firm of the value of keeping us. Then he used the downturn to geographically expand our work. So we proposed on jobs outside of our normal sphere. And we won some terrific jobs and diversified the business. It ended up being hugely beneficial that we had stayed together. But that all resulted from our boss's values and his ability to communicate those values to the organization. So, what is a young person to do?

Put simply, listen. Listen to that inner voice. When you hear yourself saying you should speak up, speak up. When you hear yourself saying that you should not stand by and let something happen, don't stand by. When you hear yourself saying that a particular action someone is asking you to take is wrong or worse, illegal, don't do it. We were all raised to know the difference between right and wrong. We all have values. Listen to them. Act according to your beliefs. Trust your values. They're the best leadership tool you have and will virtually guarantee your success.

*This article was written by Elizabeth Levin. Former MassDOT and MBTA board member, former Rizzo Associates principal and board member, and current Normandeau board member, Elizabeth "Liz" Levin is the co-author of *Boots on the Ground, Flats in the Boardroom: Transportation Women Tell Their Stories*, a fascinating collection of first-hand accounts from the careers of 18 pioneering women in transportation.*