

Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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This month we welcome Harlene Anderson, Taos Institute board member and a co-founder, as she shares aspects of the keys to success in....

Handmaidens to Power Advice from Executive Assistants on Keys to Success



By Harlene Anderson, Ph.D.*

In a conversation with Jane Seiling, Taos Institute Associate and author of [*The Membership Organization*](#), our talk drifted to the topic of executive assistants to CEOs. The conversation sparked a curiosity about what we can learn from these “experts” who perform such vital behind-the-scenes work. I spoke with executive assistants at the peak of their careers, all women working with high-powered executives in industries including oil and gas, banking, higher education, and media. I asked about their histories, roles, and advice for those on this career path and for executives.

Consistent with my collaborative-dialogic practice orientation, I began with broad questions to invite them to share what *they* deemed important. I participated in their storytelling by exploring the narrative fragments of their stories with questions and comments, encouraging them to expand and help me understand. Following are selected themes, illustrated with italicized quotes.

Trust and respect: Trust and respect must be mutual features of an executive assistant-executive relationship. Showing it invites it in return.

*Trust and respect are more important than material gifts, but you have to earn it.
Give me a project and let me run with it.*

Pride: Pride in the executive, the organization, and the executive assistant’s role is essential.

Take pride in your boss and organization and in your position and accomplishments, but be prepared to not be the one to receive the accolades.

Relationship skills: Building and maintaining good relationships with the executive and members at all levels of the organization is crucial.

*You are the link between your boss and the rest of the company.
I think I learned early that if you want to be treated well by everybody, then you treat everyone well, whether it’s the janitor or the CEO.*

Professionalism: Confidences, discretion, and good social judgment are vital.

*Do not share confidential information under any circumstance.
You can go to lunch and happy hour, but you must not get involved in gossip.*

Information: The success and life of the organization depends on communication. Information is critical to bridging relationships and accomplishing goals. The executive assistant is often privy to information that the boss is not, and must know how to use it astutely.

Familiarize yourself with everything that comes across your desk.

Need to control the flow of information...store it and use it when appropriate.

Partners: The executive assistant-executive relationship is a collaborative partnership.

He used the speakerphone a lot so I heard both sides of the conversation. He called me his partner. We were completely in step and I was doing things before he hung up the phone. I would hear the conversation and anticipate what needed to be done.

Self-awareness: The executive assistant position is demanding. Successful executive assistants know their strengths and when to exert them.

I've learned that my perfectionism is a key to success at work but not at home.

Networking: The executive assistant is a key link between the executive and members of the organization and must build networks of trust.

You need their [other employees'] support, especially the support of other women.

Treat each person as kindly as you do the president.

Stress management: The executive assistant position requires the ability to manage a demanding schedule and to balance business and personal life.

I will stay here until midnight and be back at 7 if that's what it takes.

If he calls you from London at 2 am, you need to be there.

Attitude: The executive assistant must have a personal investment in the success of the executive, the organization, and themselves. A positive attitude is 100 percent critical to this success.

Do what it takes to get the job done.

My attitude about work is always if it's there work to be done, let's do it.

Successful executive assistants are forward thinkers who have the “gift of anticipation.” They take enormous pride in doing a good job and thrive on challenges. They have extraordinary organization, time management, and people skills. They know when to say “yes” and when and how to say “no” diplomatically.

The women I spoke with challenged the negative view of the executive assistant (or any woman in a “pink collar” position) as a sort of “vessel,” an interchangeable figure that has no expertise or value of their own. To the contrary, the women I talked with were strikingly invaluable to the success of their bosses and organizations. They had expertise and power and knew when and how to use it.

*[Harlene Anderson](#) is a co-founder and board member of the Taos Institute.