

# 10 Things I Learned at P&G to Make Me a Better Leader

19th November 2015 By [Anna Lundberg](#)



Multinational Procter & Gamble (P&G) is recognised globally as one of the world's best companies for leaders, with its commitment to internal leadership development and promoting from within, and leadership featuring as one of its five core values (along with integrity, ownership, trust, and a passion for winning, all in fact values that are also related to leadership).

I spent the most formative years of my career at P&G, and I'm incredibly grateful that I did. The experience I gained and the skills I learned there have opened doors to many of the opportunities that I've had since leaving the company two years ago, as well as helping me to manage all the many projects and priorities that I have on my plate now that I work independently.

These are 10 of the things that I learned at P&G that make me a better leader today...

## **1 You can't meet (and exceed) expectations if you don't know what they are**

It's so easy to launch yourself into a project, to get straight to business when working with a new boss, and think that you're being productive. Taking the time to clarify expectations upfront, however – whether that be in terms of the work itself i.e. which projects are the most important, what's the scope, and so on; or in terms of the

working relationship i.e. how you can work most effectively together – can avoid a whole lot of time wasting.

The same applies as an independent consultant. You can dive straight in and try to solve everything you think needs fixing, but that may or may not be what the client wanted. Clarifying those expectations at the beginning of the relationship, identifying three main areas where you're going to focus your time and really deliver results, will allow you to create the most value while making sure that the client is getting what they want.

## **2. Make sure you're speaking the same language**

At P&G, and at any large company, there is a whole system of words and expressions and those dreaded TLAs (three-letter acronyms) that you need to understand in order to be able to communicate. Once you have the lingo, this will give you shortcuts to getting your point across and will ultimately get things done more quickly and in a way that everyone agrees with.

While this language code can be useful, we also need to remember the poor souls who aren't quite up to speed. This can include new hires, of course, and external agencies, but you'll be surprised how sometimes even the more experienced managers won't have a clear idea of what you're actually talking about. Agree on a common definition upfront and you'll be more effective in delivering something that everyone is happy with. In fact, this goes beyond language to encompass fundamental values as well – establishing these upfront will ensure that everyone is on the same page.

## **3. How to take real ownership of a project**

At school, we had parents and teachers telling us to do our homework – at work, not so much (especially when we're freelancers or business owners)! Of course we have our managers and/or clients and if we don't deliver our projects we're going to hear about it; but what we're not going to have is someone leading us by the hand and telling us exactly what to do. We're responsible for getting the job done in the time that we have and in whatever way we deem appropriate.

Even then, though, there are different levels of project delivery, and taking real ownership means going beyond just the bare minimum. Taking real ownership means being proactive and taking the initiative, staying on top of all the milestones and deadlines, following up with others to get their input, and looking beyond the obvious of what you've been asked to do to really deliver added value. (In fact, you

may remember that ownership is another of P&G's top values.) This is again how you meet, and exceed, expectations.

#### **4. Your priorities are not necessarily the priorities of the people you're working with**

This is a big one! As "keen bean" junior managers, we bombard people with emails, we interrupt them at their desks, and we get huffy when they don't deliver to our schedules and our specifications. Following up relentlessly shows commitment and drive but what it doesn't show is emotional intelligence. Your priorities are just that, your priorities! At P&G in particular, the whole organisation was built on a system of checks and balances, which by definition meant that each function had a different set of priorities. Finance of course would have one set of success measures, marketing another, and the consumer research department yet another.

Following up relentlessly shows commitment and drive but what it doesn't show is emotional intelligence.

[Click to tweet](#)

Working effectively with a multi-functional team means being sensitive to the context, understanding the particular perspective of each individual and what their goals are both globally and in specific reference to the topic at hand, and adapting our behaviour accordingly. Step one here is treating the individual like a human being! Build a rapport and seek to understand where they are coming from and you'll be much more effective working together in the long run.

#### **5. Performance isn't enough (- the PIE model)**

There was a "secret" model at P&G that we weren't supposed to tell junior managers for fear that they would misunderstand it and change their behaviour in an ill-advised way. The model was PIE and told you the "formula" for how promotions and salary increases would be applied. 'P' stands for 'performance' and this is what you'd expect, how well you do your job. There are two more elements, however, which are 'I' – 'image' i.e. how you are perceived by your peers and most of all your seniors – and 'E' – 'exposure' i.e. it's no good doing wonderful work if no one knows who you are or what you're doing.

There's no point in putting your head down and expecting someone to notice and reward you accordingly.

[Click to tweet](#)

So the trick is definitely not to become a political animal and forget about doing any actual work; but likewise there's no point in putting your head down and getting on with it like a good girl and expecting someone to notice and reward you accordingly. Instead, you need to be aware of these other two parts of the puzzle, image and exposure, and make sure that while you're delivering excellent work you're also thinking about who needs to see that work and what impression you're giving more generally in the organisation. If nothing else, you never know who will be your next boss!

## **6. You're responsible for your own training and development**

At P&G, we changed assignment every two years, giving us an opportunity to gain experience in different aspects of our function (in my case, what we called marketing "design" and "delivery") as well as different business units. I was a superstar, of course, and I expected the offers to be falling at my feet – but I quickly learned that I needed to go out and look for the roles that I wanted. In doing so, I looked for something that would challenge me and let me learn new things, while exposing me to different people (see #5!) and giving me broader experience that would stand me in good stead for future roles.

I also took ownership of my learning early on, making sure that I signed up to every possible training that I could benefit from in one way or another. Your boss will be busy, and may not be on top of exactly which courses you have and haven't been on. Personal growth and development is a top value for me so this was particularly important in my case, but really it's something that is important for everybody in both their personal and their professional lives.

## **7. The magic happens when you focus on your strengths, not your weaknesses**

Training and development is great, but while it's admirable to try to get good at everything this is simply not possible, and both you and the business will be better served if you learn to focus on your areas of strength. Of course, when we first start in a company or a role there will be certain things we need to learn to do – project management, time management, and so on – but beyond that there will always be some freedom to discover what we're good at and use that to our advantage.

[The magic happens when you focus on your strengths, not your weaknesses.](#)

[Click to tweet](#)

P&G did this really well: in our annual rating sessions we were asked to highlight our three biggest strengths and only one weakness, and even then we didn't call it a weakness but an "opportunity". So you're good at public speaking and delivering training workshops? Maybe you're a number-crunching guru and a superstar at drawing up possible scenarios? Or what about creative brainstorming, getting the team excited behind a common vision, or mentoring interns? Find opportunities to use your strengths and you will shine.

## 8. The power of effective business writing

I was amazing at writing at school, in fact I was so good that my English teacher would make copies of my essays and hand them out to the rest of the class. Get me! So it was a bit of a shock when I started my first job at P&G and found that essay writing was not the same thing as business writing. On top of that, an international environment where most people were not native speakers meant that simple and unambiguous communication was crucial. Effective business writing had a specific objective, used clear and concise language, active tense rather than passive; it wasn't about sounding clever or being poetic.

Learning to write an effective business document – a recommendation, a report, or just an email for that matter – will allow you to get your message across quickly and effectively, to influence people with a more persuasive argument, and to impress people with your convincing business results. The ability to distil complicated matters into a clear and well thought-out message is a useful skill in all areas of life, above and beyond the corporate world.

## 9. You have to make choices

Ah, choices. This is a biggie. The long-time guru of P&G, two-time CEO A. G. Lafley wrote a book about it, [Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works](#), and we even had a made-up word, "choiceful", that every manager worth his salt would drop into any given conversation. We have to be *choiceful*.

So what does this mean? Well, you can apply this at a couple of different levels. First, looking at your project list: you need to identify which projects will have the biggest impact and then focus your time on those projects – it's far too easy to get bogged down in little tasks and trivial details. Second, at the macro level, a brand strategy is choice: we'll focus on this market OR this market, we'll invest here OR there, we'll prioritise this OR that. Giving a laundry list of every possibility, or saying that "it's all important", is the path to failure.

## 10. There's no such thing as work-life balance

I've [written about this before](#) and I'll say it again: the concept of work-life balance is a completely false dichotomy; and I think it was P&G that taught me this. During my first years at P&G I was the poster child of "work hard, play hard" – me and everyone else. We were all straight out of university, young and single, hardworking and ambitious. We worked late and partied later. In the good old days before the economic crisis, P&G even encouraged this with extravagant "off sites" where romance (or something a bit less Hollywood) blossomed and new relationships, with a varying degree of seriousness, were formed.

The point is that you can't hate your job, counting the minutes until you get to go home at 6pm, the days until the weekend, the weeks until the next vacation. That's no life at all. Instead, I'm a big fan of work-life integration, where we enjoy our professional endeavours and spending time with our colleagues just as we have fun while working hard on our personal interests in our time "off". I've never felt happier or more fulfilled than I do now, working harder than ever on my own businesses and projects and having a blast while doing it.

**So that's my list of 10 things I learned at P&G to make me a better leader. Any other P&Gers out there, current or former, who want to share your own learnings? (Yes, another made-up word...) Please comment in the box below!**

( <https://www.wolfleaders.com/10-things-i-learned-at-pg-to-make-me-a-better-leader/> )