

# THE REVERSE PYRAMID— *Thinking Upside Down Leads to Success*

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*This story is excerpted from one that appears in the flagship edition of the Ben Franklin Honor Society Book of Wisdom. I thought it would be appropriate to present it as a member of the Graphic Communication Advisors Group (GCAG) because it is meant to provide advice for leadership success to present members of our industry and the organizations that they represent.*

I've been in the graphic communication industry since 1961, mostly in teaching and administrative position in higher education, and well as in association work in employed and volunteer leadership positions. These types of positions take a special kind of leadership, because you are dealing with highly educated and highly accomplished professionals, many "at the top of their game." You are also serving a constituency with members that rely on you for wellbeing and success; sort of like being a statesperson elected to a political office.

And, in the case of higher education, many are at the highest rank and tenured, where promotions and salary increases cannot be used as rewards or motivators. In this story, I will share my "secrets" and experiences for successful leadership, as many of them can also work in more traditional, private, companies. Some may not agree, but they worked for me.

## **In the Beginning**

Briefly, after a few years in the advertising and printing industries in New York City, and after completing most of my higher education, I saw my calling being in association work and education. In the late-1960s to the mid-1970s I was employed by the Graphic Arts Technical Foundation (GATF) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and then by La Roche College, also in Pittsburgh, from the mid-1970s to 1983 when I took a position as Full Professor and Department Head of Graphic Communication at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, California.

Now, fast-forward 30 years to 2013. I was still a Full Professor and Department Head, the longest continuous tenure of a department head in Cal Poly's history. The typical continuous tenure of a department head or chair is three years. So, how did I continue for 30 years when three years was the norm? *This is the most important part of my story!*

## **The Reverse Pyramid**

One of my least favorite words is "boss" because it elicits a hierarchy of inferiors and superiors, counter-productive to eliciting motivation. I established a "reverse pyramid," telling faculty, staff, and students:

"You don't serve me, I serve you." I saw my job as ensuring that the faculty, staff, and students had what they needed to be successful. In supporting this position, I established an "open door policy." Anyone was permitted to walk into my office, uninvited, if they had anything to discuss. No appointment was necessary. If my door was open, and it was as much as possible, they could walk right in. As an anecdote, David Ogilvy of Ogilvy & Mather Advertising, one of the most successful advertising agencies, was once asked, "How did you build such a successful business?" He answered, "I surrounded myself with good people and got out of the way." I did the same thing. I did not micromanage. I delegated responsibility *AND* authority to the faculty and staff.

To support the faculty, I established an aggressive endowment program bringing in resources for faculty professional development, including traveling to the more important meetings and conferences in the world. I gave the faculty professional development priorities to advance their careers above my own. For example, I was invited to participate in events in China and Russia. They wanted me personally. However, I sent faculty members whose careers would benefit from such exposure and activities. I also established an advisory board of 30 industry leaders who met twice a year with the faculty and staff to share industry issues that we should be teaching in preparing students to enter industry. I listened and implemented the good ideas of the board. It is important that people volunteering their time do not get a sense that their participation is token involvement, but that their ideas are listened to and implemented. The advisory board indeed helped to improve our program.

## **Recognizing the Value of Others**

To further enhance connecting industry and "real world" projects with the university, I established the Graphic Communication Institute at Cal Poly (GrCI), for research, testing, product evaluations, seminars, workshops, conferences, and publishing, all for industry. This demonstrated that we recognized our industry as a constituency, and provided services over and beyond the undergirding mandate of academic departments. This too provided professional

development opportunities for faculty, and opportunities for students to participate. Related to this was the establishment of a Research Professors From Industry program, bringing prestigious industry leaders to volunteer periodic teaching of specialized courses to supplement the regular curriculum. This told industry that we recognized and respected their day-to-day expertise in running the industry, and that they had something important to contribute to the next generation of industry leaders. To encourage student involvement in research, I established a student chapter of the Technical Association of the Graphic Arts (TAGA) that did student research and published a journal for the annual TAGA conference attended by leading researchers, scientists, and technologists.

**My Most Difficult Job**

My most difficult job was motivating professionals, particularly tenured Full Professors at their top of rank and salary. I had to figure out how to motivate them when promotions and salary were not options, but formula driven. And I did! For example, when promotions and salary cannot be used as rewards, stimulating ego and providing territorial freedom can. By ego I mean recognizing and respecting the unique experience and preparation to become professionals, and helping develop a sense of “self-worth” recognized by managers and peers alike.

“Territory” does not mean physical space, but “mental space” within which the employees work. Examples include decisions on how to achieve ends, resources needed to achieve goals, and freedom to decide on professional development needs. I lived by these motivational principles and always had the support of the faculty and staff. Interestingly, in today’s word—pandemic and post pandemic—industry has learned the rewards that come from trust in employees to, for the most part, to do the right thing when given the freedom of remote work, i.e., working from home. All indications are that such work arrangements will not be short-lived, but will become the “new norm.”

**Proof of Concept**

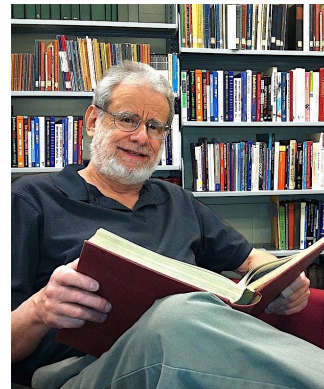
At Cal Poly, I offered up the department head position several times, realizing that change is often good and, perhaps, another faculty member would like to try the position. The word always came back that they wanted me to continue. I retired from Cal Poly after 30 years, but was then asked to stay on for another year-and-a-half to help continue running the GrCI as a special assignment until another director was trained. Two years prior to retirement I was asked to chair the Cal Poly Journalism Department where personnel issues made it vulnerable to elimination. I took this on and, I’m told, “saved” the department using my managerial principles. I then fully retired from Cal Poly in December 2014, but not from the graphic

communication industry in which I continue to function as a writer, speaker, consultant, and Expert Witness. I also continue to support Cal Poly.

**My Advice for Leadership Success**

- Become educated and credentialed in your field.
- Manage by “reverse pyramid” by reporting to employees, offering what they need to be successful.
- Maintain an “open door policy” where anyone may walk into your office at any time to discuss any topic.
- Do more listening than talking, and never act on “one side of the story” when there are more.
- When things go right, compliment the employee. When things go wrong, look to system problems first.
- Surround yourself with good people and get out of the way. Don’t micromanage
- Support employee professional development.
- Seek advice and opinions from outside constituencies and stakeholders.
- Do not take a job based on salary alone, as it is not likely to provide long-term satisfaction.
- Never leave one job before another is in hand, and always leave a job “with a blaze of glory.”
- Reduce stress with humor...tell a lot of jokes.

I am available to assist individuals and companies wanting to implement some of the procedures and suggestions that I have presented.



**Harvey R. Levenson** is Professor Emeritus and former Department Head of Graphic Communication at Cal Poly. He remains an active speaker, writer, consultant, and Expert Witness. Harvey has authored many articles and books and holds four degrees in printing and communication. He

received many industry awards and is featured in a documentary movie, *Harvest of Wisdom*, tracing graphic communication from the dawn of civilization to the present. His book, coauthored with GCAG member John Parsons, *Introduction to Graphic Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. ([www.igcbook.com](http://www.igcbook.com)), is the first printed interactive book using Ricoh’s Clickable Paper app. Harvey was raised in Brooklyn, NY and now resides in Pismo Beach, California

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