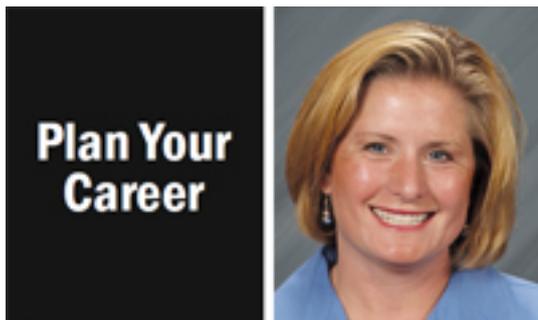


Ask: Because you never know what you don't know

Written by Julie Desmond
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By Julie Desmond
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It was just a report. A straightforward spreadsheet. A list of text and numbers lined up in long columns, a few formulas, some formatting and Voila! A report. Unfortunately, the recipient of the report did not appreciate its simplicity. “What about that other column?” he asked. “And where did those numbers come from?” Working in fits and starts, three days later, the reporting dynamo had produced the report he was looking for and pulled out most of her hair in the process.

This is the story of Ann's first week on a new project. She was handpicked for the high-profile position because she was uniquely capable of succeeding. When the request for the report came through, she forged ahead. She had created other reports for other teams on other projects, and thought she knew what was expected.

Other is the operative word here. This week's team had its own ideas about how that report should look, probably based on how they would use it. Ann assumed that their expectations aligned with the reports other teams had requested, and she assumed the information she needed would be readily available to her. Asking a few good questions at the start could have helped Ann shine in her new role.

Ann's problem was, she did not know what she didn't know. Being new to the team, a fair conversation could start out, “I've done some reports like this one. What information does your team want me to include?” Additional questions might be, Which resources are best to use in creating this report? How do you want it to look when it's done? Do you have any examples of similar reports? How do you want the information distributed?

Whether the report's column headings are bold or italic usually has zero bearing on the information provided. However, if the team has always done it a certain way, changing up colors or formats is better saved for later on. Learn the ways of the natives before introducing your futuristic concepts. You might discover that, “We've always done it this way,” is code for, “This is the best way to do it.”

Asking for assistance in a new position can feel like asking for directions at the gas station: humbling. Ann thought she knew it all, but discovered that by asking questions up front, she gained a clearer picture of what was needed, saving a fortune in time and embarrassment later on.

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