

BUSA 305 LEADER INTERVIEW

Leader Interview

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Interviewing a leader in an organization might be harder to do than at first thought. LuteLink is an excellent resource to connect current PLU students with alumni in specified fields, who will offer their time for specific reasons, such as a personal interview. The interesting thought, though, is that while some individuals might be supervisors or managers of employees or programs, some of them don't consider themselves "leaders"; that is to say, they consider themselves just doing the job they are supposed to do. Such is the case with Wendy Fowler.

When sitting down with Ms. Fowler in her office at the Tacoma Municipal Building, we talked about what classes I was taking, and how this assignment brought us into a meeting room. Ms. Fowler said that at first, she did not consider herself a "leader". She had to really think about it after reading my first email. In her initial replies, she thought about setting me up with the City Clerk or City Attorney. After getting to know what position she held, I decided that it was Ms. Fowler that I wanted to interview. She graduated from PLU in 2005 with a Bachelor's in Communication, emphasis in Public Relations, which is the same major I am pursuing. While I am still dabbling in different fields to choose a minor, Ms. Fowler went through the Specialized Minor in Business Marketing. She did "Study Away" in the United Kingdom, where she got some PR work experience, and she was a member of Circle K International. Also while at PLU, she worked for Conferences and Events, and that is how she became acquainted with the Tacoma city government, and how she was able to get her foot in the door at City Hall.

Ms. Fowler's career goals while at PLU weren't to work in a city government office per say. She was looking to work more in PR and Marketing, most likely in the private sector. She admitted that her job search coming out of PLU wasn't easy. She went on a few interviews here

and there before deciding to head to Europe on vacation to visit some friends. This was where Ms. Fowler told me that you should apply for jobs you don't think you will get. Before her vacation, she applied to a PR firm whom she thought she had no chance of getting hired on with. After three weeks in Germany, France, and jolly old London, Ms. Fowler returned home to a message from the PR firm. The caller did say they were not considering her for the position which she applied for, but that they had another position they felt would be a good fit for her. She called back only to discover the position had already been filled.

Thankfully, with her connections made through working with Conferences and Events, she was made aware of openings at the City of Tacoma. Because of her personable skills, as well as her in-depth computer literacy, she was hired. Ms. Fowler added that one of the most important things you can do before leaving college is get as much computer software application knowledge under your belt as you can. She felt that most of her graduating class was similar to most of the persons she, now as a manager, has interviewed and hired, only to terminate or re-assign: they just don't know how to process documents, and she believes that PLU should add a computer proficiency exam to the graduation application, and I couldn't agree more with her. As she and I discussed, you might know to open Microsoft Word and type a document, but do you know how to format everything and create a professional looking document? Surprisingly, many college grads don't.

After spending four years as an office assistant to the City Clerk, she began to fill in and take the minutes at city council meetings. Then the position of Records Management Supervisor/Public Relations Officer came open. Although Ms. Fowler did not have a background in Records and Information Management, she was encouraged by her superiors to apply, and was offered the position, and she has been in this position for almost four years now. She works

under the direction of the City Clerk in managing all municipal data, including the city archives, which date back to the late 1800's. She has two employees that report to her directly, but in addition to managing her small but mighty team, she is also responsible for managing the process for records and data management amongst all departments in within the auspices of the City Clerk and City Attorney, which includes inter-office memorandums to public notices, and more. Ms. Fowler's position actually requires her to work with multiple departments, with multiple individuals with an array of personalities and work ethic, as well as being on the public records committee and being on various other attorney laden committees.

Ms. Fowler said that when working with others, she disagrees with the "meeting halfway" and considers it an improbable goal. She said you will have to find a way to meet the other party at a compromise, that is, you will never get to a fifty/fifty standpoint. There are times, that for the greater good, you will need to cede your stance on certain aspects of a position to pull others closer to a common goal. She is also very sensitive to the ongoing budget issue at the city, and offers her assistance in ways that help to reduce the time spent on some tasks, in an effort to give more time for others. Occasionally, when all else fails, and Fowler runs into a snag with the record keeping practices of a department, she will bring the matter of city code, Washington State laws (specifically WA State Public Records Act 42.56) and Federal laws into the picture. While the goal is to keep accurate records of city affairs, she does change her approach and her message with each department she deals with. This, as she stated, is just something you learn by observing others and by trial and error. She also feels it is important to consider each department as a "client", that is, if they were a paying customer. Currently, Fowler describes her "typical" work week in three specific areas. One is the records management process. The second task is standing in for the City Clerk at some meetings. And third is an ongoing data conversion which

includes both document imaging of old files, as well as converting proprietary data from the city's outdated database system into a searchable PDF database that will be accessible both internally, and by the public.

Ms. Fowler stated her degree from PLU continues to be relevant to her current job on a daily basis. In addition to ongoing internal and public dialog she is engaged in, there is, in her words, a ton of writing. The general education as well as the Communication writing courses taught her valuable skills that helped her as an office assistant, and continue do so now as a supervisor. Fowler is also an avid reader, keeping up with magazines and newsletters from ARMA (American Records Managers Association), IMC (International Municipal Clerks), and AWC City Vision. Since part of her job is to work with attorneys, she reads a lot of case law. She continues to grow in her career as member of the Washington Municipal Clerks Association and the Pierce County Clerks Association, where she attends quarterly meetings and annual training. Her advice to anyone is that if your organization offers training, go to it! You will pick up a few new pieces of information, and be refreshed on some you may have forgotten. As far as further development, Fowler offers that you either follow a career path, or you follow your passions. For her, that passion is serving the citizens of Tacoma. She is set to finish her certification for Municipal Clerk by early next year.

When I asked Ms. Fowler how she viewed being a leader, she stated that you have to be the manager that brings everyone together. You have to be the cheerleader for your department, and help to bring others onto your squad. A leader inspires, makes the big picture easier to see, makes it fit into a process, and shares their vision with their team. But, Fowler said one of the most important thing a leader will do is to listen, and not just to those in their department, but to

those in other departments as well. Fowler says her biggest strength is her personal drive, followed by her analytical thinking skills.

Ms. Fowler also considers herself lucky to have had people to guide her in various stages of her life. At PLU it was Professor Feller out of the Communication department. At the City of Tacoma, it is the City Attorney, Elizabeth Pauli. While Fowler says that she and Pauli do not have the typical mentor relationship, she has learned a great deal from Pauli's ability to be quick, to know what to say at any given time, and how to respect the law and the processes therein.

Finally, Fowler offers this advice to current PLU students. She said if you are interested in something, explore it. Setup an internship, a job shadow, or an informational interview at the very least, and last but not least, be open to trying new things. As far as finding a mentor, she said to find someone you like, whether be a current supervisor, a family member, a pastor, or a public figure, and model yourself after them. It may be multiple people that you borrow ideas and management strategies from, but take the good qualities of those you like and put them into use.

This assignment was fun. I got to meet someone who chose the same degree path that I am on, and saw how they were able to go on to their careers, and how they use what they learned at PLU in the real world. I learned that being a leader means building bridges, being the internal P.R. person, and being able to compromise and listen well to others. For some supervisors and managers it just comes natural, and others have to work harder. And there are those like Wendy Fowler who feel that they are simply just doing their job, and doing the right thing.