

Leaders Want You to Show Up!

Here are five ways to do it well. **BY KAREN HOUGH**

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The EVP of a global packaged food company wanted to get to know some people. These were promising managers, who had everything he wanted in future leaders. He also realized that visibility was key to getting these managers into next-level positions.

He organized a dinner at his own home, during a visit from European executives. What a perfect opportunity! Great talent could mingle with top leadership in a social setting.

It was a disaster.

The managers were intimidated, barely spoke, and faded into a tight knot together until the evening was over. The leadership team went back to Europe, entirely underwhelmed. What a disappointment for the EVP who set it all up.

Presence and how we show up, isn't just about you. It's also about the leaders who are looking for—and hoping you are—the next great asset to the company. No matter your position, leaders *want* you to show up.

In addition to budgets, strategy, and clients, leaders are responsible for *people*. Do we have the talent we need? Are people engaged and excited about our work? Who will come up with the next great idea? If you are one of those people, great leaders are thrilled and relieved to have found an asset in your talent.

Let's first look at what gets in the way of making those positive impressions.

"I DON'T WANT TO BOTHER THEM"

One of the biggest misconceptions that gets in the way of connection to leadership is the refrain, "They're so busy! I don't want to bother them."

Yes, they are very, very busy people. They also want to know what's going on.

Jim Flynn, managing partner for law firm Bricker & Eckler (<https://www.bricker.com/>) gave key advice to the attorneys in a nine-month leadership development program led by my company. He shared the story of moving from partner to managing partner, the top leadership

position in a law firm.

"As a partner, I was always around my colleagues and the clients. I knew within an hour when there was an issue, and clients called me directly. I was also the first to hear about uplifting family moments, and nearby to celebrate when a colleague won a case."

"The day I moved into the managing partner's office, there were changes. Many were great, and I was excited to be defining our vision for the future. I also noticed that I wasn't hearing about personal moments and small victories as often. When I asked why, the answer was always, 'I didn't want to bother you.' Although my schedule is demanding, I want to be part of the life of this firm. And I need those stories when I speak to clients. It helps create connections and a picture of our culture. It also supports me—I'm a human being and want to be connected as much as anyone."

He then reminded the attorneys that for him to contribute to their journey to partnership, they had to take the responsibility to engage with him.

As much as we expect leaders to show up and represent entire organizations, we also need to show up for them. How can we do this effectively? Here are a few tips to get you started.

5 TIPS TO SHOW UP WELL

1. Know your company and its leadership. Be informed. Especially in large enterprises, it's important to understand the hierarchy of your company and what's going on in the industry. I'm always surprised how often people don't know each other in meetings, don't see breaking news, or have no idea about major company initiatives. When you are informed, you have a much better chance of recognizing leaders, having relevant questions to ask, and showing up as someone who cares.

2. Don't be intimidated. Leaders are people, just like you. Sure, we're going to be nervous if we meet someone important. Consider those nerves to be good energy—you care about this! Just channel it constructively. Avoid the worst behaviors of

people who are nervous or intimidated: clamming up and fading away, giggling a lot, talking about themselves too much, or conversely, not sharing anything about themselves. Sound confusing and conflicting? It is! The key is to understand how you respond when meeting someone new or important. Once you are aware, you can be prepared. If you go silent, practice introducing yourself. If you talk too much, practice asking an open-ended question and listening. If you giggle, do breathing exercises in advance so you can have your nerves more under control. Be professional, be present, and believe you belong there, too.

3. Have a succinct introduction. Can you introduce yourself in 10 to 20 seconds? You need to be able to say who you are, what you do, and something interesting in two to three sentences. That intro should be something you practice out loud.

You don't want to be saying it for the first time when you suddenly have the chance to meet the VP. It should be relaxed, delivered with a smile, and confident.

4. Always ask good questions. Getting other people to talk and share their ideas is the secret weapon of showing up. People often are given the opportunity to ask a question, in formal Q&A settings and in smaller conversations, yet stand there mute. Before you go to an event or meeting, have you researched who is going to be there and thought about good, open-ended questions you could ask? Asking good questions shows you are engaged and interested in relevant topics. And you may learn things you never expected!

5. Be positive. Business can be full of negativity. There are always supply chain issues, upset shareholders, and long days to complain about. Leaders hear about those things in spades. What can you contribute that's different? If you feel good about your job, or your team's work on a recent project, that would be such a breath of fresh air. People like to be around others who lift the energy in a room and have something good to say. Sometimes you may only have one chance in a year to speak to a leader. What impression can you choose to leave behind?

LEADERS NEED GOOD NEWS, TOO—FROM EVERYONE

Final emphasis should be made on the fact that you can have an impact, no matter your position, and leaders want to know about that.

We work with an international media provider, and its #1 content leader is a woman who makes impossible decisions every day, with millions of

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dollars in the balance. She once shared with me that her favorite surprise was hearing from an enthusiastic mailroom attendant.

She was at the end of a horrible day, in the elevator on her way to a last-minute meeting. A man entered the elevator with a mail cart and recognized her immediately. He greeted her with a smile, said her name, and commented that they were both working late. That made her laugh a little, which was welcome. She asked him what he was up to. He quickly told her about a project that really excited him. He'd discovered an inconsistency in their mail process, and his manager had let him solve the issue. He was happy it was working and saving time. As she stepped off, the interaction gave her a burst of energy she needed.

Two days later, she followed up with the leader of logistics. That little mail project had saved the company \$10,000 in the first month of its implementation. It was some of the best news she got all week, and she wouldn't have heard it if the man hadn't shared with her. She sent him a thank you note, and they have been friends at work ever since. She always looks forward to running into him. She also made sure he got the next promotion he was up for. **1**