

A look backward and forward

25 Tips from 25 Years

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March, 2011

As of January 28, 2011, I have been working with Oscar winner Olympia Dukakis and actor Louis Zorich as their personal assistant for 25 years. I did not plan for it to be this way but there it is. I admit that even I am surprised by our longevity.

In thinking about all this, I gave myself the exercise of writing out the most important things I've learned in 25 years and decided to share the ideas with you.

But first, some back story.

It was a snowy Tuesday morning. I'll never forget that day when I started working at the Whole Theatre in Montclair, NJ. I had been hired to be the head of Public Relations, which eventually morphed into being Olympia's assistant. I wasn't there for but an hour or two when suddenly there was shouting and everyone ran to watch the television. The Challenger space shuttle had exploded and suddenly, my new job was jolted into its proper perspective. It was a day filled with strong feelings, an emotional roller coaster. Looking back, I realize I've had many of those days in my career.

When Olympia read this piece, she recalled, "*Do you remember when you wouldn't talk at meetings? I would say, 'when is the tall one going to talk?' That certainly changed.*" It's true. It took at least two months to feel confident enough to speak up in a meeting because I was afraid of appearing stupid or ill-informed. I've had many of those days too. Fear can be paralyzing and debilitating and what I now know is how common a problem it is for assistants. Overcoming and working through fear takes some serious reflection and honest personal assessment.

The profession looks glamorous on the surface and it does have its fabulous moments. (My trips to Alaska and Australia top that list.) It has also meant sleepless nights, long and stressful days, difficult people, demanding deadlines, headaches, and tense conversations. Too many tasks and too little time in which to do them. It is impossible to not make mistakes given the detail-orientation of this work. The trick has been to try to only let the mistakes happen once and take responsibility when they do, then shake it off and move on. As is true in all professions, a sense of humor comes in very handy too.

Olympia and Louis have been my mentors, teachers, and friends and many times, I to them. Sustaining a long-term working relationship is a work-in-progress and requires learning from my own mistakes and theirs. Celebrities are human too. The whole thing – the job and the relationship – is in constant motion, a living, breathing entity. Nothing, including a job description, can be engraved in stone. Everything is up

for grabs because life happens and we have needed to stay open and responsive to the natural shifts that take place simply because we are human. The mistake is to fight them.

We have gone through some of life's biggest milestones together and witnessed each other's lives including the birth of my son Adam in 1988 just three weeks before Olympia won the Oscar for her role in "Moonstruck." I was grateful that Best Supporting Actress was the first award announced that night because Adam was in my arms as I watched the TV with pride – and then we both went to sleep. 25 years of following the trials and tribulations of our children and families – my divorce, the deaths of both of our mothers, opening nights, movie premieres, award shows, and quiet times in hospital rooms – and all the while travelling all over the world and managing to stay closely connected whether by phone, fax, or email.

Looking back, I realize that I now possess one thing I did not have on that first day of work. It took awhile and it happened gradually. I found my voice. As the years have gone by, it's gotten stronger and clearer. My work enabled me to figure out the things I cared about and empowered me to do something about them.

In 2004, I self-published a book called, *Be the Ultimate Assistant, A celebrity assistant's secrets to working with any high-powered employer*. It was my way to support administrative professionals all around the world. In the most recent edition of the book, I added a chapter called "Gender in the Workplace" because so much about finding my voice had to do with figuring out what happens between women and men in the world and in the workplace. My profession is dominated by women – 95% - so gender issues are a very important factor in how we operate. This subject has become a passion and something of a mission to support other working women to find their voices too.

These gender issues lead to the topics of respect, appreciation, fair compensation, self-esteem, assertiveness, and positive confrontation with co-workers. This is tricky stuff in the workplace of 2011. Abusive and destructive situations exist and are made worse by the tight job market which makes admins feel they are stuck with no recourse or options. Since 2004, I have travelled the United States and spoken to groups of admins and they have spoken to me. I see their faces, I hear their stories, and understand their experiences. In the workshops, we expose the problems as a way to move towards real-life solutions.

Certainly part of why my work with Olympia and Louis has lasted for 25 years is because they support me to pursue these passions. When I gave Olympia the final draft of the book to review and offered her free reign to take out anything she did not like, she called me two days later and said, "*Don't change a word.*"

At the beginning, Olympia, Louis and I did not dare to think how long our relationship would last. Olympia and I both had a need. I needed a job and in her late 50's, Olympia was suddenly busier and in more demand than ever before due in large part to winning the Academy Award. Olympia followed up "Moonstruck" with "Steel Magnolias," "Mr. Holland's Opus," and "Tales of the City." As her personal assistant, I can tell you that since "Moonstruck" the phone has never stopped ringing. 25 years later, it's slightly quieter now but that is only because of e-mail.

Communication – frequent, clear, consistent, and accurate – is key. In 2011, there are so many more choices than there were in 1986. Consider that when Olympia was nominated for the Academy Award in 1987, we managed the entire Oscar race without cell phones or computers. Can you even imagine it? At the same time, Olympia was helping her cousin Michael Dukakis run for President of the United States by doing as much press as possible. That meant scheduling private planes, limos, and hair and makeup artists exclusively by telephone. Sometimes for six events in one day for several days in a row. Complicated high-level coordination was required without the benefit of current technology.

The point is that we got it done. Don't get me wrong, I love the way technology helps us with our work. I hope Olympia gets nominated for another Oscar for many reasons, not the least of which is that we would do it so much better this time.

It has been an unexpected and wild ride since that first snowy January day. I am grateful for the experience and for all the teachers I have had who have helped me along the way. I am excited to keep learning, to see what challenges face me as I age and the technology advances and the profession evolves.

It was fun looking back and putting this list of tips together. I hope you find something that you can use in your work and in your life. Here goes...

25 Tips From 25 Years

1. Mutual respect and Trust. If I had to name just two things that have made Olympia and I a strong team, these are, hands down, the most important. We genuinely respect each other as people, as professionals, friends, women, and fellow human beings. We have disagreed and argued, but the things that have carried us past the obstacles are respect and trust. The power of respect and trust cannot be underestimated. They are the key to all successful relationships, and without them, truly excellent work is not possible.
2. Create your brain trust, your group of people on whom you can rely and trust and depend. Not sure how to handle a situation or how to make something happen? Who do you write or call and know that the answer will be yours within moments? For me this means my colleagues at NYCA – New York Celebrity Assistants www.nycelebrityassistants.org and at IAAP – International Association of Administrative Professionals www.iaap-hq.org
3. Be generous with giving help and information to your colleagues, and usually this means women helping other women. Life is too short to keep score. In our multigenerational and ethnically diverse workplace, it is important to just do it if you can. This is a core value in the workplace which pays off big-time.
4. Do whatever it takes. In the job market of 2011, there's very little room for a "that's not my job" mentality. In the corporate assistant world, job descriptions have expanded to include personal responsibilities as the new normal. Rule of thumb – If you want to succeed and get ahead, be

proactive and take initiative. Be the one to fill important (but not necessarily glamorous or high-profile) needs as a team player with a positive attitude. It will be noticed and noted.

5. Surrender to uncertainty. The day-to-day world of a personal assistant is filled with uncertainty. Don't fight it, go with it. The image that helps me is the one of a tennis player balanced on the balls of her feet getting ready to hit the serve. Always be ready to move in the direction of the highest priority. I call this Administrative Triage.
6. Communicate! Whatever methods of communication you use, you and your employer need to communicate often and stay open to the situational changes in order to respond reasonably and realistically to changing circumstances. You and your employer will discover your best methods for communicating and they may change. Humans don't stand still, and nor do job descriptions. Don't stay silent and don't assume. When in doubt, ask. Still in doubt? Ask again.
7. Work/life balance is an idea worth fighting for and focusing on. You and your employer might not ever achieve a balance between work and play, professional and personal time, or family and business commitments, but what is important is that you both acknowledge the need for rest and relaxation in order for you both to deliver excellent work on a consistent basis.
8. It's about them. This idea took me a long time to really get but it is a workplace truth. When faced with someone who is upset, rude or difficult to deal with, the problem is - 9 times out of 10 - about *them*, not you. Give the situation a little time, and the real issue will emerge.
9. You don't get if you don't ask. People are not mind-readers and are usually focused on their own agendas. Therefore, be clear about what you want and why you want it and guess what? You'll get what you ask for or some version of it. Rule of thumb – You never know until you try.
10. You can't blame them for trying. Assistants will be approached for all kinds of things related to their employers whether the employer is a celebrity or not. It's our job as the gatekeepers to evaluate whether we even take the request to our managers. You can't blame people for asking but you don't have to say "yes" either. Olympia's son Peter made me laugh many years ago when he said that I can say "no" nicer than anyone. Olympia and I play good cop/bad cop all the time. It's an acquired skill which takes diplomacy and practice.
11. Everything is negotiable. Everything. Okay, almost everything. Rules are rules with the DMV, for example, but pretty much everything else is up for negotiation. Sometimes the only answer is to throw money at it. Understanding Tip #11 has trained me to think creatively about problems and has saved me a lot of time and aggravation.
12. Practice good manners. In my book *Be the Ultimate Assistant*, I included a chapter called "Good Manners Matter." Manners are not old school. I am 100% certain that I have been able to get something or do something simply because I say "please" and "thank you" and return calls and emails in a timely way. Our world in 2011 is moving so fast that often, being polite is neglected. Take the time to be gracious, friendly and kind, and watch the reaction. Send a hand-written

thank-you note, something that is fast becoming a lost art and is a real attention grabber. Hold a door, an elevator, help someone on with their coat, bring a co-worker a cup of coffee without being asked. Acknowledge kindnesses. Pay it forward. Doing these things is not only the right thing to do, it is good business practice and will make you stand out from the rest.

13. Turn off the tech. We must create limits when it comes to 24/7 accessibility. When you are at the movies, in a Broadway theatre, or out to dinner, turning off cell phones is appropriate and respectful. Olympia is famous for saying, "Do one thing well, not two things badly." She's right. Ask yourself, is it really so important? How many hours do you spend on social networking, email, and your Smart Phone apps daily? We each only get 24 hours in our day. Be smart how you use them.
14. Buy a box cutter. In fact, buy two. I've coordinated twenty-three moves in my life. I counted. Four of them were for Olympia and two were international. The hands-down best tool for a move is a box cutter. Invest in two good ones so you have a back-up. It saves times, your nails, and your sanity.
15. The power of a phone call. E-mail is highly effective but there are times when there is no substitute for picking up the phone to talk out a problem or a situation with someone. A well-timed five minute conversation can make all the difference. In 2011, it has become special to actually reach someone on the phone instead of trading messages. It matters to say things like, "I know that you had been hoping for a response by now but I wanted to call and let you know that I don't have an answer just yet. I expect to be able to get back to you by (name a date.)" People are appreciative of the personal touch and of being kept informed. It is respectful to do this and appreciated.
16. Pay close attention to details. Don't assume anything and don't trust just one source of information if in any doubt. The Internet is clearly one of the best inventions ever but not all the information found there is 100% accurate. And while I am thinking about the best inventions of all time, the GPS is right up there too. Life is just better because of this device.
17. Own your mistakes. Mistakes are going to happen and when they do, take ownership of them. This builds trust. Learn from them and try to allow mistakes to happen only once. (Giving Olympia the wrong speech to deliver is just one of my legendary screw-ups. For the record, *that* has never happened again!) When you are known to take responsibility for mistakes, you have complete credibility when something happens and you are not to blame. The only reason to place blame is to solve the problem and move forward as soon as possible.
18. Being nice pays off and bad behavior is remembered. While it's not always possible to be nice, I recommend it as your first approach. Someone who is treated badly remembers it and the repercussions might not be revealed for years, but payback will most likely come out sometime and usually when you least expect it. I've seen this firsthand. There's no bad time to apologize or show appreciation. Everybody makes mistakes so when you do, say that you are sorry. And when someone is kind or goes out of their way for you, say thank you and show your

appreciation in some way. This is professional. It exhibits strength, not weakness and people notice.

19. Positive confrontation pays off. Don't waste time stewing in resentments and negative feelings. Assert yourself and say, "I think we are having a communication problem. Can we sit down and talk about it?" There are at least two sides to every issue and it will serve you to make it your business to look at it from all angles. The best solution is the one where everyone walks away having been respected for their point of view.
20. Toot your horn! Excellent work does not happen by magic so be sure your employer knows what you are doing and how you are going above and beyond the call. This strategy will serve you when it is time for your evaluation and salary review.
21. Seek perspective. In the craziness of everyday life, it's easy to get tunnel-visioned and closed off from the rest of the world. Watch the news. Take a walk. Talk to strangers. Get a different point of view to help you recalibrate your own.
22. Stay healthy. Pay attention to doctor's appointments and your general health. Getting sick doesn't just happen to other people and it really interferes with enjoying life and doing your work.
23. Go outside your comfort zone. Trying something new keeps you fresh and at the top of your game. It's also good for building self-confidence.
24. Protect your name. The one thing you have that no one can take from you is your name and your reputation. Protect it to the best of your ability and this is particularly tricky given the current social networks of Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. Be a person of your word that others can take to the bank.
25. "Be the change you wish to see in the world." This famous quote by Mahatma Gandhi inspires me and it hangs on the wall in front of my desk.