

Closing Remarks: Rung Out

A former development officer reflects on her hesitation to move up in advancement

By [Mary Ellen Collins](#)

Managing people is a skill I don't have and don't want. When I left my job as a director of major gifts at Simmons College for the life of a freelance writer, I was glad to stop battling the bureaucrats who were determined to put me in charge of larger and larger groups of worker bees.

In 1996, my campus president tried to convince me to become a managerial second banana to our first-ever vice president for advancement. I mightily resisted his attempt to push me another rung up the ladder. I couldn't imagine a worse way to spend my time than trying to create *esprit de corps* among three separate departments for which collegiality did not come naturally, but he persisted.

"You'll be great at this," he said. "You have the experience! The institutional memory! We need you!" Even my husband concurred, not completely understanding why I was fleeing from the mantle of power being thrust in my direction.

Wrestling with the reasons

Many things in the office needed attention. We had nose-to-the-grindstone staffers who deserved recognition and others who just took up space. We were slaves to inefficient systems, problematic policies, and languishing long-range plans.

In an area where the left hand seldom knew what the right hand was doing, we were on the verge of trying to merge the offices of development, alumni relations, and public relations into one big, happy advancement family. Just thinking about the challenges that would lie ahead if I took the job upset my stomach.

I often had been frustrated by the bureaucratic nonsense that got in the way of doing my job, but when I was handed the chance to do something about it, I didn't step up to the plate. The whiff of power was intoxicating for a millisecond, but I knew that it was completely unrealistic to think I could effect any noticeable change just because I occupied a new place on the campus organizational chart. The prospect made me dig in my heels and cling to the door frame every time someone tried to drag me from my dark and comfortable office into the public realm of management.

"I don't have the patience to be a manager!" I yelled. "I don't have the fortitude! I'm not enough of a people person. I'm really not!"

Asking alumni for money while supervising two other competent major gift officers and overseeing my own specific program area was one thing. Expanding my administrative jurisdiction to drastically increase my number of direct reports was something else entirely.

I wish the president had believed me when I assured him I wasn't management material. There were valid reasons I never aspired to occupy the vice president's chair or even that of a director of development: I'm neither diplomatic nor political, I'm easily frustrated, I don't thrive under pressure, and I like a world in which everyone acts like a mature, responsible, professional adult.

Just saying no

After weeks of fretting and fussing over the prospect of a new title, new responsibilities, and a thousand new worries, I primed myself to explain to my new boss that I'd climbed the managerial ladder just as high as I wanted to go.

"Do I have a choice in this?" I asked.

"Of course you do," she answered.

"Then I'd like to just keep doing what I know I do well."

She agreed, and that was that.

Was it a cop-out? Maybe, but I prefer to look at it as an informed decision based on an impressive level of self-awareness. I relaxed back into major gifts for a while, but left the job and the field within a year anyway.

All that talk about what everyone else perceived as the logical next career move for me prompted some thoughtful self-assessment and a serious look at the world outside my institutional advancement window.

I knew that having numerous subordinates and feeling a sense of power would never be components in my definition of professional success, so I decided to see how well I would fare without occupying any spot in a traditional hierarchy.

Waving farewell to the folks up and down the advancement ladder, I jumped off and headed out the front door of my institution to pursue a lifelong creative dream — freelance writing.

Do I miss my favorite alumni and the colleagues who became friends? Absolutely. Do I regret my decision? Not for a minute. Do I wish I were a bigwig in charge of putting out fires related to administrative ineptitude? Absolutely not. Nor do I miss the days of meeting, mentoring, mediating, questioning, answering, appeasing, cajoling, convincing, consensus-building, and trouble-shooting.

I now spend most of my time sitting in my quiet home office trying to make a living with my words. I have discovered that I'm just about as much as I can handle, and managing myself is a blissfully solitary full-time job.

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