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Ruth Morton IT Pro Advisor
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[Interview] Part 4: Teresa Hennig, International MS Access Authority

This is the next blog in the [continuing series](#) of interviews with leading professionals. In this series of blogs, I have an exclusive interview with Teresa Hennig. Teresa is an international authority on MS Access, a top user group leader, a best selling author and a recognized and profiled MVP.

Enjoy! Stephen Ibaraki, [FCIPS](#), [I.S.P.](#), [MVP](#)

Top Ten Leadership Lessons



Stephen: As a user group leader for many years, what are your top ten leadership rules based upon your experiences of what works?

Teresa: I think that my rules, as you want to call them, are really a combination of what I've learned and used throughout my careers as a program and project manager, business consultant, and developer, as well as from being president of several organizations.

First and foremost people have to decide on the type of environment and atmosphere that they want for their meetings. Not everything will run equally well under different structures. For now, I'm going to focus on the types of rules that seem to work well for my user groups. Of course, you'll notice a strong parallel to the ten lessons.

Publish the agenda and stick to the schedule. This is true for most business meetings as well. Agendas help people to arrive prepared and by knowing the agenda the participants will help stick to it.

Make sure that the presentations cover the basics. Again, this goes back to focus on the audience. If you have a beginners' group, you need to ensure that the presentations cover the fundamentals so that people can follow along. It is good to have stretch topics that show people what is possible. But even those go over better if they start by providing a foundation for people to build on.

Set the tone and be friendly and respectful. Lead by example and you will find that the participants will be friendly, welcoming and will be volunteer for whatever tasks you can assign. You don't have to like everyone, but it helps if you act as though you do. Given a chance, you'll probably discover that each member has at least a few likeable characteristics.

Be fair. Let people sign up for drawings, let people earn software by helping or doing reviews. It's great to reward volunteers, but spread the wealth, both in gratuities and in appreciation. Oh, and when you're handing out prizes, be happy for the winners and remark on some of the benefits. Your comments add value to the prize. Give generously but sincerely.

There are no stupid questions. I want people to feel comfortable to ask any question that they have and that includes repeating a question or asking for an acronym to be explained. A surefire way to lose an audience is for them to feel lost or afraid to ask a question. I'll often monitor body language, to ensure that the group is comfortable and able to absorb the content. If I have any doubts, I will carefully phrase a question so that the presenter will provide additional background for a particular technique or point.

If you think about this, it can be rather fun and a relief to demonstrate that as the leader, you don't need to know all the answers. It is much better to let the group share their ideas and solutions. In fact, even when we have a designated lead for Q&A, I still moderate and solicit responses from the group. That encourages more questions and gives value to all the participants. We are there to gain from each others' experiences, not just from one person.

Never attack the speaker. There are plenty of ways to ask a question without challenging the content or the presenter. Even if a seasoned presenter is comfortable having his theories attacked, there are likely people in the group who will be intimidated by the exchange. Worse yet, they will likely be discouraged from asking questions or even considering to give a presentation.

Be alert to inquiries that put the speaker on the spot. You may occasionally need to thank the audience for the question, while suggesting that it is outside the scope/time of the current talk, but that you'd welcome a follow-up during Q&A - or whatever fits for the situation. The key is to maintain the friendly atmosphere that is conducive for learning, exploring, and sharing.



John Osley Director Community Evangelism
MicroSoft Canada



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Now, as a qualifier, there are certainly forums where this level of debate and exchange are encouraged. For the most part, it isn't appropriate at the typical user group meeting.

Think, don't react. There will be times when human nature might be to lash out or to take offence at a comment or action. As the leader, it is your role to defuse a situation and to preserve the dignity of the meeting. Yes, this does sound like something I've been through a few times. It helps to know that when you're standing in front of the room, something that might feel like a battle cry to you is hardly likely to be remembered by anyone else - that's the way it will be if you skillfully avoid escalation.

Plan ahead and have contingency plans. If possible, publish presentation schedules 2 or 3 months out. Then in the back of your mind, keep some ideas about what you can do "just in case." You may not think of everything, but have a backup plan in case a presenter doesn't show, the computer doesn't work or another group has your room. It doesn't mean have a second meeting location, but at least be able to think through some alternatives and then get agreement from the group for the plan.

Be ready to think on your feet and be willing to call in some favors. Remember, people feel good about helping others. So, if somebody knows you are in a real bind, they will try to help and they'll feel good knowing that you trusted them when it really mattered.

Be the leader. Run the meetings, keep them on time, introduce the speakers, moderate the Q&A, assign volunteer duties, network, bring in new ideas and new sponsors, thank your sponsors, thank the participants, and the list keeps growing.

While you're at it, figure out your leadership styles. There are many effective leadership styles. Use the one that works best for you in the situation. If you're comfortable in charge, the ranks will be comfortable following your lead. After all, they want you to succeed. However, they also expect you to do the tough stuff, like keep the peace, moderate discussions, politely reign in verbose campaigners and even pull the plug on long-winded presenters. The great thing is that once you skillfully bluff your way through a tough situation, the next one will seem so much easier. You'll actually notice yourself evaluating options and probable outcomes before taking action.

NETWORK! As a leader, you represent the group to sponsors, to your colleagues and to the community at large. You've got incredible power to network on behalf of the group, this can secure sponsorships to cover expenses and to provide drawing and review items. Networking is also the key to offering job opportunities, bringing in presenters on related technology, and expanding your membership base. Not only do you set an example for how to network within the group, but leaders are also role models. Meetings are excellent forums for both technical and professional development.

I'll end with the rule that is key to anyone's success - that is to "Have FUN"! The adage is to do what you love and you'll be good at it. Well, there sure seems to be a lot of truth in that for me. I am passionate about helping people, serving my members and affording them opportunities that they otherwise would not have had. I love leading the meetings. No matter how tired or over committed I am, on Tuesday nights my members are my number one focus. I try to take that level of energy and drive to every one of my meetings and into every project.

Look for more with Teresa in the next blog.
I also encourage you to share your thoughts here on these interviews or send me an e-mail at sibaraki@cips.ca.

Posted: Thursday, May 17, 2007 8:05 AM by [cdnitmgr](#)
Filed under: [Stephen Ibaraki](#), [Interviews](#)

Comments

[Legal Canon](#) said:

The Canadian IT Managers blog (a MicroSoft sponsored blog that contributes to occasionally) has a series of interviews with Teresa Hennig. The interview entitled Top Ten Leadership Lessons is well worth reading a it is good advice for anyone...

May 18, 2007 9:29 AM

[Stephen Ibaraki, FCIPS, ISP, sibaraki@cips.ca](#) said:

David, I couldn't agree with you more. Teresa combines the best of both worlds, extensive training and experience in leadership--and accentuated by noble choices over a long history. Her best practices are very much worth noting!

Cheers,

Stephen Ibaraki

May 18, 2007 9:59 AM

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