

TEN QUESTIONS

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# Nancy Adler

Compiled by Charlotte Clarke



Nancy Adler is an artist and professor at the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill in Canada. Since joining the school in 1990, she has taught through the medium of art. She now teaches a three-day global leadership course called Redefining Success that encourages MBA students to appreciate beauty and not just financial wealth.

Prof Adler grew up in California and studied at UCLA Anderson School of Management. In her spare time she enjoys hiking, skiing, painting and monotype print making. She frequently spends time as an artist-in-residence in the Canadian Rockies at The Banff Centre, an arts, cultural and educational institution and conference facility.

## **1. What is an average day at work like?**

This is a great question – because I have never experienced anything even vaguely related to an “average” day. My day might start in Asia, but end many hours later in Europe giving a keynote address. My day might start with an early morning cup of tea in my living room, while I write in my journal. That quiet moment might be followed by a morning of working on a new article, only to be interrupted when I leave to teach a cross-cultural management seminar. Then on yet another day, I’ll wake-up in Banff and spend the entire day in my studio painting.

## **2. Do you have a teaching routine?**

There’s no routine to my teaching or professional life. I love the freedom I have to create what I think is important at any particular moment. Ask yourself: how can leaders lead if they lose touch with their own unique perspective? When I realised how few managers take time to reflect, I decided to “seduce” them back into having regular conversations with themselves. I designed the Leadership Insight Journal, not just with blank pages, but with paintings, contemplative questions and a format designed to intrigue.

## **3. What do you enjoy most about your job?**

I love living globally. I love working with people who are skilled at getting things done – which the private sector excels at. I love working with people who are capable of making a significant contribution to global society and the planet. Just last month, I had the privilege of

working with 100 managers from around the world who had convened in Montreal.

#### **4. Who are your business heroes?**

I hugely admire Ray Anderson, founder of Interface, the manufacturer of modular carpet. I was lucky enough to meet Ray more than 10 years before his untimely death in 2011. Based on Ray's leadership and commitment to sustainability, he unequivocally demonstrated that business can do well financially by doing good for the world. His commitment to the broader society was what allowed his company not only to succeed, but to significantly outperform its competitors.

#### **5. What would you do if you were dean for the day?**

I would convene an e-meeting with business leaders and management school deans from around the world and together we would begin crafting a 21st century leadership curriculum for the planet. While Golda Meir was prime minister of Israel, she offered the hope that someday war would be like cannibalism; unthinkable for the human race. My hope is that future generations would recall the global e-meeting as the last day that businesses and business schools adhered to economist Milton Friedman's dictum that profit is the sole bottom line.

#### **6. What is the best piece of advice given to you by a teacher?**

Years ago, Nakiye Boyacigiller, my friend, colleague and now dean at Istanbul's Sabanci University School of Management, told me that our real job, whether working with undergraduates or senior executives, is to develop global citizens. Her advice guides me to this day.

Another valuable piece of advice came just as I was beginning to write my first book, *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*. My then teacher told me to imagine I was writing for someone who was very bright, but knew nothing about my field. I immediately thought about my mother and to this day, when I write books and articles, I imagine I am telling the story to my mother. Needless to say, that advice has kept me away from academic jargon and all the encumbrances of scholarly writing.

#### **7. What advice would you give to women in business?**

Don't believe what you read about women in international management! Most of it is inaccurate, based on myths. My early research focused on women expatriate managers. Most of the business community thought that the women would have a very difficult time working overseas. The reality was that the women outperformed (albeit slightly) their male counterparts.

Additional advice: Look for ways in which being a woman is an advantage in your company and your industry. Many high-ranking women have discovered that because there are still

so few senior women, they are more memorable than their male counterparts and can more easily draw attention to their company and its strengths.

## **8. How do you deal with male-dominated environments?**

Patience and a sense of humour is always a good idea! I ask myself: Is this issue worth confronting? If not, just let it go. [However] the best remedy for ignorance is to expose the facts. [And] when presenting the facts doesn't work, increasing transparency often helps.

For example, when Quebec first published professors' salaries by rank and gender, supposedly anonymously, they inadvertently exposed the fact that my university was paying me (as the only woman who was a full professor in management) \$20,000 less than the average male professor. Although it took some "education" in making the inequity visible, I ultimately celebrated a very sizeable raise that more than made up for the gap.

## **9. Where would be your favourite place to teach?**

In Slovenia at the IEDC-Bled School of Management – but not just because it's located on a beautiful alpine lake overlooked by a castle. As my friend and McGill colleague, Henry Mintzberg, says, IEDC-Bled focuses on managers, not MBAs. The highly experienced participants in their programmes bring "real world" perspective and concerns to every discussion, including a deep appreciation of discontinuous change gained through managing successful businesses in transitional economies.

## **10. If you could do it all again, what would you do differently?**

I would publish fewer articles and paint more. I would skip a few professional meetings to leave more time for my friends and family. I would learn to laugh, instead of getting angry, much earlier in my career.

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