



# Follow the 5 A's of Being a Trusted Advisor

“Trusted advisor” is not a formal job title. No job descriptions are readily available. Yet, trusted advisors are the indispensable go-to people for many senior leaders. And in this age of specialization, leaders often invite a number of advisors into their inner circle.

These advisors, regardless of their discipline, need to combine their specific subject matter expertise with soft skills. By doing so, they build trusted, collaborative relationships that leaders value.

## RELATIONSHIPS COUNT

When you focus on relationships instead of subject matter expertise, you shine the spotlight on others rather than yourself.

Research supports relationship building. In the study “Being a Strategic Communication Advisor” that my firm, **Connect Consulting**, conducted in the summer of 2011, the data showed that strong, effective and strategic communication advisors focused on three practices more regularly than other advisors: more disciplined and targeted relationship building; more measurement and more professional development. (This research is featured in “How to Bridge the Gap Between Leadership Expectations and Results” in *PR News’ Employee Communications Guidebook*

Vol. 3—[prnewsonline.com/store/63.html](http://prnewsonline.com/store/63.html). Survey results are also available at <http://connectconsultinggroup.com/results>.)

These practices, as well as the soft skills behind them, aren’t innate; you can learn them. That’s why a few years ago I started the Strategic Action Group. It’s a mastermind community designed for communication professionals who want to adopt the right mindset and improve their ability to become capable, confident and credible advisors. One of the areas we cover is how to “earn” the five “A’s” that are fundamental to advisors:

1. **Acumen**—Having and applying knowledge, including understanding of organization, emotional intelligence, body language intelligence, listening skills and astuteness about your subject matter expertise (SME). For communication professionals, this covers PR, media, presentation skills, influence, behavior change and any other topics upon which you need to draw.
2. **Awareness**—Possessing self-awareness, especially being conscious of how you present yourself, keeping your ego in check and knowing how you react under stress. At the same time, you put yourself in the leader’s shoes. You

understand what they need to be successful in their role.

3. **Anticipation**—Taking the initiative, including acting before you’re asked and addressing potentially uncomfortable yet important topics.
4. **Affability**—Being personable, curious and easy to work with. You need to listen more than you talk, getting to know the leaders you’re working with.
5. **Adaptability**—Being able to switch between being tactical and strategic. You also want to adopt the mindset of a coach, teacher and leader. Your role is to empower and support leaders as they communicate, not do the work for them.

As an advisor who’s often brought in to counsel on change communication issues, I use these A’s. I’ve also adopted Tom Sawyer as my role model. This mindset helps me avoid falling into the SME trap. Here’s how you channel Tom Sawyer:

- **Embody the spirit of letting the other person do more of the work to get better results.** For advising to be most effective, the leader needs to be an active participant: doing the deep thinking, getting the insights and determining the right actions to take.

- **Speak in “maxims,” using a minimum of sound to a maximum of sense.** When Twain lived, sound bites hadn’t been invented. Yet Twain infused in Tom and his other characters these brain-friendly attributes that David Rock of the NeuroLeadership Institute has dubbed “being succinct, specific and generous.”
- **Create a strong community.** In the book *Tom Sawyer*, the self-confident Tom works the community to meet a range of people, creating coalitions along the way. If you can tap into different networks to hear new viewpoints and start new conversations, you’re going to get helpful insights for yourself, as well as the leaders you’re advising.

When you think and act like Tom Sawyer, you’re bold, brief and indispensable—which is what leaders want in their strategic advisors. **PRN**

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