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MLIS IMPACT, ENGAGEMENT, AND AMAZING ADAPTABILITY: INTERVIEW WITH MICHELE LUCERO, PT. 1

By *Kim Dority*

Imagine if you could have the information-based career of your dreams: challenging, filled with new opportunities based on your strengths and passions, offering a diversity of experiences and ongoing ways to have a positive impact on your profession, community, and students. Impossible, you say? Not if your LAC's Michele Lucero, who seems to bring energy and insight to each new opportunity she takes on – or creates. In this two-part interview series, Michele shares information with us about what she does, how she's done it, and how others can follow in her footsteps (or in close proximity!).

Director of Client Development for LAC Group, Michele is responsible for both business development and client management (also known as client relationship management). She focuses primarily on the company's law firm clients and prospective clients, not only acquiring new accounts, but also making sure that existing clients are well-served and, if appropriate, expanding their relationship to include additional LAC services. She has been promoted three times in her nearly three years with LAC Group, a



Michele Lucero serves as Director of Client Development at LAC Group.

testament to her willingness to take on new challenges and execute successfully.

In addition, Michele is an adjunct professor for Woodbury University in its graduate Organizational Leadership program, and an adjunct in the University of North Texas (UNT) MLIS program (as well as being one of the local program coordinators for a joint UNT/Cal State University-Northridge program). Since graduating with her MLIS from UNT in 2004, Michele has also completed an MBA in Strategic Management from UNT; a Certificate in Dispute Resolution from Pepperdine University's School of Law – Strauss Institute; a Master of Dispute Resolution from the Pepperdine Law School, and a Doctorate of Education from Pepperdine with a focus on Organizational Leadership.

Clearly Michele is willing to make major investments of time, energy, and money into continually expanding her professional knowledge base. But as she pointed out, additional education is one of the sure-fire ways to continually expand career opportunities.

Preparing for Nontraditional LIS Roles

This focus on adaptability and seeking out or creating new opportunities is one of the key concepts she tries to instill in her students while teaching. In her MLIS teaching role, Michele comes into contact with many students and recent graduates who don't consider nontraditional types of jobs in their career thinking despite the fact that, in Michele's experience, there are so many out there.

Positioning for those roles, however, takes a clear understanding of how your LIS skill set and your work contribute to the overall goals of your organization. She tries to stress for students and others she mentors that this type of "strategic alignment" is critical for information professionals – for example, being able to understand your organization's industry, being able to develop relationships and have partnerships with colleagues and being able to extend those collaborative skills to working with clients. "Also," notes Michele, "promoting your organization as well as the knowledge skill set that you've learned throughout your graduate program can be really beneficial for your organization." This approach is the one most likely, she points out, to really enhance your position within your organization as well as to contribute to the achievement of its overall goals.

Translating LIS Skills to the Business Environment

A lot of times, for example, you might be drawing on your basic "reference interview" skills as you try to understand what it is a potential client needs and what they're trying to accomplish. According to Michele, it often becomes a matter of translating those skills you learned in grad school into a different circumstance, but with the same underlying goals in play.

Similarly, those same skills are used to build collaborative relationships within the various departments of LAC Group. "Actually, even though I have a specific focus area, I do work

across many departments,” agrees Michele. “And I would say at LAC, most of the team does. We are always collaborating and working on multiple projects. For example, if we’re working on an RFP (request for proposal), we’ll pull in expertise from different areas within the company, and often someone will contribute in one specific area and really add value with what they know on a specific topic or subject. And then, it all comes together as a team pulling the pieces together.

“Or even assisting with research questions. We have our dedicated analysts that do research. But also, every now and then, I might take a research question or there might be a question about ‘Do you know this specific resource?’ So, working across departments, I would say we actively leverage everyone’s expertise internally while also staying focused on our primary responsibilities; for example, in my department; our focus is with the law firms, our prospective clients, and our established clients, with whom we want to continue to grow our relationships and revenue opportunities.”

In a discussion of group work, Michele again emphasized the important of developing a comfort level – and competency – around teamwork “because anytime you’re working in the real world, in a professional position, you’ll almost always be working on teams. You may be focused on a specific project that involves interdepartmental teams or simply working as part of your own department team, but your understanding and acceptance of this collaborative reality is critical. Especially for students, if this role feels a bit uncomfortable for you, now’s the time to practice your collaboration skills as often as possible – so that when you have to do it in the real world, you don’t fall on your face.”

Growing Opportunities – and Responsibilities

Michele’s career growth at LAC Group has been a happy confluence of a highly successful, expanding company and her own drive to take on increasingly challenging roles.

“When I first started at LAC, I was actually in a completely different capacity, working as the Director of Recruiting. So my focus was really around recruiting and placement. In that role I was supervising the recruiting team, helping fill positions and then reaching out to new prospects to help them in find individuals or stopgap solutions while they were looking.

“My initial responsibility shifted after about a year at LAC as the company recognized my strengths on the legal side, as well as my expertise in making presentations and in relationship management. That enabled me to move into a different position where I really focused on those areas.

“Then I had an opportunity to bring in my expertise on dispute resolution and even cultural intelligence, both of which had been part of my post-MLIS education focus. I began making presentations to our corporate team as well as with clients. And then I became actively involved with two library associations on a voluntary basis, just volunteering my expertise. I think if you’re at an

organization that provides opportunities for its people to grow, as does LAC Group, you find that each individual may have many unique talents and skills. It's great when your organization's dynamics enable you to bring that to the team and really showcase your strengths, while also contributing in a way that helps others.

Confidence to Support Your Competence

When asked whether assuming new and unfamiliar responsibilities ever made her feel anxious or question her ability to succeed in her new roles, Michele agreed that like most of us, she'd experienced occasional second thoughts. But "most of it came pretty naturally to me or it was similar to something I'd done in a previous position. But there certainly are times where I've felt challenged, felt I was definitely getting beyond my comfort zone." Her way of handling those moments has been to tap into her inner confidence and belief that she'll be able to figure things out. "I think that any time I have felt that," she notes, "perhaps once or twice in my current role, I've basically just stepped back and realized that I can do it." Her go-to confidence builder is to begin creating an execution strategy, putting it down on paper and "creating an outline of what it takes to get me there and how I get to that angle and what I need to do."

Another strategy Michele relies on is to simply call a colleague, "because they may have encountered a similar situation, or may be a great resource to just to bounce ideas off of to help you clarify your thinking. You may not provide them all the details, but you can give them an overview of what you're faced with. And then ask for feedback. In a way, it's almost like calling a mentor. Calling a trusted colleague and asking for their advice and/or guidance may help guide you to a better decision or help you figure out how you can get to that end goal."

As Michele's confidence-building strategies make clear, having enough self-knowledge to determine the best way to overcome your fears and take appropriate career risks is an important key to creating that rich and rewarding career most of us aspire to. What other insights would Michele offer to a colleague, student or mentee? We'll take a look at Michele's career-building advice in next month's column.



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