**Independent Banker**

**Portfolio — Leadership at all levels**

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**Leadership at all Levels**

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**Leading from the ground up**

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By Lindsay LaNore, ICBA

This year, coming up on 30 years at ICBA, Karen Thomas will be retiring. As leader of our government relations and advocacy team, she has built an exceptional legacy and garnered industrywide admiration for the depth of her knowledge and remarkable humility. As her departure approaches, we sat down to discuss her path to leadership and her advice to others.

[subhead] **Lead by example**

Thomas originally trained as a lawyer and describes herself as stumbling into financial services law before joining ICBA as part of the regulatory team in 1992. She learned how to be a leader from the ground up, growing with her colleagues and ultimately heading up a team of 30. Because it’s all she has ever done, Thomas is a firm believer in rolling your sleeves up and diving in, getting into the trenches and learning every role. “I think that’s helped me to understand what the challenges are,” she explains, “and to be able to guide people, provide suggestions and guidance as to how to approach things and how to get things done.”

[subhead] **Be observant**

Thomas attributes any humility she is perceived as having to a willingness to see and learn from the perspective of others. That includes learning from those you *don’t* admire as well as those you do. Always try to understand where the other person is coming from, she says. It will help you figure out what your perspective is, why it is right or wrong and how to convince somebody of why you’re right.

[subhead] **Be thorough**

Over the years, Thomas has regularly interacted with policy makers and advises finding calm in high-pressure situations by being thorough, credible and thoughtful. “You have to marshal your facts and figures,” she says. “You have to speak with authority, and I don't mean loudly or interrupting everybody. But if you know what you're talking about, it helps convince other people of the rightness and authority of something that you’re saying."

[subhead] **Build consensus**

As a consummate team player, Karen believes many heads are usually better than one. That means allowing ideas to feed off each other, no matter how “weird” they might come across as. That, she says, is important to morale and motivation but also to good results and effectiveness. “It takes the pressure off the leader if you can get consensus,” she adds. “Then everybody’s agreed, so they’re happy, too.”

[subhead] **Explain the why**

However, when you’re explaining a decision that you’ve had to make, always include the *why*. “You don't want it to be like when you were a little kid and your mom said, ‘Because I said so,’” Thomas laughs. “Everybody wants to know why, and if they understand the why, they can accept it or see that it is the right approach.”

It’s hard to imagine ICBA without Karen Thomas around, but we look forward to her carving out time for herself away from her overflowing inbox, and we wish her enormous success in her retirement.

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