

“The DBA and the Long Game – Seeing (and Moving) into the Future”

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ABSTRACT

It is our conviction that DBAs have an inherent ‘natural’ leadership potential, demanded and fostered by virtue of their responsibilities, and that they can transform these traits to position themselves in the organization as Technology Leaders. The first things we aim to do then are step back and explore this, for the benefit of career DBAs. And whether they have a formal leadership position or not; we aim to encourage and nurture this dynamic and perspective.

But beyond that, what’s next for the Oracle Database Administrator or a DBA in general, in their career after 5, 10 or 15 years? For someone who has been a DBA of some sort for decades, what should their next move in terms of career path be, and what are the options?

Of course if one wishes to remain a hands-on, technical resource in the traditional sense, then such a question will not resonate. But, for someone who wants to make it to the next level in the executive branch after being a DBA for a reasonable time, what would a likely career path look like? Is there any progression ladders defined for a career DBA? Is there any bridge between the Professional and Executive branches? Or even better, what is an acceptable and reasonable career path for a DBA?

In this paper we will attempt to evaluate whether a DBA can move up to Executive or Management level as part of their natural career progression path. We will also discuss an approach that may be considered a good starting point. Our hope is to examine these structures and see if it is an appropriate approach for a career model. In this paper we will also endeavor to explore the resources available in the industry aimed at guiding and equipping a DBA to move up in the career ladder. We will also solicit suggestions from readers so that IOUG can formulate a plan and help create a standard ladder for Database Administrators. This in turn will, we hope, encourage young minds to choose database administration as a career with a long game, increasing their participation and retention.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Database Administrators, aspiring Database Administrators, Managers, Team Leaders, and members of Management Teams in general. The goal is to create a consensus to define an appropriate career-ladder for Database Administrators in organizations so that they, if desired, can access a clear path to executive or management level. This will make a career in database administration more appealing to entry level IT Professionals, and will help in attracting and retaining them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learners will be able to:

- Identify useful traits and virtues DBAs can accumulate from the job to help them in advancing their career
- Understand how DBAs can transform from simply being a technical resource to leaders
- Gain information about a career and its benefits in Database Administration.
- Be able to determine a career cycle for DBAs.
- Encourage entry level professionals to choose a career in Database Administration.

Learners will also be able to start to think about:

- What options organizations should provide for their DBAs to advance their career?
- Be able to exchange ideas in creating a standard career ladder for Oracle DBAs or DBAs in general.
- Help IOUG to formulate a career path for DBAs.

BACKGROUND

A career in database administration is very much sought after by many in the IT sector. As a DBA grows into the job year after year it provides them the context to develop the attributes of a true leader. And since the database sits at the heart and core of any application, DBAs are organically positioned for leadership, by virtue of this proximity to the “action”. This is a significant and important role and responsibility. And we will explore this shortly.

But over time, an IT professional in this career may, for many different reasons, have different perspectives on what it is they have dedicated themselves to, as they progress. For example, someone who has been working in an institution with set hierarchies for over a decade may feel:

- Totally complacent
- No need for a change in work patterns or skill sets
- Peculiar about the career as they get older
- The need to move up to the next level of responsibility. This may be fuzzy and undefined but there is some intention to crossover to the Executive/Management branch

When we talk about a change in career, it may happen at different levels of maturity in the job, or even at its peak. And it is reasonably common for a DBA to switch to other IT professions close to the domain of database administration. This is a somewhat logical and established pathway, and specific examples of this include:

- Data Governance
- Office of Information Security (OIS)
- Big Data
- Project Management Office (PMO)
- Internet of Things (IOT)
- Independent Consultant
- Jump the Ship..

Of course there are always those instances where someone jumps ship to find a higher level job elsewhere, and often times these may well be in the executive branch. It is the scope of this paper to discuss in further detail precisely this scenario: the career DBAs path to the parallel ladder of technical profession, the Executive ladder.

It is our contention that the move from DBA to manager, for those with this aspiration, should be a natural progression. But in reality, from our observation and experience, this is not the case. That is, managers are usually hired from other domains of IT skill sets, not necessarily a DBA.

Prof. Thomas J Allen is Howard W. Johnson Professor of Management at MIT Sloan School of Management and a world renowned specialist in organizational psychology and management. I (Ziaul) had the opportunity to interact with him during my time at Sloan, and approached him with this question of career path for DBAs. His response was a generalized one applicable to many professions, and he said:

1. Find a mentor within your organization able to guide you to the next level.

2. Or, start a company of your own and be in that position.

Whilst great suggestions in their own right they are not entirely satisfying in that for #1 those who have traversed the DBA to executive bridge are few and far between, and so generally unavailable. And #2 really only suits a small subset of the population; the more entrepreneurial and risk taking types willing to chance in their arm in the competitive database services field. So, it seems, we are back to the beginning.

LATENT LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL OF THE DBA

From the early days of my DBA career, I (Mike) was fortunate enough to have exposure to a network of Oracle DBAs, local and global, who operated with a different outlook and agenda to what I perceived as the conventional DBA agenda. That is, I encountered people who were really passionate about the database administration role, and saw it as an opportunity. Make no mistake – they were excellent at their core functions (backups, security, capacity planning) but their value and enthusiasm was recognized and sought after beyond their departments and organizations.

These passionate DBAs had broad ranging interests and took advantage of this as the job exposed them to lots of different areas, such that there were able to foot it with coders, business analysts and architects, and were as rigorous and methodical as many testers. Recognizing that the DBA is in a unique position in businesses/organizations to influence and contribute beyond their core function, they operated like a hub, often outside areas of their strict expertise. Furthermore they had additional qualities such as inventiveness and creativity, which endeared them to others, and they worked hard to be heard – developing their communication skills. What I encountered locally I discovered globally - a vibrant community of Oracle DBA enthusiasts (Oracle ACEs, authors, bloggers and speakers) who were passionate about this technology and willing to share their insights for the benefit of the whole. They were not just DBAs, but technology leaders in both formal and informal senses and positions.

Seth Godin is an author I greatly admire and enjoy reading, particularly for his relentless creativity, positivity and outside of the box type thinking. A couple of years back he released a book entitled “[Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?](#)”, which I think helpfully speaks to the latent leadership potential in the DBA role.

There are many facets to his message in this book, and its well worth checking out along with the [Linchpin Manifesto](#), but some of the key concepts can be summarized as follows:

1. There has been a *shift* in what it means to engage in the machine of industry (the business ecosphere)
2. The system just can't cope in the same way with those who are looking for a “free ride”
3. People are doing more with less – and at the same time the expectations and complexities are increasing at a rate of knots
4. Simple cookie cutter plans and scripts don't cut it anymore

So the important question to ask in light of this is, and the fundamental question Godin sets about answering in the book, wherever you are and whatever you are doing in your career, is this; are you indispensable? That is, if you were to leave your role now, would anyone notice, and would it make any difference? Or, to look at this from another angle, what is the real value of the contribution that you bring to your workplace and organization?

Such questions can seem intimidating and unsettling but Seth's constant encouragement – which is especially pertinent for those with leadership aspirations - is to meet this challenge head on, and proposes reconfiguring your view so that you see your career as artistry...In this you take what you do and LOVE it! So the rules may have changed, but here is a manifesto for people not only to survive, in terms of job security, but also to actually thrive.

And when it comes to navigating the way forward in the current climate businesses and organizations are crying out for those who will take the **lead**, and rise to this challenge. In seasons of change and uncertainty, as we are, leadership becomes all the more important.

Godin adds further definition, [here](#):

*“**Linchpins** are the essential building blocks of great organizations. Like the small piece of hardware that keeps a wheel from falling off its axle, they may not be famous but they're indispensable.”*

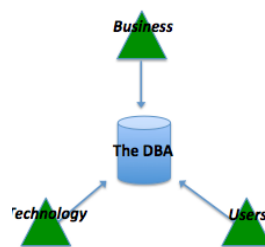
Some of the Linchpin's defining qualities then also include their proclivity to:

- Exert emotional labor to produce interactions that organizations and people care deeply about
- Invent, lead (regardless of title), connect others, make things happen, and create order out of chaos
- Figure out what to do when there's no rule book
- Delight and challenge their customers and peers
- Love their work, pour their best selves into it, and turn each day into a kind of art

These are the characteristics and qualities that set the Linchpin apart from the ordinary, rendering them exceptional and invaluable. And what is apparent here is that these traits are not merely a matter of technical mastery over subject matter, but strongly weighted towards communicative and intuitive arts: communication, resilience, intuition, patience.

KEY.

In our view then, a Linchpin IS a leader, whether that channel of influence is formal or informal. And the qualities a Linchpin exhibits are precisely those traits, attitudes and skills required by anyone aspiring to leadership. What is interesting is that these are exactly the types of attributes that those passionate Oracle DBAs we have encountered (as mentioned) display. The conclusion we draw here is that there is something inherent in the role, which lends itself to producing this.



Diving into this connection a little deeper, what the diagram above illustrates is the unique position the DBA holds within the structure of businesses/organizations. As a conduit between the requirements of the business, the needs of the end users and the technology stack, they are positioned in a role with potential for incredible influence – and if willing could act as a veritable hub, leading and educating beyond their job description to the outer edges of the business/organization. If able to rise to the challenge, instead of letting the demands beat them down, then the rewards for a DBA are better than ever – and practicing leadership is a logical extension of this.

To stay on top of their game the Linchpin DBA needs to relentlessly pursue knowledge of systems, technology and people, draw connections, problem solve and understand the bigger picture. This focus and outlook can generate insights and applications that are able guide others, with different roles and functions, in terms of decisions and direction they need to take. **If leadership is all about influence, as the saying goes, then the Linchpin DBA is well positioned to make a weighty contribution!**

GETTING PRACTICAL

The current business and technical environment is certainly an interesting one in which to map out a career as a DBA, and there are many exciting options and opportunities, which simply weren't available previously. However, the flip side of this is that things are not as they once were, which can be uncomfortable for some. One of my key contentions, however, is that the DBA role as it currently stands is far more social and communicative than most anticipate. In addition to this other skills, such as marketing acumen, will prove invaluable for those who wish to succeed, if only to learn how to position your skills and expertise internally within your organization. And these are critical for developing the latent leadership potential in the role – that you come up out of the engine room for a time and learn how to communicate and position your experience, insights and opinions accordingly. You will need to speak up, and be 'found out', as it were.

So what can you do to nurture this? Here are a couple of suggestions:

1. SPEAK AND WRITE.

Speaking:

- Take a course i.e. Toastmasters
- Host a webinar for your company – either internal or external
- Regional Oracle user groups – submit your presentation ideas for the likes of IOUG conferences and events
- Attend local meetups, which provide a platform to practice sharing your ideas. Can't find one - then start one. That's precisely what we did at Dbvisit in Auckland, New Zealand
- At the very least, network!

Writing:

- Run your company Wiki/FAQ
- Start your own blog (tips and tricks)
- Answer forum questions

So while advocating the practices above may not be obvious - and perhaps even considered a waste of time to some – we return to the idea that times have changed – and for those with leadership aspirations this is doubly so! In the “old days” skill and sophistication in the area of communication was not demanded or mandatory, but what you may have been able to get away with is no longer tolerated, and the stakes are higher. Another way of saying this is that part of your core DBA craft is now the ability to take these technical concepts and communicate them clearly and concisely. This is not easy work, and requires a lifting of your vision, and a looking outward – critical competency in terms of leadership acumen.

On a personal level I love these practices, because I have benefitted so much from other DBAs applying themselves to them, equipping them to effectively share the knowledge they cultivated. I have been inspired by this somewhat counterintuitive notion of giving away, rather than a hoarding of knowledge. But this is not an altruistic endeavor alone, because in this openness to share there is the test of fully striving to grasp concepts and skills before passing it on to others. Secondly such willingness locates you within the wider DBA community as a voice and (budding) authority – a satisfaction that has its own benefits – and positions you well in relation to others who will be equally as motivated to share their wisdom and experience with you. And third it opens your insights and directives out beyond the technical sphere to potential impact on management and executive teams. Leadership influence begins with making known what it is you see, feel and believe.

2. KNOW YOUR BUSINESS.

Tune your contribution:

- Take a business course
- Put dollar values on improving efficiencies
- Organize tech Q&A sessions - e.g. “Ask the DBA Thursday”

My final recommendation to DBAs is to “know your business,” which is effectively all about seeing the bigger picture – the larger context in which your technical endeavors are located and contribute toward. This then is about giving consideration to business drivers, and thus putting yourself in the shoes of someone focused on moving your business forward, and developing a clearer understanding of the ways in which your particular organization operates. Take time to consider the challenges for those in management and at the executive level. And are there suggestions or recommendations you could offer to improve their lives?

There are many possible ways to cultivate this more holistic vision, and I have made but a few suggestions. What is clear though is that in order to see the bigger picture you, the DBA, will need to come up out of the engine room to see how your efforts contribute to and are shaped by the overall. You could begin simply by taking some business courses which are likely to equip you, at minimum, you with an understanding of the lingo, which is useful for better comprehending that mysterious business ‘dialect’ – and positioning you, in turn, to contribute back into that environment.

Moving on from there, how about putting some dollar values on improving efficiencies? Understanding how you and your colleague’s time as DBAs is spent in dollar values, rather than as tasks or projects, is sure to provide an unsettling perspective – and may well help you shape and prioritize your activities in a different way. This is sure to delight management and those with an eye toward the bottom line. But don’t stop there – take the initiative – and look for ways in which you can improve systems and processes and increase the business’s resiliency and efficiency. For example, do you have a Disaster Recovery (DR) plan? If not then look to implement one. Or how about offloading reporting from your source server with a logical replication tool to reduce workload on this system, and improve the end user by optimizing reports to run on the new target database...the possibilities are numerous.

Finally, on the soft skills side, begin to see that a function of your role is both education and marketing, helping others within your organisation grasp what it is that you, the DBA, do. It is highly likely that there will be significant amounts of time as a DBA where you don’t feel appreciated, let alone understood. But instead of sitting back, make some noise! Don’t expect others to figure this out on their own, but find constructive ways to make yourself known, and demonstrate your value. Again the possibilities are limitless. How about organising a regular get together at lunchtime over pizza and beer/soda – “Ask the DBA Thursday” - where attendees can pick your brain, so to speak.

Again this is not a purely altruistic arrangement, in which you being encouraged to give and give, without return. This is, in fact, all about setting up win/win situations. Seeing with business eyes positions you to lift your leadership contribution to your organization in targeting its needs, not just the demands of your role specifically, and consequently increasing your value. All the while you need to remember this that if the business does better it also sets you up to prosper.

In rounding out this section we return to our conviction, stated earlier, that if leadership is all about influence, as the saying goes, then the Linchpin DBA is well positioned to make a weighty contribution. Again it is our belief that DBAs have an inherent ‘natural’ leadership potential, demanded and fostered by virtue of their responsibilities, and that they can transform these traits to position themselves in business as Technology, and even Organizational, Leaders.

SO, WHAT’S HAPPENING NOW? IS ANYONE TALKING ABOUT THIS ?

But for now let us now return to the discussion on the career progress path for the DBA by asking is anyone actually talking about this? And the good news is, YES. The Oracle community, including DBAs and many others - and the IOUG forums in particular - have been actively engaging in this discussion. IOUG for one have started a specific leadership series/track at

Collaborate, and renowned IOUG advocates have been talking about these issues in many forums. A few that we have seen which worth mentioning:

1. Rich Niemiec

Rich has talked about leadership and leadership traits for a long time, and I have attended his seminars since 2005. His talks are personally inspiring, and have helped me to think about my role as a DBA differently, in a non-traditional way.

Some of his presentations worth reading around this topic include:

- Exceptional Leadership: Be the Uncommon Leader! IOUG 2005
- Move your Career from Tech Leader to CIO, CFO or CEO. Collaborate 2013

2. Steve Lemme

Steve started to float an idea about the evolving role of the DBA between 2003-2005. Calling it DIA-Database Infrastructure Architect this centered on the idea that DBAs were perceived to be in a leadership role due to their function and proximity to the application stack. Haven't seen much follow-up on it since then.

3. Maria Anderson:

Maria talked about leadership beyond managers in Collaborate 2013 – a theme which resonates our topic. Her presentation "Leadership: not just for managers" is a good read for any aspiring leaders.

4. Ari Kaplan:

Ari has also been vocal advocate of the idea that professionals can be transformed as leaders.

5. Michael S. Abbey:

Michael had an interesting presentation in Collaborate 2012 - "Measuring Seniority by Years in the Business (I think not!)". In this he discussed how qualified people could sometimes get eliminated and passed over, simple because the notion of "Junior" and "Senior" drives the choice in a career-ladder.

SAMPLE MODEL: A CAREER LADDER FOR DBA

Our Organization (Ziaul) recently adopted a simple career-ladder for database administrators. By no means is this complete and comprehensive, but we offer this as a starting point. This has been the subject of extensive discussion, so hopefully this model can bring value to organizations!

However, whilst there is a defined structure here, the clear line of crossover from the professional branch to Executive/Management Branch is not articulated. We hope the discussion on mapping this will continue.

Position	IT Background (Suggested)	Usual Background Career Trend
DBA Intern	Studying in any IT discipline or completed Tertiary Education in an IT discipline	N/A
DBA-Tech	2 yrs. as DBA Intern or worked in any branch of IT. Completed Tertiary Education in an IT discipline	Help Desk, Desktop Support, Network/Storage/Server Tech
Database Administrator I	3-5 yrs. as Programmer, Analyst, min. 2 yrs. As DBA-Tech	DBA-Tech, DSS Developer, SQL Programmer.
Database Administrator II	2-4 yrs. as DBA I or 4-6 yrs. as DBA Tech	DBAs
Senior Database Administrator	4 yrs. as DBA II or 6-8 yrs. as DBA Tech.	DBAs
Database Architect	10+ yrs. as DBA	DBAs
Principal Database Architect	10+ yrs. as DBA, 2 yrs. as Database Architect.	DBAs

Manager of Database Administration and Infrastructure Services	10+ yrs. as DBA, 2 yrs. as Database Architect. Completed Post-Graduate studies in an IT discipline. Community involvement in Science and Technology. Affiliation with leading Technical/Engineering Organization(s).	DBA
Director, Database Administration and Infrastructure Services	15 yrs. as DBA, 2 yrs. as Manager of Database/2 yrs. as Principal Database Architect. Completed Graduate studies in an IT discipline. Community involvement in Science and Technology. OR 15 yrs. as DBA, 2 yrs. as Database Architect. Graduate studies in an IT discipline. Executive Education in ‘Management and Leadership’ discipline. Community involvement in Science and Technology. Affiliation with leading Technical/Engineering/Project Management Organization(s).	DBA

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

In our opinion (and experience) many Database Administrators have the qualities and virtues to be leaders in their organizations, whether this is in Technical or Executive/Management capacities. There is a latent potential in the role to drive leadership development for those who are willing to take up the challenge.

This being said the 2 most common paths we see in terms of a career path progression for the DBA are 1) Deep immersion in the technical aspects of the role for those who enjoy hands on work or 2) Management/Leadership/Executive oriented responsibilities for those who feels their strengths better suit this.

Although someone may find it difficult to penetrate through the Executive ladder after being in an organization for a long period of time our encouragement is don’t be discouraged, or wallow in feeling left out. Decision-makers choose to fill management jobs based on criteria that are not always clear to others, and they may be driven by business-interests or bureaucratic reasons – not your inadequacies or unsuitability necessarily. This being said the key decision for you to make is where you want to head, and for those who decide that the Executive path is for them then having this clarity and conviction is perhaps the most important first step.

If you have decided that leadership is for you then take the initiative and explore options and possibilities, and make something happen. Someone with such talent and commitment can always find a way to contribute their values as leaders. Think outside the box, and even outside your immediate vocation; getting involved with charities/not-for profits is a great way to contribute to community and outwork your leadership capacity – which will have positive flow on effects for you in terms of your professional development. So find a charity of your choice and consider how you might contribute to it in your own private time.

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