



# *Measuring* **MILESTONES**

Celebrating meaningful markers in life

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One day before I began writing this article, I celebrated a momentous birthday. This one was significant because it ended in a zero and marked the end of one decade of my life and the beginning of another. While the definition varies from source to source, most consider my recent birthday as the official transition from middle age to senior citizenship. Unlike some, rather than cringe at the thought of my new age, I embraced this transition. One day after my birthday, I traveled from southwest Michigan back home to central Indiana and stopped at a family restaurant in LaPorte, Indiana for an early dinner. After my husband and I were seated at a booth, I was ecstatic to officially order off the “senior menu” for the first time, as it is reserved those who are of a certain “wiser age.” My first senior menu meal was seasoned, roasted chicken with soup, salad, stuffing and green beans. I was elated I had attained an age that provides the benefit of a scrumptious meal for only \$10.49 — a bargain in the post-pandemic world. My most recent birthday marks a milestone in my life.

### **Milestones Touch All Parts of Our Lives**

Aside from birthdays that allow for discounted meals and other items, many other milestones provide opportunities for celebration and recognition. One may ask, what exactly is a milestone, and how are they significant in leadership? The American Heritage Dictionary defines a milestone in one manner as “[a] stone marker set up on a roadside to indicate the distance in miles from a given point.” Technically speaking, a milestone marks a place to which you are traveling or have traveled.

Metaphorically speaking, in right of way language, milestones are markers we reach as we travel on the highway of life. Milestones can be historic, personal, familial, professional or organizational. Historical milestones include events like the COVID-19 pandemic, the end of World War II, the day that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in a convertible and when John Lennon was shot in the archway of the Dakota. Every generation can recall historical milestones — many of us remember exactly where we were when we first learned about the devastating, shocking crash that occurred at the New York City Twin Towers on September 11, 2001; my parents can clearly recall the same facts in their lives when President Kennedy was assassinated.

Milestones can also be personal or familial. They can include your nuptials’ date and the day your children were born or sad occasions, like the death of a loved one or a divorce. Professional milestones could be the date of graduation from high school or college, the commencement of your first job, a promotion to manager, the bestowment of your SR/WA or the completion of a notable assignment under your direction. Organizational milestones for associations or companies can be anniversaries, reaching a membership goal or the completion of a groundbreaking public improvement project for which your firm is responsible.

Milestones are life’s placeholders, and we often speak about them in terms of the times before, during and after. But, in addition to marking a place in time, some milestones change our lives forever. Historic milestones, like 9/11 and COVID-19, permanently changed the way we travel. On a positive note, these same seemingly tragic or arduous milestones compelled us to confront our humanity and shift our focus to our precious personal relationships, which had too often been previously neglected.



### Milestones Provide Positive Opportunities

The philosopher and physician Debasish Mridha said, “Don’t measure life against time. Measure life by the milestones you have reached.” As leaders, milestones not only provide a measurement in professional and organizational lives but also opportunities for recognition, celebration, comradery and to express appreciation.

A couple of years ago, when I served as IRWA Chapter 10 president, our Chapter celebrated its 65th anniversary. This anniversary was spotlighted in the first article that I wrote for Right of Way Magazine. Also, for this special occasion, one of our Chapter’s Board members made wine, with custom labels, which was given to our Chapter’s members at our first in-person event after the pandemic. In my family, birthdays have always been exalted, and celebration of these important milestones is incorporated into my law firm’s culture. My law firm not only commemorates its team members’ birthdays with special gift certificates, but also the birthdays of the firm’s significant others and children. I fondly recall, in my early professional life as a deputy attorney general with the Indiana Attorney General’s Office, my litigation section having a celebration for me on my 29th birthday. This birthday party stands out for two reasons — one, no one believed I was really 29 because it is often recited as a fake age, and two, I felt appreciated by my supervisor and colleagues. Who doesn’t like to be the center of attention?

While the celebration of birthdays and anniversaries at work is meaningful, professional and organizational milestones should not be restricted to just these two occasions. Yet, regrettably, these types of milestones are often the only kinds to receive attention. In her article, “We Need to Celebrate Professional Milestones as Much as Personal Ones,” which appeared in “The Tempest,” author Sharanya Paulraj lamented that we need to announce professional milestones as fervently and frequently as our personal ones, particularly on social media. She commented, “I wish I saw more social media posts that celebrated winning a prize, getting the keys to your own home, [completing] that [always-talked-about] documentary film or even completing a thesis.” While Paulraj promoted tooting your own professional horn, as leaders, acknowledging and appreciating your team’s milestones is even more meaningful and impactful.

Although milestones other than birthdays and anniversaries are often buried in the busyness of day-to-day demands at work, leaders can change such cultural oversights. An initial step is to identify noted accomplishments that warrant special attention. They can include a promotion, assignment or completion of a special project, obtaining a degree or designation or landing a new big client.

The platforms for recognizing professional and organizational milestones need not be limited to in-house communications and social media and can be greatly expanded. Announcements about your team and organization’s milestones can be published in your firm’s newsletter, professional publications and hometown media outlets. Not only will a larger audience be reached through the use of multiple media to recognize milestones, but if a childhood friend learns about a team member’s accomplishment in a local newspaper, it would likely have a more personal and meaningful impact.

For business and organization leaders, milestones can also be utilized as an effective tool in project management. In “What are Milestones in Project Management,” author Hannah Donato explains using milestones at different project development phases and for achievement of significant project tasks, such as finalizing the project team, finishing project estimates and obtaining budget request approval. She professes, “Introducing project milestones is an effective way to ensure projectivity and alignment with business goals.”

Unquestionably, individual and team milestone recognition can increase productivity and work commitment, which is important, but there are far more heartfelt reasons for doing so. It strengthens relationships, builds comradery among team members, highlights accomplishments and inures appreciation. Recently, my mother told me, “One should never miss an opportunity to celebrate.” Don’t miss the opportunity to celebrate your team’s milestones because the rewards are priceless. 🎉



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