

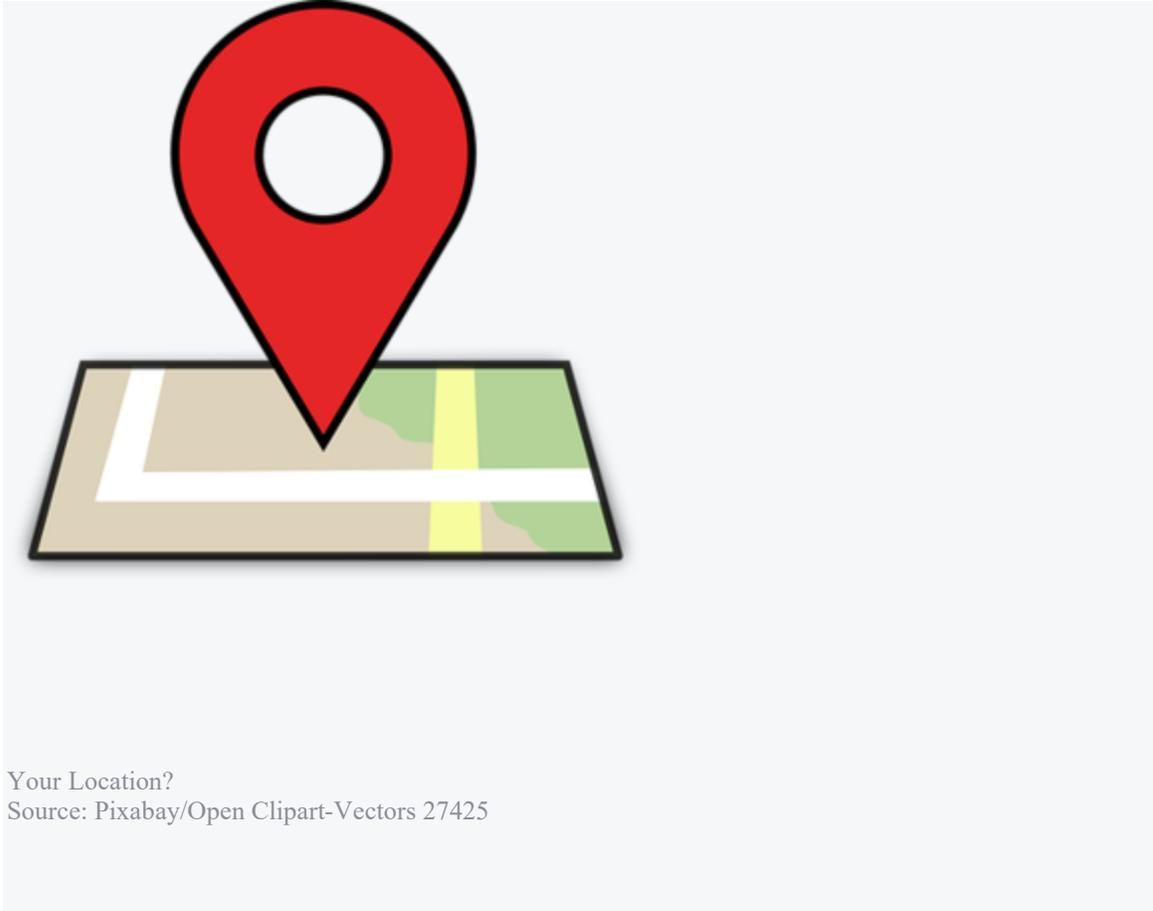
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Laurence Stybel, Ed.D., and Maryanne Peabody, MBA, founded Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

# How to Manage “Miles Law” to Improve Your Influence.

## Physical Location and Virtual Location Matters



Your Location?  
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“Where you stand depends upon where you sit” is also known as Miles's Law.

We will go over the birth of Miles's Law and then discuss its implications for leadership in a COVID-19 world.

Rufus Miles was a senior officer with the U.S. Bureau of the Budget during the Truman Administration. The Bureau’s mission is financial oversight of Federal operating agencies. Top officials in operating agencies naturally resented the interference of the Bureau of the Budget staff.

One day, Rufus’s subordinate informed him that a Federal operating agency had offered him a position with a significantly higher salary. The subordinate preferred to work with the Bureau, but the financial rewards were too great to pass up. Rufus said he could not match the financial package and wished his subordinate well.

Within weeks, Rufus' former subordinate loudly joined his new colleagues in their criticism about Bureau interference.

People on Rufus's team complained that this ex-employee had betrayed Rufus and the Bureau. Rufus calmly replied, "Where you stand depends upon where you sit." (Miles, 1978).

Embedded within Miles Law is that money, time, and space are valued resources. Your perspective will be heavily influenced by who is paying your salary, how much time you are spending, and where you are physically sitting.

## Miles's Law and the "Corporate Ghetto"

We define a "Corporate Ghetto" as a place geographically separated from the center of power. It is often a physical spot where colleagues work with other colleagues from the same discipline or function. The stated rationale for a ghetto is to improve within-department communications. Who can argue that it is more productive for attorneys to work next to other attorneys?

When the ghetto is located on another floor away from the CEO, there is almost zero probability of "informal" conversations between the head of the function and the CEO. This limits the functional head's ability to influence the CEO.

When the ghetto is physically separated from other departments, it helps create an "Us vs Them" mentality relative to other business functions.

When the CEO rails against the "silo mentality" of the corporate culture—yet the company physically places people in "Professional Ghettos"—there is a gap between verbal ideals and real estate reality.

## The Location Paradox

For leaders seeking to increase their influence, this creates the "Location Paradox." You do not want to sit too far away from your team, but you do not want to be too close either.

Department heads should consider reducing the tendency towards a silo mentality by insisting that the team "mix it up." Your team will probably not do this naturally. As a leader, you will probably have to require a "mix-up."

### **an example of a mix-up:**

An urban teaching hospital Board of Trustees would normally have the CEO sitting at the head of the table. Next to the CEO would be the important business leaders. At the end of the long table, hospital physicians would sit together, have conversations among each other, and oppose business leaders' ideas in unison.

To break up this dysfunctional culture, we convinced three leading physicians to show up five minutes before the scheduled meeting and sit near the head of the table but separate from each other. This forced the business leaders to sit next to the physicians. They would engage in informal conversations and eventually managed to discuss proposals with each other before being formally submitted for consideration to the Board.

This change of seating helped changed the dysfunctional Board culture.

### **Another example:**

The head of Human Resources in a department housed on the ground floor of a 10-story office building instructed her HR professionals and office support staff to have lunch at the employee cafeteria as often as possible. But HR people were not permitted to have lunch with HR people. They had to sit with strangers and ask questions about their issues with the company's approach to attracting, retaining, and motivating employees.

After lunch, HR employees would write memos summarizing what they had learned without mentioning the names of people they had lunch with. These memos were then sent to the head of HR.

These memos helped the head of HR get a better sense of real-time issues in the company versus the sanitized or skewed information she was receiving from her peers.

### **A third example:**

The General Counsel and her team of attorneys were in a ghetto on the fourth floor while the CEO was located on the seventh floor. At 4:30 pm every day, the General Counsel would come up to the seventh floor. There was a Board Room next to the CEO's office. If it was empty, she would take a seat and start

doing work on her laptop. Between 5:30 and 6:00 p.m., the CEO would generally leave her office and spot the General Counsel in the Board Room.

She initially asked, “Why are you here and not in your office?”

The General Counsel would respond, “I wanted to be near you in case you want a sounding board for ideas.”

Eventually, the CEO stopped asking the question and got in the routine of using the General Counsel as an informal sounding board to debrief events of the day or test out ideas. This relationship would never have happened had the General Counsel remained in her office.

## Miles’s Law and Virtual Communications.

How does Miles Law work in a work environment where a large percentage of the key people you need to work with are working from home?

The concept behind Miles Law is that physical proximity allows for informal communication and relationship building.

When the relationships are virtual, being one of 20 participants at a Zoom meeting followed up by Emails would be the equivalent of physical distancing.

Communications is facilitated but not conversation. By conversation we mean a back and flow of ideas and the development of trust.

Try to improve communication with monthly phone call or 1:1 Zoom meeting. There need not be a specific agenda. It could be as simple as, “I want to do a better job of helping you do your job. What can I do?” Another example might be, “I want to have monthly individual meetings with you as a reality check to make sure I am on track with you.”

**References:**

**R.E. Miles. “The Origin and Meaning of Miles’ Law.” *Public Administration Review* (1978), 38,6,399-403.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/975497>**

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