

# Characteristics for **Effective Leadership**

Shaping the future of the right of way industry

BY GORDON E. MACNAIR, SR/WA, AACI, P.APP





As we approach the IRWA leadership elections this June, it's an opportune moment to reflect on the qualities that define truly effective leadership. In the rapidly changing landscape of infrastructure real estate, leadership extends far beyond managerial tasks. It requires a deep understanding of both the technical aspects of the field and the human element involved in guiding teams and making decisions that impact public and private stakeholders.

As stewards of the right of way profession, our leaders must demonstrate a blend of visionary thinking, emotional intelligence, and ethical judgment that not only drives projects forward but also fosters collaboration and trust among diverse communities. This article explores the essential characteristics of leadership that are vital not just for navigating the challenges of today but for shaping the future of our profession.

## Visionary Thinking

Effective leaders have a clear vision of the future and the ability to articulate it in a way that inspires others. They can see the bigger picture, set strategic goals and guide their team toward achieving them.

A prime example of this can be found in the visionary leadership of Frank C. Balfour, one of the founders of IRWA. In 1934, Balfour and a small group of his colleagues saw the need for a professional organization that could elevate the standards and practices within the right of way profession. At that time, infrastructure projects were expanding rapidly, yet there was no formal network to support professionals engaged in these projects — no platform for sharing knowledge, refining best practices or advocating for ethical standards in property acquisition and land use.





Balfour's vision was not just about creating an organization for networking; it was about building a unified community with a shared purpose. He and his fellow founders foresaw the importance of collaboration and knowledge exchange in a field that was becoming increasingly vital to public and private infrastructure development. They knew that as the country continued to grow, so too would the complexities of land acquisition, and they recognized that the profession needed structure, training and ethical guidance to meet these new challenges.

What's remarkable is that Balfour's vision wasn't just about addressing the immediate needs of the time. He and his colleagues were laying the groundwork for an organization that would evolve and remain relevant decades later. They set strategic goals to provide education, develop professional standards and foster a sense of community that would benefit both professionals and the public they served.

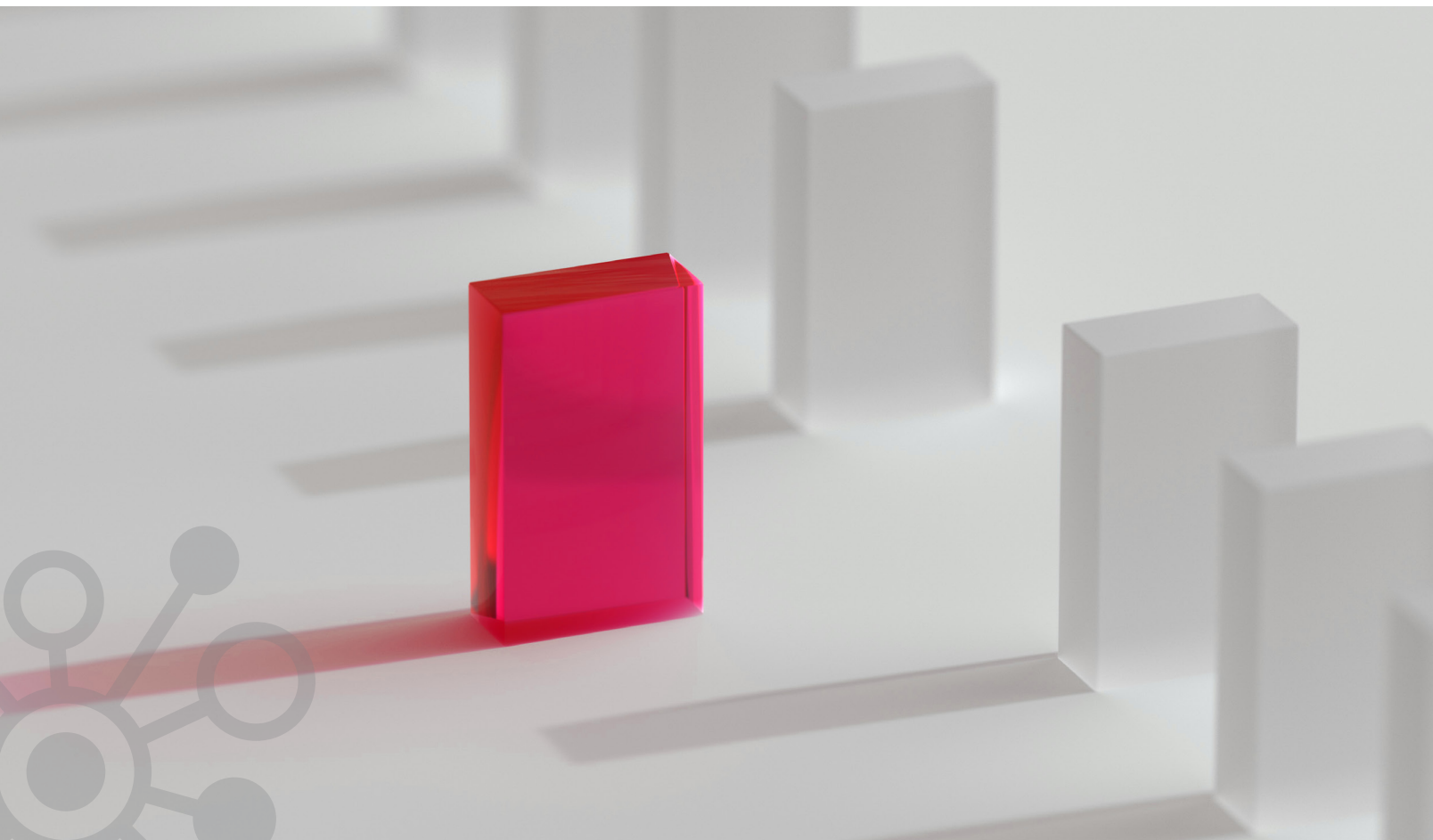
Today, IRWA stands as a testament to Balfour's foresight and leadership. His ability to see the bigger picture — both the challenges and opportunities — created an enduring legacy. The fact that IRWA continues to thrive globally, shaping the right of way profession through educational programs, ethical guidelines and professional development, speaks to the lasting impact of his visionary leadership.

## Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

Leaders with high emotional intelligence possess a deep sense of self-awareness, empathy and strong social skills, allowing them to navigate complex human dynamics with ease. They can manage their own emotions while understanding the feelings of others, which helps them build strong, trusting relationships. Emotional intelligence is especially important in leadership because it fosters an environment of mutual respect, connection and collaboration.

Amir Vafamanesh's leadership style is a shining example of emotional intelligence in action. As a servant leader, Amir consistently demonstrates a remarkable ability to connect with people on a personal level, showing genuine empathy and understanding of their needs. He goes beyond simply managing tasks or achieving results — he is deeply invested in the well-being of those around him. Whether it's a colleague facing a personal challenge or a team member navigating a complex project, Amir makes it a priority to listen, understand and offer empathetic guidance.

Another great example of emotional intelligence in leadership comes from Rakhshan Mazarei, who has been described by many as someone who makes people feel valued in every interaction.





In one memorable encounter, a Chapter treasurer shared with me that Rakhshan treated him like he was the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, even though their interaction was routine. He made him feel valued and respected, which are the qualities that are the hallmark of a leader with high emotional intelligence. Rakhshan's ability to create this sense of importance in others wasn't superficial; it reflected his deep understanding of the power of empathy and connection in building strong relationships.

Leaders like Amir and Rakhshan demonstrate that emotional intelligence isn't just about managing people—it's about truly understanding and valuing them. Their empathetic, people-centered approach to leadership has helped them build strong, trusting relationships, fostering a culture of respect and collaboration within their teams. This emotional intelligence enables them to lead with authenticity and kindness, inspiring those around them to do the same.

### Effective Communication

Good leaders communicate clearly and persuasively. They listen actively, provide constructive feedback and ensure that everyone is on the same page. Communication also involves transparency and honesty.

Good leaders communicate with clarity and purpose, ensuring their messages are understood while also creating an environment of openness and trust. Effective communication goes beyond just speaking — it involves listening actively, offering constructive feedback and fostering an atmosphere where everyone feels heard and valued. Leaders who excel in communication also know how to tailor their approach to connect on a personal level, which deepens relationships and enhances collaboration.

Carol Croft exemplified these qualities during her time as chair of the Right of Way International Education Foundation (RWIEF). Known for her impeccable communication skills, Carol had a remarkable ability to bring people together, ensuring that each person felt appreciated and understood. Her approach was not just about delivering messages but about actively listening and engaging with those around her, fostering an inclusive and supportive atmosphere.

Carol didn't just communicate to achieve organizational goals; she went the extra mile to connect with people on a personal level. A memorable example of this is how she reached out to me when she learned about my passion for running, particularly the time I spent running with my daughter, Brenna. Carol could have simply acknowledged this in passing, but her thoughtful and genuine interest in the people around her was a hallmark of her leadership style.



As a gesture of her appreciation, Carol gave me a gift that reflected not only her attention to detail but also her understanding of how important those moments were to me. She surprised me with two Steve McNair jerseys, a nod to the former Tennessee Titans quarterback. These jerseys were meant for my daughter and me to wear during our 10K runs together. This thoughtful act wasn't just a gift; it was a symbol of her ability to connect meaningfully with people, to listen beyond the surface, and to communicate her support and understanding in a deeply personal way.

What made Carol's communication so effective was her authenticity and her ability to make people feel valued — not just as colleagues but as individuals. She understood that leadership is not just about conveying information but about building relationships through genuine care, empathy and active engagement. Her actions demonstrated that true communication is not one-sided; it's a dialogue where leaders listen just as much as they speak, fostering trust and collaboration within the team.

By going the extra mile in both her professional and personal interactions, Carol set a standard for what effective communication looks like in leadership. Her ability to combine clarity, transparency and genuine personal interest not only strengthened her relationships but also made her an exceptional leader who inspired those around her.

### Inspiring & Motivating

A leader who embodies the essence of inspiring and motivating leadership is someone driven by a clear vision and an unwavering passion for excellence. Andrea Carolan is a prime example of such leadership. Through her dedication to mentoring others, fostering collaboration and leading with integrity, she inspires those around her to achieve their full potential and embrace opportunities for growth.

Andrea exemplifies these qualities as a standout leader in the field of infrastructure real estate. As the managing director of her own specialist valuation practice since 2017, she has built a solid reputation for expertise and innovation. Her leadership philosophy emphasizes creating a vision that

motivates individuals to excel while fostering a collaborative and supportive environment that empowers her team.

Her practice specializes in valuation and compensation for land acquisitions tied to infrastructure projects across diverse landscapes in Australia as well as valuations for financial reporting and insurance purposes for local and state governments. This breadth of expertise reflects her ability to navigate complex challenges. Andrea's dedication to these specialized markets highlights her strategic thinking and inspires confidence among her clients and team members alike.

As a Certified Practising Valuer and Fellow of the Australian Property Institute, Andrea leverages her deep industry knowledge to mentor and inspire the next generation of professionals. Her leadership extends well beyond her company. She has held prestigious roles such as director of the Australian Property Institute, international director and Chapter past president of IRWA's Australian Chapter. Through these roles, she has motivated others to actively contribute to the growth and reputation of the industry, including the development of the Infrastructure Professional Chapter through the Australian Property Institute.

Andrea's inspirational leadership has a global impact, particularly through her involvement with IRWA's International Relations Committee. It was there that she truly shone and where I had the privilege to work with her. She was able to foster connections with infrastructure professionals worldwide including members of the Compulsory Purchase Association in the U.K. and exemplified a commitment to collaboration and shared learning. Her clear vision, passion and genuine drive to uplift those around her make her a true beacon of inspiring and motivational leadership.

## **Integrity and Accountability**

Leaders must demonstrate honesty, ethical behavior and a commitment to doing the right thing. They should be accountable for their actions and decisions, taking responsibility when things go wrong and giving credit to others when things go right.

Colleen Brown, a former chair of the International Ethics Committee and director of Property at the Department of NB Transportation and Infrastructure, exemplified these traits time and time again. Colleen's leadership style was deeply rooted in ethical behavior, and she made it clear that doing the right thing wasn't just a professional obligation — it was a personal commitment.

One instance that stands out involved a complex property acquisition for a major infrastructure project. The negotiations had reached a stalemate due to the sensitive nature of the

property owners' concerns. The owners felt they were not being treated fairly, and the situation was on the verge of escalating into a legal battle. While it would have been easy for Colleen to push forward with a standard legal solution, her commitment to fairness and ethical conduct led her to take a different path.

Rather than pressuring the property owners or resorting to a quick fix, Colleen stepped back and reevaluated the situation. She took the time to listen to the owners' concerns, ensuring they felt heard and respected. She then worked with her team to craft a solution that not only met the project's needs but also addressed the owners' unique concerns. This approach required patience, transparency and a firm commitment to doing the right thing, even when it was more time-consuming.

When the solution was finally reached, Colleen didn't seek recognition for her role. Instead, she gave credit to her team for their collaborative efforts and acknowledged the property owners for their willingness to find a compromise. This demonstrated her accountability, as she understood the importance of taking responsibility for the process and ensuring everyone involved felt respected.

This situation could have ended very differently, but Colleen's unwavering integrity and ethical approach turned a potential conflict into a win-win outcome. She didn't just adhere to ethical guidelines — she embodied them, setting an example for her team and reinforcing the value of accountability in leadership.

Colleen's actions remind us that true leadership isn't about taking shortcuts or looking for easy wins. It's about making difficult choices with honesty and fairness, taking ownership when things don't go as planned, and lifting others up when success is achieved. Her commitment to integrity and accountability serves as a lasting example of how these traits are essential to building trust and credibility in leadership.

## **Decisiveness, Courageous and Perseverance**

Effective leaders make timely and informed decisions. They weigh the pros and cons, gather input when necessary, and have the confidence to act, even under pressure or uncertainty. This means that a leader needs to have courage and be able to stand up for what they believe in. This is not about being a "bottlehead" and going with the flow. We need people who are prepared to stand up for what they believe. Ideally, we want to be able to get up in the morning and feel good about ourselves when looking in the mirror knowing that you did the right thing. Being courageous is difficult but is what we need to do as leaders. Leaders often face difficult decisions, resistance and unforeseen obstacles. Perseverance and courage enable them to push forward, make tough calls and stand by their values, even in challenging situations.



A great example of decisiveness and perseverance in leadership is Kristen Short, SR/WA, who demonstrated immense courage during her tenure as chair of the International Professional Education Committee (IPEC). At the time, the IPEC was responsible for overseeing IRWA's education programs, which are vital to the organization's mission. As the landscape of infrastructure real estate evolved, it became clear that the educational materials and programs needed to be revamped to stay relevant and meet the future demands of the industry.

Kristen and her team faced a monumental decision — whether to implement significant changes to the curriculum that would modernize the program but also disrupt the status quo. The proposed changes weren't met with unanimous approval. There were concerns from various stakeholders who were comfortable with the existing format and skeptical of the need for change. However, Kristen didn't shy away from making the tough call. She gathered input from all sides, carefully weighing the pros and cons of each option, and ultimately had the courage to move forward with the necessary reforms.

What made Kristen's leadership exemplary wasn't just her ability to make the decision but how she handled the challenges that

came afterward. The changes required an overhaul of the existing systems, and the implementation wasn't without its setbacks. Yet, Kristen and her team persevered, remaining focused on the long-term benefits of the new program. They faced pushback, navigated logistical hurdles and dealt with ongoing concerns, but they never lost sight of the bigger picture.

Kristen's perseverance wasn't just about getting through a difficult time; it was about creating a lasting, sustainable impact on IRWA's education programs. Her leadership resulted in a more modern, adaptable curriculum that continues to meet the evolving needs of professionals in infrastructure real estate today.

This story is a reminder that leadership requires not only the courage to make tough decisions but also the determination to see them through. Perseverance means staying committed to your vision even when the road is hard, and ultimately, it's this long-term commitment to success that makes a true leader. Kristen's example shows us that decisiveness, courage and perseverance are not just traits of effective leadership — they are essential to driving meaningful, lasting change.



## Adaptability and Resilience

Adaptability and resilience are essential qualities for any leader, especially in times of unprecedented challenges. A classic example of these traits in action is demonstrated by Sharon Slauenwhite, SR/WA, during her tenure as IRWA International President from 2020 to 2021 — a period defined by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Leading an international organization during a time of such uncertainty required Sharon to navigate uncharted waters. With in-person meetings completely replaced by virtual platforms such as MS Teams and other communication technologies, Sharon faced the challenge of maintaining connection, collaboration and momentum without the traditional tools of face-to-face interaction. Remarkably, throughout her presidency, she never attended a single in-person meeting, yet she led with unwavering focus and determination.

As International President, Sharon exemplified adaptability by embracing the realities of a rapidly changing world and steering the organization into untested territory. She worked closely with the International Executive Committee and International Governing Council to pivot the IRWA's operations, ensuring the

organization could continue to thrive despite the pandemic's constraints. One of the most notable achievements under her leadership was the rapid transition to online course offerings. This restructuring effort not only ensured that IRWA's educational mission continued uninterrupted but also laid the foundation for a more flexible and accessible approach to professional development moving forward.

Sharon's resilience shone through as she faced the challenges of this new reality with poise and confidence. She remained calm under pressure, guiding her team through the complexities of virtual collaboration while fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose across the organization. Her ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances inspired those around her to do the same, creating a culture of innovation and perseverance during a time of significant upheaval.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of Sharon's leadership was her capacity to maintain the human connection so vital to IRWA's mission, even in a virtual environment. She ensured that every member of her team felt supported and valued, demonstrating that resilience is not just about enduring tough times but about emerging stronger, with a renewed sense of purpose and direction.



Sharon Slauenwhite's tenure as International President serves as a powerful example of what it means to be an adaptable and resilient leader. Her ability to pivot strategies, embrace change and inspire confidence in others ensured that the IRWA not only weathered the storm of the pandemic but also emerged with innovative solutions that continue to benefit the organization today. Leaders like Sharon remind us that adaptability and resilience are not just individual traits — they are the foundations of organizational success in an ever-changing world.

## Delegation and Empowerment

In a rapidly changing world, effective leaders empower and delegate with purpose, fostering resilience and adaptability within their teams. True empowerment involves trusting others with responsibility while providing the support and guidance necessary for them to thrive. Delegation, paired with patience and attentive listening, becomes a powerful tool for building confidence and competence in others, enabling them to rise to challenges with assurance and creativity.

Matt Harris, SR/WA, exemplifies these leadership traits through his roles as the past Region 6 chair and his current service on the International Executive Committee (IEC). His unwavering patience and attentive listening skills have become hallmarks of his leadership style. By taking the time to hear every perspective and ensuring that every voice is acknowledged, Matt creates an environment where individuals feel empowered to contribute meaningfully. His calm demeanor and inclusive approach foster collaboration, building trust and respect among team members while inspiring them to reach their full potential.

Through thoughtful delegation, Matt enables others to grow and adapt, ensuring they are equipped to navigate even the most complex situations. His ability to guide without micromanaging instills confidence in his colleagues, allowing them to take ownership of their roles and responsibilities. By empowering his team with trust, clarity and support, Matt not only helps them overcome challenges but also builds their resilience, preparing them for future opportunities and leadership roles.

Matt's leadership is a testament to the transformative power of empowerment and delegation. His steady hand and inclusive approach have strengthened not only the organization's ability to adapt to change but also the individual capacities of those he leads. In doing so, Matt demonstrates that great leaders don't just guide — they inspire others to become leaders in their own right.

Having worked closely with Matt on the International Relations Committee and consulting with him about inclusivity and diversity, I witnessed his empowering approach on numerous occasions. Whether navigating sensitive cross-cultural conversations or guiding the committee through complex decisions, Matt consistently balanced patience with action. He entrusted team members with meaningful responsibilities,

provided constructive feedback and celebrated their achievements. This approach cultivated a sense of ownership and pride within the team, reinforcing their commitment to the organization's goals.

Matt's ability to delegate effectively and empower others is a cornerstone of his success as a leader. His example reminds us that leadership is not about doing everything yourself but about uplifting others to excel, creating a ripple effect of resilience, capability and growth throughout the organization. Through his actions, Matt has set a standard for what it means to lead with trust, inclusivity and empowerment — qualities that leave a lasting impact on both individuals and the broader community.

## Strategic Thinking and Problem Solving

Effective leaders must think critically, anticipate future challenges, and develop solutions that align with long-term goals. Strategic thinking isn't just about solving immediate problems — it's about setting a vision, prioritizing actions and navigating complexity with foresight and adaptability. This type of leadership requires the ability to make decisions today that will shape the organization for the future.

I vividly remember my time serving on the International Executive Committee in 2003 alongside visionary leaders like Don Marx, SR/WA, Dan Beardsley, SR/WA, W. Howard Armstrong, SR/WA, Jim Finnigan, SR/WA, and Jim Struble, SR/WA. One of the most pivotal moments of that time was during our strategic sessions when the conversation turned toward expanding IRWA's influence on a global scale. Up until that point, the organization was well-respected and impactful within North America, but the idea of establishing IRWA as a global leader seemed, to many of us, a lofty and distant goal.

At the time, I was skeptical. The challenges seemed immense — geographical, cultural and logistical barriers would make such a move complex and fraught with risk. However, Dan and Howard (two giants in the industry) and the rest of the team had a different perspective. They recognized that the world of infrastructure real estate was evolving, and to stay relevant and provide greater value to our members, the IRWA needed to think bigger. Their strategic thinking wasn't just about reacting to the current environment but anticipating how global trends and increasing infrastructure projects across the world would demand a more international approach.

Dan and the others laid out a clear, long-term vision: IRWA would establish itself as the preeminent global association for right of way professionals.

Over the years, I watched in awe as that vision began to take shape. Through the support of many dedicated members and leaders, IRWA's influence grew, and the organization started to establish a foothold globally. What once seemed impossible





became a reality, thanks to the foresight and strategic leadership of individuals like Dan Beardsley and the others.

This experience taught me an invaluable lesson about leadership: strategic thinking isn't just about what you can achieve today — it's about envisioning the future and laying the groundwork to get there, even when the path forward seems unclear. With the right vision, priorities and persistence, leaders can turn ambitious goals into tangible realities.

## Diversity and Inclusivity

Diversity and inclusivity are essential leadership skills as they help create an innovative, equitable and sustainable environment. Leaders should build diverse teams, promote inclusive decision-making and ensure cultural competence to better serve their communities. By fostering equity, role modeling inclusive behaviors, and incorporating diversity into the organization's strategy, leaders can enhance trust, engagement and mitigate groupthink. Ultimately, diverse and inclusive leadership strengthens the organization's effectiveness and aligns with its social mission.

While serving as chair of the International Relations Committee, I had the opportunity to witness an excellent example of diverse and inclusive leadership through Patty Quinn, SR/WA, who was the vice chair of the Committee. Patty had an extraordinary ability to engage with our international members, many of whom came from different cultural backgrounds and regions across the world. Her outgoing nature and inclusive leadership style allowed her to bridge cultural divides effortlessly.

Patty demonstrated how diversity in leadership isn't just about bringing different people to the table but actively creating opportunities for them to contribute meaningfully. She engaged members by fostering a welcoming environment where everyone felt their perspectives were valued. For instance, during our International Conferences, Patty would go out of her way to ensure that cultural differences did not prevent anyone from sharing their insights. She took the time to listen carefully, respecting each person's point of view and encouraged them to take on leadership roles or participate in projects that aligned with their strengths.

Her approach showcased the power of inclusive decision-making, as she created a sense of community and trust within the group. Members from various backgrounds felt empowered to contribute, which not only improved the Committee's work but also reflected the spirit of collaboration and global understanding that is essential in organizations like ours.

Patty's leadership was a clear example of how embracing diversity and practicing inclusivity strengthens engagement, fosters innovation and drives the organization forward. By valuing the unique experiences and perspectives of our international members, she ensured that our committee's efforts were both globally relevant and impactful.

## Closing Thoughts

As we look ahead to the future of IRWA and the broader field of infrastructure real estate, it's clear that effective leadership will continue to be the cornerstone of our success. The qualities discussed — visionary thinking, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and integrity — are not just ideals to strive for; they are the building blocks of sustainable growth, innovation and community trust.

By embodying these traits, our leaders can inspire others, cultivate lasting relationships and drive meaningful change within the profession. As you consider your role in the leadership of IRWA, whether in the upcoming elections or in your daily work, remember that leadership is an ongoing journey of learning, growth and impact. Let's continue to build a future where we lead with purpose and inspire excellence in everything we do. 🌟



*Gordon E. MacNair, SR/WA, AACI, P.App, is a senior real estate infrastructure advisor employed with MacNair Consulting Inc. His former position was with the City of Ottawa as the director of the corporate real estate office where his team oversaw all real estate matters for the City of Ottawa. He is also a certified lecturer for IRWA and the AIC and has published numerous articles on infrastructure real estate matters. Gord is a Past International President of IRWA and has previously served as chair of the IRWA International Relations Committee. Gord has taught courses and delivered presentations on infrastructure real estate issues throughout Canada and the U.S. as well as Australia (virtually), South Africa, and the U.K.*