



# There's a Leader in Every One of Us

## Answering the call to be a leader

The past columns I have authored for Right of Way Magazine have focused on existing leadership. Conversely, this article is addressed predominately to those who are entertaining the idea of becoming Association leaders, although I'll also touch on how seasoned leaders can participate in the process.

The time is ripe to address the obvious gap between emerging and senior leadership. Overall, membership in professional associations has declined in recent years, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the April 25, 2021 Sidecar online article, "Declining Membership in Professional Organizations and What You Can Do About It," the authors cited a survey, finding that "8% of organizations had difficulty growing their organization in 2019 — 11% of those shrunk, and 25% experienced no growth."

Declining membership has affected leadership in organizations. It is axiomatic that if an organization's membership is faltering, then a drop in leadership participation follows. Fortunately for IRWA, although its membership had been adversely impacted by COVID-19, the Association has slowly recovered and is currently experiencing a resurgence in membership. However, the same cannot be said about leadership within IRWA — but the Association is not alone in this disconcerting trend. The number of quality leaders is dramatically dwindling both in volunteer organizations and in businesses across the board. Contributor Dan Pontefract in his article, "New Research Suggests An Alarming Decline In High-Quality Leaders" (updated in February, 2023), noted, "It is the steepest decline in leadership quality in a decade, bringing ratings back down to levels last seen in 2007–2008, at the height of the global financial crisis."

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.



The origins for this falloff in leadership are multifaceted. The whirlwind advances in technology and increased workloads in the industry have propelled IRWA professionals to be busier than ever in their jobs. These circumstances are exasperated by personal obligations and responsibilities — children or grandchildren, and their attendant activities and involvement; aging parents; spouses or significant others; friends; participation in charitable organizations; and the list goes on. Another reason for the gap is that the right of way industry is comprised of many baby boomers, who have either completely or partially retired or are planning to do so in less than a decade. Undoubtedly, the pandemic also affected those on the path to leadership. Since COVID-19, values have been reevaluated and shifted, some seismically. People have become more insular, choosing to spend more time domestically and not on extraprofessional activities.

Some may surmise that the lack of interest in leadership is generational because younger IRWA members may not feel the same draw to contribute their time to the Association. Personally, I reject this reason for a couple of reasons. First, IRWA has a cache of bright, motivated emerging leaders — albeit this group seems petite in size. Second, neophyte Association members are not necessarily younger in age because some IRWA members enter the right of way industry as their second careers. Thus, generational differences are inapposite.

### Why pursue IRWA leadership opportunities?

How can someone be persuaded to commence his or her leadership journey when it unquestionably detracts from time spent at work, with family and friends or participating in favorite pastimes? Stated more crassly, for members flirting with leadership, what's in it for them?

At the outset, there's a smorgasbord of leadership options at IRWA — something for everyone. These opportunities abound and exist on various levels — Chapter, Region, International and Executive. Additionally, IRWA's International Committees are in diverse areas. The International Service Committees are an integral part of how the Association functions and include professional education, ethics, nominations and elections, finance, marketing and membership, young professionals and international relations. The International Industry Committees cover issues impacting the disciplines within the right of way industry, including electric and utilities, environment, oil and gas, public agency, real estate law, real property asset management, relocation assistance, surveying and engineering, transportation and valuation.

Another benefit is that commitment to Association leadership strengthens the right of way industry. Leadership in any professional organization, including IRWA, creates the





opportunity to have a voice. Instead of complaining and/or being disappointed about issues, if you become a leader, you have a voice, and when you have a voice, you are positioned to effectuate positive and meaningful change.

Leadership skills are transferable. What we learn through IRWA leadership training and experience is applicable to other areas of life where we serve either officially and/or informally. Whether we realize it or not, we are leaders in many areas of our lives — we may supervise teams in our jobs, manage the household within our families or lead in our neighborhoods by initiating a crime watch program or serving on the homeowners' association board. When we hone our skills as IRWA leaders, it sharpens our abilities to lead in other areas of our lives.

### There's just not enough time

An unfortunate reality of life is that time is finite. As much as humans have progressed technologically, they cannot manufacture more time. Although the concept of “managing” time is sometimes challenged, how professionals use their time outside of work is partially within their control. It's easy to fall into the trap of using available time by merely reacting to those matters that impose upon our time.

A candid and thoughtful assessment about how time is spent can lead to carving out time for leadership. For instance, you can think about what is important to you and where to spend your time. Do you feel compelled to continue involvement in activities or organizations that you no longer enjoy or suit you? Although initially it may be uncomfortable, perhaps it's time to reduce, or even discontinue altogether, your involvement in these activities or organizations. Also, think about how time nibblers — like frivolously scrolling through social media or other meaningless, unfulfilling activities — impact your life by encroaching on free time.

The thought of leadership may seem undaunting timewise, but remember that one person does not, and should not, do it all. Tasks can be delegated to Chapter committee chairs, their members and other volunteers. When more Chapter members are involved, it lightens the leadership load. There's truth in the old adage, “Many hands make light work.”

### Concerns about lack of experience

Another reason members may be deterred from pursuing Association leadership is that they believe they lack leadership experience. If this reason is preventing you, remember that you are not alone. A plethora of resources are available to train and support first-time, burgeoning leaders. The most obvious asset is past Chapter leaders, who often have a wealth of historical knowledge about a Chapter and valuable leadership experience to impart. Leaders in other Chapters, particularly in one's Region, along with IRWA Headquarters, are equally available and willing to coach young leaders. The IRWA Membership Services team can visit and train new Chapter leaders upon

request. Other resources include the Chapter Toolkit, which can be found on the IRWA website under Member Resources, along with the quarterly Chapter leadership training calls, the Chapter Leadership Training session at the annual conference and the Leader's Edge newsletter.

At times, a new member may feel deterred to embark on the leadership track due to believing that his or her lack of experience can't stack up against a longtime leader's resume. Seasoned leaders step into these positions — and sometimes, these are roles they have previously served — because they believe the talent is unavailable, and potential leaders forgo opportunities because the experienced ones continue to fill the vacancies. This can lead to a self-defeating cycle.

### Seasoned leaders are instrumental in developing new leaders

Although current Association leaders may innocuously impede the growth of upcoming leaders, they can contribute to banishing this counterproductive cycle by playing an impactful role in developing new IRWA leaders to replace retiring ones. It's important to develop a keen sense of self awareness about how recycling past leaders can affect an organization. Experienced leaders can reach out to younger members, encourage them to serve in leadership positions and mentor them. The survival of any organization depends upon growing young, talented leaders. Fresh perspectives are necessary to keep an organization relevant.

At times, senior leaders may avoid stepping aside because they are resistant to relinquishing control, fear that less-experienced leaders will discontinue to do things as they have always been done or allow their egos to get in the way. The interests of any single Chapter or Region and the Association overall are best served when mature leaders put their egos aside, abandon the need for control and know when it's time to pass the baton to the next group of younger leaders.

### You're invited to answer the call

So, what's holding you back? If you have thought about becoming an Association leader, even for a fleeting moment, I invite you to overcome any challenges that you may confront and explore leadership opportunities with IRWA. I hope that you accept my invitation. You're needed now more than ever. ☆



*Yasmin L. Stump, Esq. currently serves as IRWA International General Counsel and Parliamentarian. She is also an IRWA Chapter 10 past president. Yasmin is the president and founder of Yasmin L. Stump Law Group, PC in Indiana and has practiced in real estate transactions and litigation, as well as been a member of the right of way industry, for more than 35 years. She has more than 40 years of leadership experience with business and nonprofit organizations and is authoring this column, Leadership.*