

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

How to transform your work, your team, and ultimately YOU!!!

BY ROBERT KIRKPATRICK, SR/WA



PEOPLE OFTEN ASK ME WHAT I DO.

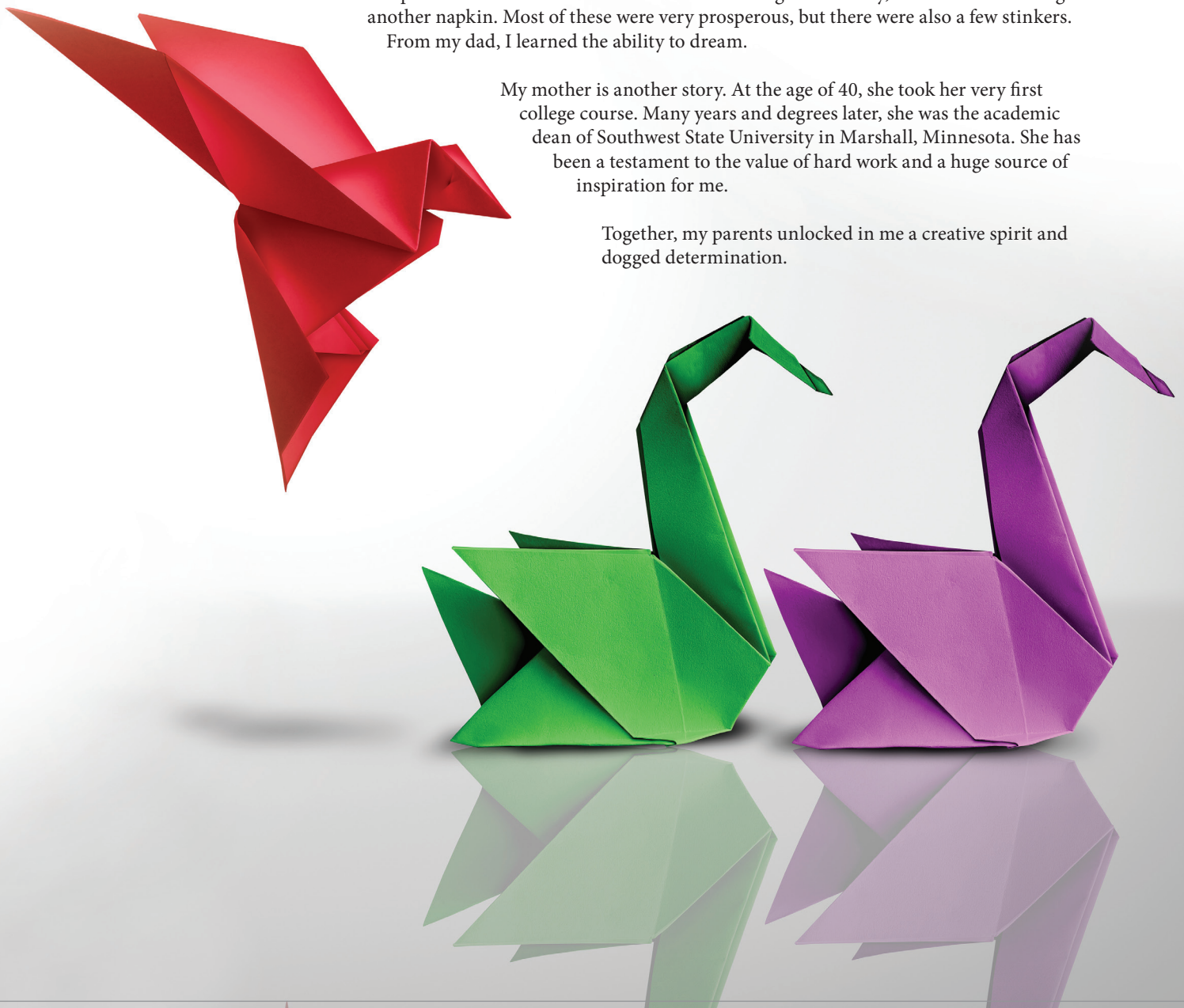
I used to say, "I am in right of way" or "I am a real estate supervisor" or "I work for Ameren." During a recent mentoring session with one of our top executives, I was challenged to rethink my answer. Do any of those statements describe what I do? Though they are accurate, they don't quite capture it. I thought long and hard and came up with one word.

Transformation

To better understand why I am so passionate about transformation, you need context. Two of the biggest influences in my life have been my parents. My father was a self-taught musician who turned down a music scholarship (my grandmother was not impressed) to play in big bands on the road in the 1940s and 1950s. After a stint in the army, he went to work for Standard Oil as a tax accountant. Though he had only completed high school, he was probably the smartest person I knew. For most of the next 30 years, he was a serial entrepreneur. His process was simple: go to a coffee shop, sit down with a napkin and pen, and start thinking. Before long, that napkin was a business idea that he put into action. Once the business was running successfully, he would sell it and grab another napkin. Most of these were very prosperous, but there were also a few stinkers. From my dad, I learned the ability to dream.

My mother is another story. At the age of 40, she took her very first college course. Many years and degrees later, she was the academic dean of Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota. She has been a testament to the value of hard work and a huge source of inspiration for me.

Together, my parents unlocked in me a creative spirit and dogged determination.



Personal Growth

I have often said that nobody gets into right of way on purpose. When I came to work at Ameren, it was because I was pretty good at buying and selling all kinds of real estate. Owning my own asset management brokerage and working as a commercial broker/developer/property manager prepared me well for that first role. I had no plans of staying long term, as I like variety and assumed the company could not hold my attention. That was 2012.

So, what happened? Shortly after starting with Ameren, I started pushing for a promotion. I applied for every leadership opening I saw and eventually became a real estate supervisor. Looking back, I chased the opportunity for all the wrong reasons. Like many people, I wanted that job because it was more money, more responsibility and the next step up the corporate ladder. Then something interesting happened . . . I discovered I actually *like* people.

Becoming a people leader didn't happen overnight, and I can learn so much more on the topic. Because of my curious nature, I routinely seek out opportunities to learn about effective leadership through a variety of sources. I read books and articles, listen to podcasts, watch TED Talks and spend a lot of time listening to anyone that is or has been a leader. IRWA has presented me with some great opportunities

to learn more about leadership. In 2017, I was elected as treasurer of Chapter 12 and continued the leadership pathway through the Chapter president role. Last year, I was elected as Region 5 vice chair. Throughout my time in IRWA leadership, I have been fortunate to work with some amazing leaders and have observed how they interact with people and collaborate to solve problems and move the Association forward for the benefit of our members.

Coworker Development

In my experience, engaged and self-aware coworkers bring the most to the team and tend to be more satisfied with their work experience. In my role as a people leader, I have the opportunity to work with my team and better understand what they want out of their careers. Through collaboration, I seek to help remove obstacles to achieving those goals.

Most companies have programs that foster individual development. My company has a growth philosophy that I fully embrace: 70% of development experiences come through the work we do, by stretch assignments that take us out of our comfort zone; 20% of development happens by learning from other . . . more experienced team members, leaders and people with different competencies; and finally, only 10% comes through formal education.

The IRWA courses I took to obtain my SR/WA taught me so much about the various disciplines within the right of way industry. Each course, seminar or symposium provides an opportunity to learn something new. I am a huge advocate for IRWA's educational offerings, but that's just the tip of the iceberg as far as the value members can get by being involved with the Association — participating in your Chapter's committees, event planning, becoming a course coordinator, leading a team, presenting at Chapter meetings, Region Forums, or even the International Education Conference. Chapter, Region and International leadership opportunities lead to growth and development.

Business Process Management, Automation & Technology

Like most electric utilities, Ameren became what it is today through a series of mergers. Some of its history dates back over 120 years, including a display at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. When I was learning my first role with the company, I heard much about "the way we have always done it." I often received conflicting information and was frustrated to find that instead there were multiple "ways we have always done it." Our group had a lack of defined standards and had few documented processes. For years, knowledge had been passed down from one long-term employee to another. In years past when people worked for fifty years and got the gold watch, this transfer of information may have worked. In today's labor market, it doesn't.



With the right tools, we will reach greater heights.

Several years ago, my focus shifted from working in the business to working on the business. I dove deep into learning all about Lean Continuous Improvement methodology ("The Toyota Way: 14 Management Principles from the World's Greatest Manufacturer" by Jeffrey K. Liker), strategy and tools. I focused on becoming a better facilitator and listener (my wife knows that last one is a work in progress). Armed with these tools, I engaged each member of our department to learn about what they do and how they did it. A fascinating thing occurs when you get people talking about their processes. When they talk about the parts of their job that they love, their passions and excitement emerge. But when relaying those elements of the work that are clunky, monotonous or just plain dumb, you can see and hear their pain (as a nod to the movie "Office Space," "You know, we're putting cover sheets on the T.P.S. reports. Do you need a copy of the memo?").

Lean Continuous Improvement seeks to eliminate waste from a process but does so for the benefit of the people. In my experience, when people have great processes, job satisfaction goes up. Each improvement to the process returns a valuable commodity: time. If you find yourself saying "I'm just too busy to work on improving processes," I would challenge you to consider if improving your processes would unlock new potential for you or your team.

Improving processes is crucial, but my team is always looking for more ways to transform the work that we do. Business process automation comes in all shapes and sizes. The simplest tools, like using rules in Microsoft Outlook to keep your inbox focused or creating macros or formulas in Excel, take very little time to learn and master. More advanced automation capabilities exist within Office 365, such as Power Automate and Power Apps. These tools allow you to chain together multiple applications to perform more complex tasks but are easy to assemble using building blocks that don't require significant technical knowledge.

Though we are leveraging these tools, the most significant progress in business process automation has used three tools: Robotic Process Automation (RPA), Robotic Desktop Automation (RDA) and Optical Character Recognition (OCR.) By using these tools, we have been able to reduce or eliminate manual, repetitive processes and reduce risk, all while returning valuable time to our coworkers. Additional capabilities exist using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML), but we haven't even tapped these in real estate yet. I am excited to explore ways in which these might help us.

Another significant transformation revolves around how technology can better support our team. We are reimagining the systems that will support our workflows, enable more effective project management, integrate geospatial information, increase transparency for business partners and provide actionable dashboards with real time metrics for our leaders. With the right tools, we will reach greater heights.

Change Management

Not everyone responds well to change. When the new iPhone comes out, some people camp out to be first in line while others may take a wait and see approach. Some may even still be using their flip phone from 1996. Regardless of where people live on the change spectrum, it's important to understand their concerns and work to address them. Some companies apply the ADKAR model (Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement) for change management for large and small changes. It's a great system to plan for and execute change within an organization. Managed change tends to be more successful.

Think Again

I recently read "Think Again" by Adam Grant. Though I pride myself on being a creative and innovative thinker, this book humbled me and opened my eyes to some potential blind spots. My passion for transformative change can be overwhelming for some people. I am impatient and ask "why" more times than your average five-year-old. I want to focus on the root of these problems and help create positive outcomes for people.

Look around. Do you see opportunity for transformation in your work, on your team, or in you? Think big. If that's too much, think small. If one small adjustment could give you 15 minutes extra a week, what would you do with that time? How about an hour or two or five? We all have the power to transform, we just need to take that first step. 🌱



Rob Kirkpatrick, SR/WA, is a real estate supervisor with Ameren Services. After years of leading teams supporting electric and gas distribution and transmission ROW, he now leads Lean Continuous Improvement, innovation, automation and technology strategy and implementation for Ameren's real estate department. Rob currently serves Region 5 vice chair and is a member of the International Electric & Utilities Committee and is a Chapter past president of Illinois Chapter 12. He holds a bachelor's degree in finance from the University of Illinois and an MBA in human resource management from Capella University.