



WORKING TODAY TO FOSTER TOMORROW'S LEADERS

Confronting concerns about gaps in leadership

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

Recently, my husband, who is a longtime right of way industry professional, told me about an email that he received. The email was sent to members of a local chapter of an esteemed professional organization, other than IRWA, soliciting members to apply for positions on its board of directors; it explained that the organization was having serious challenges filling these leadership positions. My husband and I discussed the content of the email, and it led me to pose three questions. First, does a deficit of emerging leaders for professional organizations exist? Second, what is causing the decline in upcoming leaders? Third, what can present and past leaders do to close the gap in the lack of tomorrow's leaders?

Is There a Deficit of Emerging Leaders?

The email my husband received is not unique. In fact, my own involvement with IRWA leadership has corroborated the seemingly disappointing trend of a lack of interest and involvement in leadership positions. During my term as Chapter 10 president, I recall other Chapter leaders in our Region lament about the challenges they confronted with filling and retaining board and committee chair positions. Some Chapters have been locked in the endless loop of the same members serving year after year in leadership positions without the inclusion of new faces on their Boards and as committee chairs. During my presidency, I was fortunate to recruit chairs and co-chairs for my Chapter's committees, but several Chapter members whom I asked to serve in such positions declined or were initially hesitant to do so.

What is Causing the Decline in Upcoming Leaders?

The genesis of the dwindling numbers in emerging leaders is multifaceted. Initially, as frequently noted, the right of way industry is aging. For instance, in my husband's profession of real estate appraising, the Appraisal Institute

has reported in its annual U.S. Valuation Profession Fact Sheet for Q1 2019 that as of December 31, 2018, the average age of a real estate appraiser is between 51 and 65 years old. Candidly, as one well entrenched in middle age, that age range does not seem old to me. However, this statistic is alarming when one considers that the average age of an individual in this profession is close to or at retirement age. The average ages of other professions in the right of way industry are not as bleak but certainly not encouraging. According to the career website, Zippia.com, the current average age for other right of way professionals, such as project managers, surveyors and civil engineers, is between 41 and 46 years of age. With such statistics, the right of way industry will likely face a similar leadership deficit in the next decade as these other industry professionals retire. The link between an aging industry and a depletion of new leaders is axiomatic.

The trending deficit of emerging leaders is not restricted to the right of way industry. Other industries are confronting this same unfortunate trend. One reason is that baby boomers have retired or will be retiring imminently. As this generation retires, they leave their professions and their organizational leadership positions. Without new leaders to replace them, a leadership void is inevitable.



The decline in leadership involvement began more than 15 years ago. In her July 2018 article, “Volunteerism Declined Among Young People,” Sarah Sparks notes, “Across every age group, volunteering has declined since 2005.” Although this decline commenced before COVID-19, my own experience has revealed that the pandemic has exacerbated this situation in several ways. As a result of the pandemic, people have reevaluated their priorities. More of their time is spent at home with family and friends. Their involvement in activities, such as professional organization leadership, which may decrease the time spent in these personal relationships, has been restricted. Additionally, the public improvement projects that were previously stalled during the pandemic due to funding and staffing issues are now progressing at a lightning pace. As such, many of our industry colleagues are inundated with work and lack the time to serve in leadership roles.

The pandemic also led to industry companies’ cutbacks. Budgets that previously included the payment of their employees’ professional association dues, as well as the conferences and travel costs for these organizations’ activities, have been severely restricted or eliminated altogether. Association members employed by private companies are now confronting the same situation that public employee members have faced for years — they have to pay their dues and other expenses out of their own pockets and take personal time off to participate in organization activities. Leadership involvement only increases these costs.

Aside from the current demographics of the right of way industry and the pandemic, I have learned that some IRWA members have been reluctant to participate in

leadership roles for other reasons. When I encouraged new individuals to participate in leadership positions, some, even those who have been Association members for years, declined or expressed hesitancy because they did not believe that they have the experience to do so. They find such involvement undaunting. Younger members are ambivalent because they lack fundamental understanding about the organization and how professional organization boards operate. Potential new leaders are sometimes concerned about how they will be perceived by more experienced organization leaders or members due to their lack of experience and/or the ability to present fresh ideas to the organization.

What Can Present and Past Leaders do to Close the Gap in the Lack of Tomorrow’s Leaders?

The recruitment and cultivation of new leaders is vital to not only the success but the survival of any organization. While current statistics and trends in the lack of new leadership seem abysmal, they are not insurmountable. Industry leaders are critical in overcoming the challenges and can materially contribute to the recruitment and development of new leaders.

I believe that the most significant precept to convey to new leaders is the value in leadership service. Some are drawn to serve as leaders because of their intrinsic or ingrained sense of altruism. I grew up in a household where giving back in diversified ways — to the community, to those less fortunate, to the educational institutions I attended and to my profession — was expected. But there are many



other compelling reasons to serve as a leader — the comradery and friendships that are built with others, the opportunities to consult with and assist peers within the industry and the relationships developed that lead to new business connections.

An anonymous Frenchman said, “No man is happy until he has made another man happy.” Leadership involves doing good for others in our Association, and doing good creates emotional positivity. Research supports the connection between volunteering and positive emotion. According to a July 2020 article in the Washington Post by Elizabeth Hopper, a recent report conducted by the Journal of Happiness Studies found a correlation between volunteering and mental health. Hopper writes, “[T]he researchers found that those who volunteered at least once a month reported better mental health than participants who volunteered infrequently or not at all.”

The concerns about the time involved in serving as a leader are understood and respected. The amount of time in a day, week, month or year is finite. Obviously, the way that people spend their time is pivotal and is an understandable concern to those who hesitate to serve as leaders. This concern can be addressed by involving more members in leadership roles. The old adage “many hands make light work” applies to leadership. Rather than concentrating leadership responsibilities in a limited number of members, if more are involved, responsibilities can be allocated to more members, which reduces the commitment and time required by all leaders.

For those who shy away from leadership due to a lack of knowledge about IRWA and/or how boards operate, their fears can be allayed by the resources that the Association has available at one’s fingertips. On the IRWA’s website, under the Member Resources tab, there is an abundance of material for all levels

of the organization. The tab contains board member, committee and committee chair descriptions, incoming and outgoing leadership checklists and more. In addition to the information available electronically, in my own experience, current and past IRWA leadership in addition to IRWA staff have always gladly assisted with guidance and addressed any questions I had.

As the economic situation for companies involved in the right of way industry improves, my hope is that those that have restricted or eliminated funds and time for Association activities will revisit this issue. My belief as a business owner is that it is important for those at the helm of an organization to invest in their employees by giving them opportunities to meaningfully contribute as well as develop and succeed in our industry, particularly in leadership positions. The CEO and founder of Sama and LXMI, Leila Janah says, “Talent is equally distributed, but opportunity is not.” If companies do not provide the needed support to employees, their contributions to the industry, including in leadership, could be seriously stifled.

IRWA is a phenomenal organization, and my own enthusiasm for IRWA is boundless. Enthusiasm is contagious, and I believe when enthusiasm in the Association and the opportunity to serve IRWA in a leadership role is conveyed to someone, it creates excitement about the opportunity for involvement in the organization at a higher level. Leadership engagement provides avenues to shape our industry and provide valuable input and direction in its future. This column is not intended to be a dismal account of the future of leadership in our industry. Rather, it is intended as a call to action by past and present leaders to consider what they can do to foster new IRWA leaders at all levels. Our Association’s life depends upon it. 🌱



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