Listening is Key

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Everywhere you look there are books, essays, blogs, webinars on how to be a leader or what makes a leader. I've done a few myself. But it really all boils down to two things: 1) emotional intelligence and 2) continual learning.

Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to recognize, understand, manage and effectively express one's own emotions as well as the capacity to interact with others through understanding and managing their emotions.

It starts with being self-aware. If you know yourself, who you are, what your strengths and weaknesses are, you can learn how to handle various situations by either playing up your strengths or knowing where you are weakest and creating mitigation strategies to keep things from going south. It also means monitoring where you are on the emotional spectrum. We can usually tell when we are getting out of balance. We can be short or cranky or sometimes downright angry over something that any other time may not even phase us. When we feel these times coming on, it's time to do the things needed to bring us back into balance. That varies with each person. Maybe it's reading a book — my escape of choice — or going for a long walk, taking a spa day or just unplugging the phone for a bit.

When we are centered and balanced the second aspect of emotional intelligence comes into play. The main factor with working with others is listening. This is the single key component for us as infrastructure practitioners. We need to know what is really at issue for this landowner about the project and how we can help them through the process. We can only know that through listening. Sometimes a landowner just needs to vent their frustration over what happened to them with past projects. Sometimes they will never get to the place where they are happy or even accepting, but you have heard them and can recognize where they are coming from, which will give you the path forward with that individual.

As with athleticism or musical ability, there are certain individuals who are born with a higher level of emotional intelligence. But unlike athletics or musicality, there is hope for those who were not innately gifted in this area. This is a skill that can be readily learned and honed.

According to Sheryl Sanberg, the former COO of Meta Platforms, "The ability to learn is the most important quality a leader can have." This applies to more than just emotional intelligence but to all aspects of leadership. By continually learning, we are growing and evolving. We are learning new ways of doing things, adapting to new technologies and expanding our world view. Learning helps you grow as an individual while also improving your professional expertise. You can't lead from behind the pack.

Membership in IRWA is one way to start your leadership journey through education, honing your abilities as a right of way professional. It can also help develop leadership skills through the many opportunities available at the Chapter, Region and Committee level. These are skills that build and are transferable to all aspects of your life.

Thank you for giving me the honor this past year of leading this wonderful organization as your International President! I look forward to many more years' involvement and watching how our future leaders step up and continue making this a great organization! ✪