Training the Next Generation of Right of Way Professionals

Passing the baton (and the plat maps)

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Right of way (ROW) professionals are the unsung heroes of modern infrastructure. While everyone else admires the freshly paved highways, the gleaming pipelines or the power lines stretching across the horizon, we're the ones sweating the details — mapping, negotiating, and let's face it, occasionally playing referee between landowners and project managers.

But here's the thing: many of us seasoned ROW pros are nearing the phase of life where coffee tastes better at home, and the only maps we're interested in are the ones we're using to plan our next vacation. Who's going to take over when we hang up our negotiation hats? Spoiler alert: It won't be ChatGPT, despite its uncanny ability to parse legalese. No, the future lies in the hands of the next generation, and it's our job to prepare them.

This isn't just about teaching them how to navigate easements or read legal descriptions. It's about instilling the knowledge, resilience, and humor it takes to make it in this crazy world of right of way. So let's break it down: how do we train tomorrow's ROW leaders while keeping the experience as engaging (and entertaining) as possible?

The Art of the Right of Way Pep Talk

Let's be honest: ROW isn't exactly the first career path people dream about. Kids don't grow up saying, "Someday, I'm going to draft the most airtight condemnation notice ever!" So when you encounter someone curious about ROW, treat them like a rare species and nurture their interest.

Start with a pep talk. Here's a suggestion:

"Right of way isn't just a career; it's a calling. It's where legal expertise meets human interaction, where engineering merges with diplomacy. One day, you'll be explaining to a landowner why their prize oak tree has to come down for the greater good. The next, you'll be in a courtroom arguing over the fair market value of a parcel that's mostly swamp. It's a rollercoaster ride of challenges, surprises, and — believe it or not — a lot of laughs."

Pep talks set the tone, but they're just the beginning. Once they're intrigued (or at least not fleeing the room), it's time to dig deeper.

Mentorship: More Than Just Coffee and Complaints

Mentoring in ROW isn't a passive activity. It's not about inviting a junior employee to sit in on a meeting and hoping they absorb knowledge via osmosis. It's an active process of teaching, guiding and preparing them for the quirks and complexities of this unique profession. Here's how you can do it effectively:

1. Start with the Fundamentals (Emphasize "Fun")

Plat maps and legal descriptions may not scream "excitement," but they're the backbone of ROW work. Instead of launching into a dry lecture, approach these topics with a bit of flair:

- Compare plat maps to treasure maps, emphasizing the stakes of finding the "X" that marks the easement.
- Turn deciphering legal descriptions into a game: "What's the weirdest boundary description you've ever seen?"
- Share examples of maps that caused major headaches and challenge your mentee to spot the errors.

Remember, enthusiasm is contagious. If you're passionate about these details, your mentee will be too — or at least they'll appreciate why they matter.

2. Teach the Human Side of ROW

ROW isn't just about land; it's about people. From landowners to stakeholders to government officials, the human element is where ROW professionals truly earn their stripes. Help your mentee master the "soft skills" by:

- **Role-playing difficult negotiations.** Pretend to be a landowner with a list of grievances (bonus points for adding a stubborn mule into the mix) and let them practice diffusing the situation.
- **Sharing real-world scenarios.** Tell stories of landowners who went from hostile to cooperative — or vice versa — and analyze what worked or didn't.
- **Highlighting empathy.** Teach them to see every negotiation as a collaboration, not a conflict.

The human element is also where mentorship shines. By modeling patience, kindness and professionalism, you'll give your mentee a blueprint for success.

> **... you're not just training a replacement — you're building a future leader.**

War Stories: The Ultimate Teaching Tool

If you've been in ROW for more than five minutes, you've got war stories. These tales of triumph, disaster and sheer absurdity are more than just entertaining — they're lessons that can take you to the next level of your career. Here are a few examples of how to use your war stories as teaching tools:

- **The Tale of the Mismatched Parcel Numbers:** A classic cautionary tale about double-checking your paperwork before heading to court.
- **The Great Chicken Coup Standoff:** A humorous reminder that landowners' concerns are often deeply personal—and resolving them requires creativity and compassion.
- **The Pipeline That Went Viral:** A story of how community outreach (or lack thereof) can make or break a project's reputation.

War stories stick with mentees because they're relatable, memorable and often hilarious. Don't hold back — your experiences are a goldmine of wisdom.

Keeping It Light, but Meaningful

ROW work can be intense, but training the next generation doesn't have to feel like a slog. Infuse the process with humor and hands-on experiences to keep things engaging:

- **Lunch and Learn Sessions:** Casual discussions over pizza are a great way to cover complex topics without the pressure of formal training.
- **Field Trips:** Take your mentee to active ROW sites to see the work in action. Let them observe surveys, meet landowners, or walk the proposed corridor to understand the physical scope of projects.
- **Celebrate Mistakes**: Encourage your mentee to see errors as learning opportunities. Share your own embarrassing missteps to show that even the best ROW pros occasionally stumble.

Humor and approachability make the learning process enjoyable and foster a sense of camaraderie.

Preparing for the Future

As the ROW industry evolves, so do the skills required to succeed. In addition to traditional knowledge, help your mentee develop these forward-thinking competencies:

- **Technology Savvy:** GIS software, drone technology and data analytics are becoming staples of ROW work. Encourage your mentee to embrace these tools.
- **Cultural Competence:** Infrastructure projects increasingly intersect with diverse communities, requiring sensitivity and understanding.
- **Resilience:** ROW can be a rollercoaster of setbacks and triumphs. Help your mentee develop the mental toughness to stay the course.

By equipping them with these skills, you're not just training a replacement — you're building a future leader.

Passing the Baton

Preparing the next generation of ROW professionals goes beyond preserving the field; it's about creating a lasting legacy. When you take the time to mentor a young professional, you're ensuring that the expertise, values and traditions of ROW work live on.

One day, when you're sipping coffee and critiquing poorly aligned traffic barriers, you'll smile knowing that somewhere out there, your mentee is carrying the torch — juggling plat maps, negotiation tactics and the occasional irate landowner with the same enthusiasm and humor you once brought to the job.

And if you've done your job right, they'll also have a great cookie recipe. After all, nothing builds rapport like homemade cookies.

At the end of the day, mentorship is about more than passing on technical skills — it's about sharing the stories, wisdom and humanity that make this profession so unique. So take a moment to think about the next generation. Who will you inspire? And what war stories will they tell about you? ✪

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