

Dear Dr. Mazie,

As I get closer to retirement, I seem to be having more concerns about my replacement. I don't mean to sound egotistical, it's just that I don't feel confident that there is a suitable replacement. Plus, many of my coworkers in right of way are also planning on retiring in the next 5-10 years. What is going to happen to our industry?

– Arlene in Southern California

The challenges of hiring, staffing, training and employee retention are everywhere. But the real daunting challenge facing America today is replacing the 78 million baby boomers that will become eligible for retirement this decade.

According to a Fortune Magazine article, every seven seconds someone in the U.S. will turn 60. By the end of the decade, it is estimated that 40% of the workforce will have retired or will be eligible to do so. And although many of us may be having sweet dreams about what retirement means for us personally, the right of way industry will face some challenges ahead.

Adding insult to injury, a recent survey showed that, although 80% of company executives will soon become eligible for retirement, fewer than 20% of their employers planned to do anything about it. Their inaction may be linked to denial. Between the unstable economy, losses in employee pensions and 401k plans, and the fact that people are living and working longer, they may believe that the problem has been exaggerated.

It's time we all face the fact that there is a real problem. If you look at our industry and talk to folks at the various Chapters, Regions and International events, you know that many in the right of way profession are planning on retiring – and some very soon! So what can we do as an industry and within our individual companies and agencies?

For those who care about the future of our profession, now is the time to get adequately prepared. Start by setting

up a task force so managers can discuss, dissect, explore and develop a plan of action. Get senior management buy-in so they can be supportive, encouraging and participatory.

For the plan to work, it must be viewed as a permanent part of the organization's operating procedures. Here are some tips for establishing an action plan:

- Create an organizational chart for each department, as well as the company/agency as a whole.
- Highlight the individuals that are most likely looking at retirement over the next ten years (use different colors to identify 1-3; 4-6; 7-10 years).
- Task all managers to meet with each employee privately about their career plans. Create a climate of open communication. Ask questions, and then allow them to talk at length.
- If they don't bring up retirement, consider asking. Assure them that their job is secure and that talking about future retirement is only for long-term planning purposes.
- If retirement is in their plan, tell them your goal is to make their transition as smooth as possible. Explain that they will be involved in identifying and training their replacement. Unless you can assure them that the timetable is based on their plans, you will not get the assistance and information you need.
- For those with immediate plans of retiring, fast-forward your training and mentoring plan. For those without

a formal mentoring program, this is the time to create one. (For tips, refer to my article in the November/December 2009 issue.)

- On the staffing side, hiring the right people and getting a 'job fit' is another part of the plan. Go beyond simple job application forms and learn more about applicants - their skills, personalities, work ethic and personal values. Identify their career goals, their ideal job and expectations regarding the work environment.

Remember that the younger the workforce, the more important it is to have good training. This means training that is interesting, applicable, timely, frequent and presented by skilled mentors and motivated trainers.



Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D

A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Mazie has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.