

Dear Dr. Mazie,

In one of your courses I took a few months ago, you stated that all of us in the right of way industry need to be “professional problem solvers.” Can you explain this further?

-Jeff in Houston

Thanks for asking. It’s nice to know you were paying such close attention in class!

I find the right of way industry to be one of the most complex, intricate, multi-layered, challenging and at times, convoluted professions in today’s business world.

Think about it. We work with title research and due diligence; we do appraisals, surveying and permitting; handle environmental, geological and archeological issues; perform acquisitions, relocation, routing, siting, design, construction and construction damages; deal with public relations, landowner relations, politicians, state, federal and local agencies; national and international energy companies, permitting agencies and more. As you can see, this is an extremely complex industry!

As professionals, we are expected to get things done. We are required to interact with a variety of different entities and collaborate with a diverse group of individuals. There are bound to be problems and conflicts.

So what exactly does problem solving entail, and what are the skills required to be effective?

Basically, professional problem solving is both an art and a skill that facilitates a satisfactory resolution to a disagreement between two or more parties. It requires getting all parties to be in a consensus mode, which means being ready, willing and able to discuss issues openly and seek a win-win situation.

READY: to not jump to conclusions, react emotionally, make assumptions, insist on doing things the same old way, or focus on winning.

WILLING: to listen, think out of the box, look for the positives and be flexible.

ABLE: to communicate openly, stay focused on solutions instead of personal interests, and focus on what’s right – not who’s right.

You might recognize the personality traits of a problem solver as being credible, innovative, patient, calm, persistent, positive, sincere and empathetic. Combine those with industry knowledge, excellent communication skills, the ability to delay gratification and handle the multiple ambiguities of the other parties’ needs, wants and personal interests while maintaining composure in the pursuit of a resolution, and voila – you have a Professional Problem Solver. Obviously, a very special person!

Although there are other ways of resolving conflict, collaborative problem solving should always be attempted first. A professional problem solver recognizes that there are times when a less desirable method might be needed just to keep things moving forward for the moment.

There are five basic styles of handling conflict. See which style best describes yours!

Avoidance: Non-confrontational; denies issues are a problem; afraid to damage relationship or create a bigger problem.

Accommodating: Cooperative even at expense of personal goals; avoids any disharmony; not worth risking relationship.

Competing: Confrontational and aggressive; must win at any cost; survival of the fittest.

Compromising: Focus on achieving basic goals and maintaining good relationships; cooperative in finding resolution; agreement is high priority.

Collaboration: High mutual respect and support; both parties discuss issues openly; seek mutually-beneficial solution.

For those who are interested in an in-depth understanding of conflict management, I encourage you to take IRWA Course 213 at the next opportunity. You won’t regret it.



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.