

# Upgrading the right-of-way function in the eyes of upper management



by David E. Punches, SR/WA

*This article is adapted from a speech that has been given to several of IRWA's local chapters over the past few years and is still relevant.*

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He spent 32 years with the Bell System, retiring as head of American Telephone & Telegraph Company's Right of Way and Liaison Department with offices in New York City. Formerly with Illinois Bell Telephone Company, he spent two years as an engineer on the DEW line and White Alice project in Alaska for the A.T.&T. Company and Western Electric Company.

Extremely active in the International Right of Way Association, Mr. Punches has served in many capacities on both State and International levels. He is past International President and Chairman of the Board of IRWA.

A past member of the American Public Works Association, he served on the Association's Utility Location and Coordination Council as Chairman of the task force for the study to standardize color code marking for underground facilities.

While with American Telephone & Telegraph Company in New York and New Jersey, Mr. Punches authored a textbook on "Right of Way — Acquisition and Management" which is in use today by all of the former Bell companies. He has also written a series of articles for the "Telephone — Engineer and Management" magazine and is a regular contributor of technical articles to various national publications. He also lectures and appears in Seminars throughout the country. Dave is also known as the "father" of the Bell System Right of Way Agents' school formerly held at the Bell System Center for Technical Education in Lisle, Illinois.

"Upgrading" seems to imply that the right-of-way function is looked down upon by top management as some sort of second-rate, unimportant activity. I wonder whether this is really so. From what I've seen and heard, the problem seems to be one of management's lack of understanding of the full potential of our function, rather than a tendency to downgrade it.

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This title also has something of a self-serving air about it. It sounds as though we're saying, "Why don't those guys in 'mahogany row' realize what a great bunch we are?" While favorable recognition from the brass is certainly enjoyable, it seems to me that what we're looking for is not status, per se, but rather knowledgeable management support of our function. This is support we must have not to make our work easier or more glamorous but, more basically, to enable us to make the greatest possible contribution to the overall success of our organization. So let me start this discussion by suggesting a completely different title: "Increasing the Effectiveness of the Right-of-Way Function by Clarifying its Role in the Eyes of Management." Still quite a mouthful — and easier to talk about than to accomplish.

Why should we be so concerned about top management's view of the right-of-way function? It seems to me that there are three basic and interrelated benefits which grow from management's understanding and support of our function:

- A soundly based assignment from management as to the objectives and scope of the right-of-way function in our particular organization.
- Well-balanced and clearly defined relationships between the right-of-way department and the other

departments with which we work: engineering, construction, operations, legal, etc.

- More lead time.

Do you remember the old commencement exercise story about the two workers on a construction project who were asked what they were doing? One said, "I'm laying bricks" — The other replied, "I'm building a cathedral." Management's knowledge of the potential of the right-of-way function has a direct bearing, it seems to me, on whether we're bricklayers or cathedral builders. Management can view us simply as the men who can handle all the tedious, nit-picking details when the organization has to acquire a right-of-way, arrange a lease, or buy some property. Or, hopefully, they can charge us with the broader responsibility of using our right-of-way experience in helping to achieve the basic objectives of the organization in a more effective and economical way.

Similarly, management's view of our function will have considerable influence on how we work with other departments in the organization. We can be the "tail-end Charlies," the guys who are never called in on a project until there's obviously some right-of-way chores to perform; or we can be viewed and used as people with important experience who should play an active role from the earliest inception of any project which

may have some real estate implications.

With knowledgeable management support — as evidenced by a sound and broad basic assignment of responsibilities, and established relationships and procedures which enable us to make the fullest possible contribution to the total organization — we'll also enjoy the benefit of the most precious commodity we can hope for: more adequate lead time. Time to do an effective job of planning and organizing our own work, time to establish all of the requirements, time to investigate alternate solutions, time to negotiate the best possible price, and time to work more effectively with all the other departments involved in the project. I don't know the man who first said, "Time is Money" — but I'm sure he must have been a right-of-way man!

What can we do to help establish the sort of management understanding for which we're striving? Basically, as I see it, we have to recognize that this understanding won't just happen. We have to work to achieve it. Underscore WE! Top management is faced with the challenge of coordinating the efforts of an increasing number of specialists and technicians. If we don't think we're getting the sort of support our function deserves and needs in order to make the maximum contribution to the organization, we've got to work for it ourselves.

Certainly the best way of establishing the value of our function is by doing a top-notch job for the organizations for which we work. This means being professionals — and what better guide for truly professional performance can you find than our own IR/WA code of ethics?

The second precept of the code, you will recall, stresses the need for constant study to improve professional knowledge. Keeping up-to-date with the latest developments in the real estate and right-of-way fields is no small task in itself, as witness the broad spectrum of topics which are being discussed at our seminar.

But to deserve management's understanding we have to be equally understanding and become diligent students of the organization for which we work. We need to ask and seek answers to our organization's current objectives. What major plans are being formulated? What are the important problems presently being faced in organization or opera-

tions? In each of these, what possible right-of-way implications are there? What contributions can our professional expertise make to the overall success of the organization?

Here, it seems to me, is our finest opportunity to demonstrate to management that we are cathedral builders and not just bricklayers. Obviously, we have to handle routine assignments competently. But beyond this, there is no end to special situations in which knowledgeable and imaginative use of real estate savvy can make a contribution to the organization. Perhaps it's helping the sales department with the real estate and zoning aspects of a plant location study for a prospective customer who's thinking of moving into our territory. It may be helping the personnel department recruit key personnel by offering assistance in locating a new home. Or perhaps it's helping the public relations department establish the organization's reputation as a responsible, community-minded outfit by working with the local community chest in finding new quarters.

In order to have the opportunity of demonstrating our ability in such special situations, we not only have to know our organization and what's going on, but the rest of the group has to know us. They have to know who we are, what we can do, and that we want to be of service. Here again, it seems to me, we have the primary responsibility for becoming known. "Communication" is such a frequently used word these days that it runs the risk of sounding trite, but unless we're doing a good job of communicating — both listening to others and letting them know what we can do for them — we can't be sure our services are being used whenever they should be.

We have a special communications responsibility in dealing with top management. Periodic progress reports submitted through the chain of command can serve as a vehicle for keeping the brass posted on routing operations in our area or responsibility. In addition, we should be alert for any developments in the real estate and right-of-way fields — either in or outside the organization; and we should inform top management of the developments and possible implications for other aspects of the organization's operations. Perhaps a special

report on the relationship between real estate financing costs and the level of new construction in a market area is a factor to be considered in sales plant construction planning. Or it may be that an analysis of legislative action could have a significant bearing on right of way acquisition time requirements or costs.

It could be a recommendation for clarification of internal organizational responsibilities to achieve more effective liaison both within the organization and with outside agencies.

I'm not suggesting swamping "mahogany row" with piles of paper just to call their attention to our existence. Top management has enough demands on their time and attention without having to wade through tons of trivia, but I do believe we should take advantage of every appropriate opportunity to bring to their attention both summary reports of our routine operations and indications of some of the less obvious potentials of a soundly based, broad-gauge right-of-way function.

#### **To summarize —**

We really have a lot going for us. Land, real estate, and rights-of-way are basic — literally and figuratively — to the operations of any organization. They represent increasingly complex fields, requiring knowledgeable and professional attention. For many of our organizations, our work has a significant impact not only on immediate costs but on longer range aspects of customer and public relations as well.

As right-of-way specialists, we have the primary responsibility for, as well as the primary interest in, top management understanding and support. In order to achieve this, we have to be professionals, doing an effective job of supporting the basic objectives of our organization in every appropriate way. To do this, we have to do a good job of communicating — both listening and telling.

I suggest that the key to management understanding and support of our function is to do what is suggested by a succinct definition of public relations I heard recently:

**"Do a good job — and tell people about it."**