



The Value of Experience

Transforming young professionals into well-equipped leaders

BY TAYLOR SASS

It was during my third year of college when I faced an unexpected turn of events. I was majoring in communications and journalism and planning for a career in commercial real estate. But it was 2011, and with the real estate market sinking, I was unable to secure an internship to finish out my degree. Fortunately, I heard about an opportunity to work for a pipeline company writing press releases.

After a challenging interview with the Right of Way Project Manager for the nation's largest Natural Gas Liquids (NGL) producers, I realized that taking this job would likely change the course of my career path. Then I thought to myself, "Pipelines, NGLs and ROW? How am I even going to write about something I don't even understand?"

Still, I accepted the position and quickly started researching everything I could about the pipeline industry. I knew the learning curve would be steep. On day one, we covered basic office procedures, and I was introduced to my coworkers. Not too intimidating. But on day two, when I was told that I'd be traveling across Texas with a coworker to build relationships with project stakeholders, I started to panic.

It was then that reality set in, and I began to doubt my ability to perform the job functions.

Looking back, it is clear that my first employer, now a longtime mentor, believed in me more than I did. He invested time in me by explaining the industry jargon and accompanying me to project sites and special commissioner hearings. He encouraged me to ask questions and quizzed me every day about what I had witnessed. And to ensure I had every available tool at my fingertips, he established lines of communication for me between the project engineers, GIS technicians and the company's public relations team.

After three weeks of what seemed like the most intense examination period, I set off to my first right of way meeting with land agents. Standing in front of 40 seasoned agents, it was my role to present, on behalf of the company, details about the project they would be representing. Surprisingly, I found myself explaining the project with the utmost confidence. Not only did I understand all aspects of the project, I was able to answer each and every question they asked. From my perspective, I had successfully passed my first test.

Three Lessons Learned

Effective communications plays a crucial role in every aspect of the right of way profession. My employer emphasized three concepts as he cultivated the future leader he saw in me.

1 | Never wait for an answer, but hunt it down. Being held accountable taught me to always be prepared.

2 | Watch and learn. Even though meetings could have been shorter, construction site trips could have ended faster, seeing the process evolve was crucial. I could not effectively communicate about a project without understanding all the different facets involved.

3 | Build and maintain relationships. After one project ends, another begins. The people you encounter during one project might be of great assistance on the next one. Showing everyone respect, regardless of their position or title, goes a long way in creating a positive outcome for all.

Employers, managers and mentors play a vital role in cultivating the next generation of right of way professionals. And IRWA's young professionals are hungry for guidance and ready to take on the challenges that this industry offers. By working together, we can foster the next generation of IRWA leadership. 

For more information about the IRWA YPG Initiative, please contact the IRWA YPG at irwayp@gmail.com, follow us on twitter at [@IRWAYP](https://twitter.com/IRWAYP), the Young Professionals group on [MemberNetwork](#) and follow us on [LinkedIn](#)!



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