



# Professional Engineer Career Development: What Does It Take?

by Rod Plourde, Ph.D., P.E., President

In Spring 2002, Joe McMahon, CEO, graciously recognized my succession to President. After my promotion announcement, I received many congratulations and best wishes from clients, fellow engineering professionals, and friends. I was also privileged to be interviewed by the National Society of Professional Engineers for an article that appeared in the September 2002 issue of their national magazine *Engineering Times*. The question specifically asked of me was "What does it take for a young engineer to become president of a firm?"

Upon reflection, I developed my perspective on successful career development which I hope will be helpful to both engineers and all young professionals who may read this article.

## Stages of Professional Careers

I believe that engineers and other professionals develop and advance their careers in three stages by being a good:

1. Specialist
2. Project manager
3. Leader

## Being a good specialist

The prerequisite of being a good engineer or professional is having a good education. While a bachelor's degree suffices for young people to enter a profession, I strongly recommend pursuing an advanced degree. For example, many national engineering societies now advocate

that an advanced degree be a requirement for engineering registration. However, education alone won't make you a good specialist; it's what you do with it. Engineering problems and solutions are not always black and white. That's where practical judgment and common sense are necessary. Finally, in my opinion, a good work ethic and dedication round out the qualifications of a good specialist.

## Being a good project manager

Like a good education, Professional Engineer registration or comparable registrations won't make you either a good engineer or a good project manager, but it is necessary so that regulatory and reviewing agencies, governing bodies, your clients, and the public recognize you as an expert. Added skills are necessary for project manager development, especially good oral and written communication skills. Project managers must have the ability to communicate, defend, and sell their product to clients, agencies, and the public. Thirdly, often the primary difference between a project manager and a good project manager is innovative thinking and creativity. If the square peg doesn't fit in the round hole, alter them until they fit! Last of all, success in professional consulting is based on relationships formed with clients, agencies, and our consulting competitors - which are all key to a project manager's and future leader's ability to bring new work into the company.

## Being a good leader

Lastly, being a good leader requires at least three prerequisites. The first - leadership qualities - includes integrity and respect, caring for staff first, then clients; mentoring staff and future leaders; and volunteering to professional societies and

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the community. Second, you must be both a fighter and a compromiser. With fourth down and one yard to go, you need to know when to go for it and when to punt. A good leader also needs to be more than just strong technically. You have to aspire to acquire business acumen, most often acquired on the job. But I also encourage courses and advanced degree work in business or management to give one a solid background for making good business decisions.

In closing, I hope that my thoughts are helpful to readers who have similar ambitions, and I again thank all my family and friends and other professionals who have helped make it possible for me. ■