



Photo: PCI

No Partial Credit

William N. Nickas, *Editor-in-Chief*

The editorial in the previous issue of *ASPIRE*®, “Bring ‘Em Along,” by Dr. Krista Brown, is a great primer for all of us.

I owe a great deal of my professional engineering journey to several individuals who took the time to share knowledge and assist me along the way. My journey began more than 40 years ago at The Citadel in Charleston, S.C. The civil engineering department was known for its high academic standards, and the course load was just brutal. The professors were a notable cast of characters. They all had nicknames, several going back generations. Some of those nicknames were flattering; some are not printable.

One especially exacting professor, Thomas Dion, stood out to me for the way he combined the charm and wit of a Southern gentleman with the brutality of a sledgehammer. He was unbelievably demanding, and he did not grade on a curve. The test score you received—or “earned,” as he was fond of saying—was the score recorded. I remember one of my classmates asking Professor Dion if he gave partial credit. The response is etched in my memory: “Do you get partial credit for the building you designed that partially fell with the First Lady in it? No, and you’ll get no partial credit here.” Much has changed in our profession in the years since I heard that statement, but those words still ring in my ears.

After college, I joined the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) to complete a yearlong professional engineer (PE) training program. That exceptional program, built on a rotational model, was designed to expose college grads to aspects of planning, building, and operating an infrastructure asset. We spent time in the planning, finance, bridge and roadway design, construction, traffic operations, and maintenance divisions of the department, learning how projects moved from concept to concrete.

During my years as a consultant, I constantly wrestled with the concept of training new or inexperienced engineers. We didn’t have 12 months to spend developing new talent, but my exposure to the FDOT PE training model allowed me to scale a training/onboarding program that fit our office and expertise. Our firm generally preferred to assign a

mentor in a single area of focus, knowing that this investment would reap benefits during the specialist’s tenure in that area of civil engineering.

The challenges we face today don’t just come from the rigors of the profession. Everyday circumstances, emerging technologies, local and federal policies, and declining numbers of people joining or staying in the profession all bring about new challenges.

At the recent PCI Convention, an esteemed colleague voiced concern about what he perceives to be fewer senior-level engineers in the workforce. Some of them have moved on to well-deserved retirement, but others have been lost to outside pressures and, somewhat shocking to me, to professional burnout. (My oldest daughter, who graduated from college in May 2023, shares that her peers call it “trauma bonding” and quickly assess personal impacts. Some even go as far as making several career pivots early in their work life.) This colleague was struggling to find a solution that best fit his organization. We talked about strategies to increase staffing levels, the training timeline for newly minted engineers to become “profitable,” and how to approach the increasing demand for “work-life balance.”

The current reality is that we are losing qualified and senior professional engineers to out-of-balance work and life conditions, and this problem needs to be addressed ASAP. When an out-of-balance condition is discovered at the jobsite, leadership gets involved to identify the needs and help the team remedy the situation. We need to take the same type of approach here. For myriad reasons, we cannot afford to lose highly experienced professionals to this out-of-balance condition.

There’s no partial credit here—we are talking about people. Creative solutions must account for both sides of the equal sign. Finding and/or planning some “float time” in project delivery timelines might provide a bit of much-needed breathing room and help restore balance in the workforce. Please reassess your workload and workplace culture and your own wellness.

To help us all on our occupational journeys, PCI has launched some tools for workforce development. Please see www.pci.org/workforce for more on recruitment, retention, and wellness. ▲

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