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## The Elusive Art and Science of Leadership

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

Leadership always seems to be a topic of conversation. Everyone is looking for the “secret sauce” and contemplating the same questions: Why is good leadership so elusive? Is it art, science, or a bit of both? Why is it so challenging to get your head around it and put it into practice? I’ve talked with industry professionals and military officers about leadership, always attempting to find a few key points to develop my skills. What I’ve come to realize is that leadership is as unique as is the leader. Fortunately, we can learn from one another and improve.

Recently, I read an excerpt from *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win* by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, two former Navy SEALs.<sup>1</sup> Tyler DeVries provides a summary<sup>2</sup> of the book’s key themes: take responsibility, lead with humility, make simple plans and communicate them, get comfortable making decisions without all the information, and lead and support your superiors. There are a couple of new ideas in that list that piqued my interest, and I have added *Extreme Ownership* to my reading list; you might find it interesting, too.

In the past 10 years or so, the topic of “work-life balance” is everywhere. Part of being a leader is finding one’s own work-life balance and helping others find it, too. There is merit in finding the right mix for both personal and professional growth and development. A friend of mine blocks out “white space” on his calendar. This is time that cannot be filled without his approval. Sometimes, he uses the time for professional growth. Other times, he turns off his brain and reflects on things unrelated to specific projects or work in general. He also blocks out white space for his staff so they can engage in topics unrelated to their normal work. He told me that “forced time, paid time” away from normal office or project work provides huge benefits. It builds the connectivity of his team by supplying the most valuable resource—time.

Another key leadership concept is collaboration. The reason I feel so strongly about collaborative solutions is that I have witnessed how they benefit the parties involved, leading to long-term success and opportunities for future endeavors. One example is the collaborative

effort with National Concrete Bridge Council members, the Federal Highway Administration, and the pooled-funding states in establishing the Concrete Bridge Engineering Institute at the University of Texas, Austin. That institute shows how collaboration benefits the training of our workforce, enhances students’ academic journeys, and advances our concrete bridge industry.

I am a believer in sharing your discoveries, and I encourage you to share yours with the readers of *ASPIRE*®. A colleague uses the term “discovery learning” for the lessons learned when things don’t go as planned. Another friend measures the complexity of a do-it-yourself home project by the number of trips to the store to deal with unanticipated “discoveries.” I recognize that sharing may seem to run counter to the idea of ownership as it relates to, say, patenting a new product. That said, sharing an innovative technique, method, or solution to increase efficiency or improve safety or quality helps all of us avoid “discovery learning” situations.

In the Fall 2024 issue of *ASPIRE*, we bid farewell to several esteemed colleagues. How do we fill those holes in the ranks? We can’t replace these experts, but how do we begin the journey of finding, recruiting, and developing the next group of industry leaders and professionals? The answer is simple: We stay interested, engaged, and relevant. Bridge people are a different breed. If construction, inspection, and engineering were easy, everyone would do it. We are set apart because we tackle the challenging issues facing our industry. Deep down, we are a very proud and competitive group. We find satisfaction in answering the demanding questions, solving the equations, and ultimately delivering resilient, quality concrete bridge solutions that benefit society. We’re in a great profession at a great time—talk it up!

### References

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### Editor-in-Chief

William N. Nickas • [wnickas@pci.org](mailto:wnickas@pci.org)

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Formwork and temporary shoring facilitate construction of the Bend Bridge’s complex geometry in Toledo, Ohio. Photo: Kokosing Construction.

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(678) 576-1487 (mobile)  
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### Reprints

lisa scacco • [lscacco@pci.org](mailto:lscacco@pci.org)

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Precast/Prestressed Concrete Institute  
Bob Risser, President

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