

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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On the Shoulders of Giants

The environmental health profession is going through a generational change. The “Baby Boom Generation” is retiring and large numbers of leadership positions are opening up throughout our profession. Never have there been so many opportunities for young environmental health professionals to advance their careers.

Recently I was asked by a young environmental health specialist what they should do to prepare for promotion. My response was, “Find great mentors.” The environmental health specialist seemed surprised by the brevity of my response. There was no checklist of the 10 most important things to do. There was no recommended course to take. There was no specific book to read, just the counsel to find great mentors.

As I explained to my young colleague, one’s career journey is a lot like jungle exploration. A reliable guide will help you prepare to meet the challenges of the jungle environment. They will recommend the best paths. They will share the survival skills they have gained from decades of experience. A reliable guide will encourage you when the trek is difficult. Most importantly though, a guide will instill in you a passion for exploring new areas so that one day you can confidently lead others in exploring uncharted territory.

In the course of my own life and career I have been blessed by a number of great mentors. Early in my career, Larry Yates (former NEHA Region 8 RVP) encouraged me and helped me see environmental health as not just a job, but as a calling to service. I was inspired when Larry volunteered for an expedition to South America to study mercury

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poisoning in gold miners deep in the jungle. Later Larry volunteered to help design and build a water system for a small rural community high in the Andes Mountains. I wanted to emulate Larry, so I began working as a volunteer on drinking water projects in small villages in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the 1990s, I met Vince Radke. (Vince is now NEHA second vice president.) Vince’s passion for environmental health was downright contagious. Vince became a good friend and mentor. His nationwide contacts in environmental health helped me expand my professional network. Often when I was wrestling with a unique problem, Vince was able to direct me to the person with just the right expertise.

Later in my career, Brian Collins (former NEHA president) became one of my mentors. Brian confronted issues head on while working hard to build consensus. Although he was flexible on how the groups he led solved problems, his commitment to integrity and professionalism was unwavering. Brian’s steady hand as NEHA’s interim executive director saw NEHA through the organization’s first leadership transition in more than

30 years. From Brian I learned a lot about leadership in difficult times.

Isaac Newton once said, “If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.” He recognized that his success was built on the achievements of those who had gone before him. Even for those of unquestioned genius, mentors are critical to success.

In seeking the giants on whose shoulders you wish to stand, consider looking for people who will

- provide a model for you to emulate;
- encourage you to grow;
- challenge you to get the training and earn the credentials you need for the next step in your career;
- share their knowledge;
- expand your network of professional contacts;
- kindle your passion for your work;
- provide a broader perspective or vision;
- open doors for you to new and more challenging opportunities;
- give you honest counsel and feedback;
- applaud your successes; and
- help you learn from your mistakes.

Mentors will not flock to you. You must seek them out. Find people who are passionate about what they do. Think about the people you most admire who are doing what you want to do. Boldly ask them to share in your career journey.

NEHA is full of great potential young mentors. (For me, Stephen Hughes, Shelly Wallingford, Eric Myers, Kristin Garcia, Tom Gonzalez, Shannon McKeon, Roy Kroeger, Scott Fincham, Tim Hatch, and Rachel Stra-

dling all come to mind.) Undoubtedly there are many more.

ACTION ITEM: Take time this month to seek out great mentors who will help you grow personally and professionally.

As people invest in you and your career, take time to thank them. Let them know the difference they have made.

ACTION ITEM: Take a few minutes to write five short thank you notes to people who have encouraged you in some way during your career.

Here are mine.

Gary and Holly Coleman—Thank you for making me feel so welcome as a NEHA member. I fondly remember your invitation to join you for the fireworks on Lake Michigan after the Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition in Chicago. Your kindness has kept me coming back for 20 years!

Charles Felix—Thank you for selecting an article I wrote for my affiliate newsletter for publication in the *Environmental News Digest*. It was my first article in a national publica-

tion. What a great encouragement it was to me as a writer!

Bob Powitz—Thank you for introducing me to the history of environmental health through your AEC presentation and our conversation afterwards. It is now the starting point of every presentation I give to the general public about environmental health. Understanding where our profession came from and what it has accomplished has given context and perspective to my daily work.

Larry Gordon—Thank you for taking the time to write a note of encouragement to someone you had never met. You were (and are) a giant in our profession. I was a young environmental health specialist from Virginia who was both honored and humbled by your kind words about my article on environmental advocacy.

Doug Ebelherr—Thank you for choosing my presentation on training environmental health specialists in onsite wastewater treatment system design for presentation at the Denver AEC. I was an unknown to whom

you gave an opportunity. It was my first presentation at a national conference.

Lastly, as you think about the people who have helped you along the way, consider whom you should be helping. Remember that many of your young colleagues may be too shy to “bother” you. Don’t underestimate how much you have to offer.

Who among your colleagues are the emerging leaders of the next generation of environmental health professionals? What can you do to encourage them? You can be the giant on whose shoulders they stand.

ACTION ITEM: Identify emerging environmental health leaders around you and encourage them. Be the giant. 🐘

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