

APWA's Emerging Leaders Academy

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November 7th through 9th of last year, I made my way to the American Public Works Association Headquarters in Kansas City to participate in Class XVIII of the Emerging Leaders Academy. My first experience with the ELA was in 2014 as a student member of Class VIII. I credit the Emerging Leaders Academy with giving me a laser focus on what I expected of myself as a leader and for empowering me to return to the APWA as an instructor. This is the second class with the new panel of instructors which includes me (Chad O!) Vic Bienes, Margaret Medellin, Julie Hunt, and Laura Kroeger (ELA Class I), a team with a diverse background, experiences, and talent.

This class welcomed 30 new students, led by the 5 instructors, a few special guests, and two spectacular staff members from the APWA.

As always, when we stay at Hotel Kansas City, a garish portrait of Bertha Goodwin welcomed us to our rooms. We learned about Bertha's history during Class XVII the previous year. The portrait of Bertha graces the walls in every guestroom and suite in Hotel Kansas City. Bertha Goodwin was the first woman who attempted to join what was then the all-men's Kansas City Club back in the early 1920's. Unfortunately, she was never successful in her efforts, but the hotel continues to honor her vivacious spirit in Hotel Kansas City today by placing her in every guestroom! One of the groups from the class claimed the spirit of Bertha Goodman and adopted the team name "Bertha's Public Workers". From the 1920's to the 2020's, I think Bertha's spirit lives in within the hearts of Public Works. I'd like to think that if she had a chance 100 years later, she would have been a Public Works professional and worked tirelessly to create a safe and equitable environment for the citizens she would have served.

Retreat weekends are always a whirlwind that kicks off with a welcome dinner and ice breaker Thursday evening. I won't share with you what the ice breaker activities are because I enjoy observing the class's reaction to them. I will say this, I am usually an ice breaker denier. In Kansas City, I get to lead an ice breaker that I very much enjoy. APWA President-Elect Vic Bienes leads the other ice breaker and his is even better than mine! We try to get the blood flowing, conversations started and somewhat intentionally set a tone of friendly competition.

As always, when there is free food, there is work to do. Thursday night includes our Leadership and Challenges Roundtable where we discuss challenges that the new students face. That night, the instructors collaborate to align topics in the retreat with those challenges, the APWA Leadership and Management Committee's Leadership Framework and/or the 7 Habits of Highly Dysfunctional Leaders.

And there's homework, too! Everyone is sent out for the night with an INSIGHT Inventory® Personality and Behavioral Style Assessment meant to give each student some insight into their personal and personalities. The INISGHT Inventory serves to

kick off Friday morning's discussion and distracts the class from the great entertainment in the downstairs lounge or throughout a thriving Kansas City.

Friday morning starts with coffee and breakfast then goes right into discussing how our personalities impact our leadership led by APWA staff Deanne Cross and Corinne Watts. This is a perennially popular topic. Deanne and Corrine take us on a deep dive into our different personality types and how, no matter where a person is on the personality spectrum, there is someone on the other end of the spectrum who may be wholly different from us and how their personality traits complement and support our own.

We follow this up with discussions about Effective Communications and Dysfunctional Leadership. If you have not tuned in to the APWA's YouTube channel, I suggest you take some time for yourself to watch the videos about the 7 Habits of Highly Dysfunctional Leaders. If you see yourself in these videos, that is the goal. It is easy to diagnose the people we work for, but it is important to reflect on ourselves and address our own faults.

Friday afternoon culminates with the two class groups working separately to plan their group projects to be presented at PWX in Chicago later this year. The goal is to have the two groups work independently on their presentations, and the presentations complement each other. If you are curious to know what the topics are, keep your eye out for the PWX registration and schedule, then mark your calendar to see for yourself. Until then, we are playing it close to the vest to build anticipation.

As the saying goes, "All work and no play makes Chad O! a dull boy" or something to that effect. On Friday night, we were hosted for dinner and a game or two at Chicken N Pickle. Looking back at the competitiveness of some of the class, those personalities revealed in the INSIGHT Inventory were on full display. I hear that Pickle Ball is a charged topic recently so I will refrain from taking a position. I will note, however, that the evening was a good time, I didn't sprain my ankle, and I left on a full stomach. Three for three for the night!

Speaking of competitive. A busy Saturday starts with a friendly breakfast, then, as an introduction to and reinforcement of the leadership topics we cover, we went into an always heated, but quiet, Win As Much As You Can exercise. In this exercise, students get to experience the emotional rollercoaster of the effects of making swift decisions based on little knowledge, next to no communication, and the pressure to define the term "WIN" in terms of winning for the team or winning for ourselves without knowing the expectations of the activity as a whole. I am a helper and I am loud. Even though I know the learning objective of this exercise, it becomes an exercise in restraint for me. I have been directed in no uncertain terms to not help.

Once we get our day started with Winning, we moved right into Model the Way, a great topic about boldly modeling the behavior you want to see in other. Then we leapt quickly to Situational Leadership (Enabling Others to Act) and topped it off with What About

Culture where we shared candid talks about setting, expecting, and living our best professional lives.

Saturday afternoon was a master class in Leadership in Action. Michael Shaw, the Kansas City Director of Public Works along with a couple of architects of the downtown revitalization presented to the class the efforts and changes associated with the Kansas City Street Car program and Kansas City's effort to rebuild and reconnect the neighborhoods along Highway 71. The three of them shared their passion for serving all the people of Kansas City and really impressed on the class that, when we lift up the underserved communities, it has a ripple effect of lifting up the entire city.

In a new penultimate activity, we all participated in "Challenging the Heart". With a sheet of paper taped to our backs, we went around the room writing messages to our classmates either sharing some support, complimenting them on something that stood out or simply sharing a kind word. I saved mine in my suitcase until I got home and had a profoundly emotional response to some of the beautiful things that were written on the paper. I also heard from some in the class that they shared my experience. What a way to close out the formal retreat.

Instead of releasing the class into the wild or sending them home that night, there is usually one last group meeting. This year we returned to Pierponts at Union Station to revel in the holiday decor of Union Station and enjoy their delicious fare. We ate like royalty, chatted, asked follow up questions of each other, took group photos, took selfies, and generally sealed the retreat with a chef's kiss.

We are only a couple months out from the retreat and the class has been busy. We have monthly homework assignments, group video calls, guest instructors, along with both groups planning and tracking their progress on their projects/presentations.

I have heard it said from past participants that it is an arduous year. I want to share this as a gentle warning that, if you get selected into the Emerging Leaders Academy, you are selected with the expectation that you can maintain a high level of excellence for the year and stand on that stage at PWX glowing with pride in yourself and your cohort.

If you are interested in applying for the next Emerging Leaders Academy, or thinking of encouraging someone else to apply, the time is now. Information about the application process and applications are available on the APWA website under Education and Career/Emerging Leaders Academy.

The Mid-Atlantic Chapter has been well represented at the Emerging Leaders Academy from the first class which included Jason Calbert in Newport News, myself in Class VIII, Deanna Williams of Henrico County, and Amy Linderman, PE of Fairfax County, and, most recently, Shea Straub of Hampton.

I want to share a couple quotes from this year's class, including one from a member of my own Mid-Atlantic Chapter:

- My experience with ELA has been incredibly valuable, not just for the knowledge gained but for the lasting connections I've built. The relationships I've formed with my cohort and new friends extend beyond the course, creating a network of support and collaboration. I've already learned so much and am eager to continue growing, sharing insights, and applying what I've gained to make a lasting impact. *-Shea Straub (Training Coordinator, Hampton, VA)*
- While I understood the concept of an emerging leader, it wasn't until the ELA retreat that I truly felt the transformation begin. The instructors—dressed as superheroes—reminded us that each of us is a reflection of these heroes in our own communities. *-Michael Wodke (Sewer Maintenance Supervisor, St. Charles, MO)*
- The Emerging Leaders Academy has been such a refreshing and liberating experience. It was truly comforting to connect with fellow new managers and hear their perspectives, knowing that we were all navigating similar challenges. It made me feel less alone in the process and more supported. *-Petra Beglarian (Public Works Analyst, Glendale, CA)*
- In the time I've been in ELA, my cup has been overfilled by the bond created amongst my classmates and instructors through our shared inspirations, goals, and desire to serve our communities through public works. I have already learned so much through my peers and instructors from their real experiences. Every class meeting or project group meeting I leave feeling more and more inspired and supported in my own personal growth journey. *-Nicole Brockwell (Project Engineer, City of Wenatchee, WA)*
- The overflow of knowledge, resources and shared experiences is such a treat. My absolute favorite part of being a member of ELA is the lifelong friendships and connections you create along your career path. The Emerging Leaders Academy has shown me that I'm not in this alone. *-Jocelyn Davis (Business and Special Initiative Analyst, City of Winter Haven, FL)*

