Listen, Be Helpful, and Keep the Train Moving

MANUEL Vera Caraballo, P.E., M.ASCE, has spent his 10-year career at Dewberry, designing roadway and railway bridges and other transportation-related structures, among a host of other tasks critical to delivering modern transportation projects. He was recently promoted to assistant department manager for the company’s bridges structures department, where he is using his expert listening and team-building skills to foster the success of the department and its staff.

What are the new responsibilities that come with being the assistant department head?

As a senior project engineer, I was always working on a team; I helped others to achieve their career goals and their project goals while meeting my own goals. This new position focuses more on the internal workings of the department, including staffing and drafting needs, and coordinating the staff and their time. I am also more involved with salaries and performance reviews. For reviews at Dewberry, we request input from other engineers and staff, and now I capture all that input for the review, and then sit down with them individually and go through it with them. I want to make sure that they have the tools they need to succeed.

How did you learn to give effective performance reviews?

From the beginning of working here at Dewberry, we have always had to provide input for others. You are asked to think about others’ performance and their relationships with staff members and clients. You also have to review yourself. So over the years of doing these, I honed my skills in asking the right questions. Plus, I’ve been on the receiving end of those conversations, so I know what I like to hear and not to hear. The whole idea is that you say it the way you would want to hear it.

What are the chief skills and abilities that you developed in your previous position that enabled you to move on to this new position?

The difference is that now I am looking at many projects instead of just my own. The skill is making sure the entire department progresses together. I am also now seen as more of an authority. Other people see that I have the experience and technical skills that translate to other managerial aspects. It gives you more exposure but also more opportunities to help. People seek you out more.

What personal traits or characteristics do you believe helped you win this new position?

I look at things from a positive angle, and you don’t need formal training to do that. You treat people how you would want to be treated. I told my staff, even though I went from a cubicle to an office with a door, I am still the same person. You can still come to me. I try to be of service to others; that’s how I approach everything. You have to get along with others and work with others. I tell my own kids, even when you are playing sports, it’s about seeing where you can be helpful to the team; whatever helps the team, helps us all win.

What technical skills helped you achieve this position?

In the technical design of superstructures, substructures, or any aspect of bridges, general civil engineering aspects are needed. But even though I am a structural engineer by trade, I also have a general understanding of the project as a whole, including the electrical, the water resources, the hydraulics, and the safety aspects. Even though those are not specifically structural in nature, they are technical skills you need to be an effective project manager. You can design a bridge, but if you don’t know how the civil works are being designed or where the water will flow, things could still go wrong.

What nontechnical skills helped you achieve this position?

What I do is really, truly listen. Then I anticipate a little further ahead to what the person might need next and what the next step after that is. You know they are going to need that next step, so my thinking is, just do it—or at least ask if they need you to do it. Be helpful.

Also, I seek out the advice of others, both our more senior staff and our younger staff. Sometimes the younger staff have phenomenal experiences behind them. I also know how to ‘manage up.’ I can work with people instead of just my own. The skill is making sure the entire department progresses together. I am also now seen as more of an authority. Other people see that I have the experience and technical skills that translate to other managerial aspects. It gives you more exposure but also more opportunities to help. People seek you out more.
whom others think are challenging. I just approach them with the idea of, ‘How can I be helpful?’ If you help them, they succeed. And if the people above me are successful, they move up, and when they do, there is then space for me and others to move up, too.

How did your education—formal or informal—help you prepare for a position like this?

I received my bachelor’s of science from the University of Puerto Rico, and it was a five-year program that was very broad. I’ve heard of other structural engineers who never took a steel class or never took a concrete class; I took two of each. We took water systems, hydraulics, and many others; it was jam-packed. That has helped significantly in my having an overall understanding of engineering as a whole.

There were also a lot of group assignments, so from the get-go I was exposed to working with others. Then I got my master’s degree at Cornell, and it was a one-year program in which we worked with the same 10 people. So again, teamwork was critical. And we had a final project that just happened to be a bridge.

What role did mentors, advisers, or your network play in your achievement?

They are the main reason why I am where I am. I took into consideration everything they said and used their insight to confirm my own opinion or approach. And I want to do the same thing—to be someone others can reach out to for advice.

What do you hope to accomplish in this new position?

I want the people I manage to see me as someone they can come to with challenges and to see that I will help them with those challenges and help them grow. And it would be great to see those under me get to this position eventually, which means I would have moved up too. It’s great to see others shine.

What types of positions do you see yourself moving toward over the next few years?

Some people think if they are managing a group, that’s good enough, but that’s not me. I’d like to get more into the business aspects, into even more of the relationships with clients, and bring in the work that helps them and us grow. I want to keep the train moving. —Laurie A. Shuster