

• **NEXT STEP** •

Advice from Young Engineers Moving Forward in Their Careers

Volunteer for More— But Keep Your Balance

JUST SIX YEARS after obtaining her bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Cornell University, Melissa Fickel, P.E., M.ASCE, has been chosen as a rising star at Parsons Corp., the Centreville, Virginia-based, 16,000-employee, multidisciplinary engineering firm. She was recently accepted into the firm's early management acceleration program (EMAP), a highly competitive leadership training course for up-and-coming managers. "I believe this is because I have raised my hand for new work roles, completed voluntary management courses, and networked within my company," Fickel says. But being a go-getter all her life has also taken its toll, and Fickel recently took some time off to address a stress-related illness. Now back and ready to roll, Fickel has learned key lessons on the necessity of balancing work and self-care.

What is EMAP and how did you become involved?

Its purpose is to prepare younger employees who have demonstrated high performance for entering midlevel leadership roles, to promote cross collaboration among departments, and to facilitate networking activities with executives in the company. As a younger engineer, I recognize the importance of continuing to expand my technical skills. But at the same time, I think project management and leadership skills are really interesting.

So I applied with the idea of strengthening those burgeoning qualities within myself and also so I could network with other younger engineers from across the country [and] around the world.

Why were you interested in EMAP?

I've always been interested in leadership. Even in high school, I was voted into leadership positions in my extracurricular activities. In my senior year of college I was a board member of the student chapter of ASCE. I got to help shape the events that were held on campus for fellow civil engineering students. That gave me a great sense of accomplishment.

When I first started my career, I fell in love with technical design and could see myself doing it forever. I still feel that way, but some of the challenges I had earlier are not so challenging now. So stepping up to leadership is the next way for me to grow and continue to learn.

What are the advantages of an internal versus external leadership training program?

EMAP is specific to what I am interested in, which is being in mid- to upper-level management in an engineering firm. I have a coworker who went through a similar program for more experienced engineers last year, and she said it balanced learning your leadership style with doing workshops,

role-playing, and problem-solving. You also learn more about Parsons, its business units, and the interplay between them. All of that appealed to me.

I could get an MBA [master of business administration] elsewhere, but after that, my classmates and I would likely scatter. This program gives me the opportunity to grow my connections. I have found networking at Parsons and at ASCE to be very important.

Why do you believe you were chosen for this highly competitive program?

Parsons has a set of online training courses, and there is a track called high-growth leadership, and I completed all those courses. They included conflict management, problem-solving, and communications. So I nominated myself for EMAP and wrote essays for the nomination. Then my supervisor was contacted and recommended me.



Melissa Fickel, P.E., M.ASCE

CURRENT TITLE
Engineer I, Parsons Corp.
(Troy, Michigan office)

PREVIOUS TITLE
Associate Engineer

What are the chief skills—technical and nontechnical—that have helped in your career so far?

One technical skill that helped me get my foot in the door here was computer-aided drafting and modeling. As a transportation engineer, those are two tools you use a lot.

Also, when I first started working, I dove deep into design for compliance with the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act]. Having that specialty has gotten me in some doors that I might not have had access to otherwise. For example, there was a client meeting recently to which I was invited because the project manager said, 'If the client has any questions about ADA, we need Melissa there.'

One nontechnical skill that applies to any field is communications. I developed knowledge about when I should call someone versus when I should talk to them in person or when to send them an email or chat. And that depends on the type of message and the person I am trying to communicate with.

Another that applies more specifically to engineering is documenting my work. When I first started, I would do calculations on my trusty TI-84 calculator because that's how I

did it in college. I didn't need to show how I got the answer; I just needed to show the answer. So imagine my surprise when I completed my first assignment and my supervisor asked me how I got to that answer. I had to go back to my desk and work it out.

Now I have Excel templates for the types of calculations that I generally do, and I can modify them. That way I can point to the formula I used and show them why one design will work or not.

What personal traits or characteristics do you believe have helped you succeed?

I've always loved solving puzzles. I had a puzzle game as a kid where you had to fit the pieces to the board, and I felt so accomplished the first time I achieved an expert level. And that is what engineers do!

And my natural curiosity has served me well. I love talking to coworkers on my team and on other projects and learning about their work.

I'm passionate about making our transportation systems safer as well as more economical and sustainable to help improve people's lives.

What role have mentors, advisers, or your network played in your career?

The functional manager and the senior project engineer I worked with on my first project were key mentors. I have vivid memories of saying, 'I don't yet know what this task entails,' and they took me over to a big whiteboard on the wall and started sketching things out. At the end of the conversation, I understood it. I had a lot of questions, and it made a huge difference to know that I could go to them and they would take me seriously and do whatever they needed to help me understand.

I also have a mentor through ASCE's Mentor Match. She is also in transportation, and she is where I want to be in two years. She has helped me see how to get there.

How have you come to view work-life balance after you took some time off?

There are a lot of things I want to do, and when I started working, I would

take on every opportunity I could get for the challenge and the learning opportunity. That worked until it didn't. I burned out and had to take some time to get back on my feet, and now I am finding more balance.

There are still a lot of things I want to do, but I realized I won't have a career for thirty or forty years if I burn myself out. It can be hard to say no, but I found that it is okay to take a break and set boundaries.

And I do more fun things now. I volunteer on the weekends at our local humane society. And I enjoy knitting; it is soothing. I love the sense of accomplishment when I learn a new stitch or pattern.

And I'm studying for a project management certification—for fun!

What advice would you give to other young engineers?

Write everything down! The sooner you can get that down, the easier your working life will be. If you have to go back and ask managers to repeat themselves, that's not respectful of their time.

Be curious and don't be afraid to ask people what they are working on. That applies to people you work with and those you meet at events like those sponsored by ASCE.

When you go to a presentation, talk with the speaker afterward, even if it's just to say you appreciated one point. I learned from having done some public speaking that the person on stage is probably nervous too, and even if all you say is that you liked what they had to say, they will remember that, and they'll remember you.

Create your own opportunities. Ask to work in new roles based on your experiences.

And especially as a young engineer, be open to feedback. You're not going to get it right every time, and when someone gives you feedback on how to improve your performance, you can run with it and get better—or not. There is really only one avenue that is going to help you. —LAURIE A. SHUSTER

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