



Harry S. Truman, 1945.  
Courtesy of Library of Congress

## When the Buck Stops with You

By Jon A. Schmidt, P.E., SECB

"Make no little plans. Make the biggest one you can think of, and spend the rest of your life carrying it out."

**M**y title for this column comes from a delightful book by Alan Axlerod (New York: Portfolio, 2004) that culls 156 lessons on leadership from the life and words of the thirty-third President

of the United States, Harry S. Truman. Because of it, along with the excellent biography written by David McCullough – who incidentally is also a great chronicler of engineering, having penned comprehensive accounts of the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge (*The Great Bridge*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972) and Panama Canal (*The Path Between the Seas*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977) – I have come to hold Mr. Truman in high regard. Of course, it does not hurt him in my eyes to have spent most of his life in the Kansas City area.

Here are a few of my favorite nuggets of wisdom from "Give 'em Hell Harry", along with some accompanying comments of my own.

- "A leader is a man who has the ability to get other people to do what they don't want to do, and like it." Being part of a larger purpose can often motivate others, even when their assigned tasks are less than appealing.
- "Make no little plans. Make the biggest one you can think of, and spend the rest of your life carrying it out." Leadership requires vision – the more ambitious, the better.
- "Nearly every crisis seems to be the worst one but after it's over it isn't so bad." Do not let the pressure of the moment lead to paralysis or backtracking.
- "I walk and swim and worry very little. I appoint people in responsible positions to worry for me. You have no idea how satisfactory that policy is." Effective delegation can be quite liberating – and stress-relieving.
- "There are probably hundreds of people better qualified than I am to be president, but they weren't elected." Focus on simply getting the job done, rather than whether or not you have the "right" credentials to undertake it.
- "I spent a lot of time reading about the World's Great." You can do the same, thanks to STRUCTURE® magazine's Great Achievements department.

- "I don't believe in anti-anything. A man has to have a program; you have to be for something, otherwise you will never get any where." Opposition to something can certainly stir your emotions, and may even provoke you to action, but you will usually need to develop a positive alternative in order to rally others to your cause.
- "It's a recession when your neighbor loses his job; it's a depression when you lose your own." Learn to see things from the perspective of others.
- "Leadership is getting other people to run with your idea as if it were their own." Sell your program to those who must carry it out, and they will feel like they have a genuine stake in its success.
- "I have never forced myself to think when my energy was low. I simply will not tackle a problem involving an important decision until I feel completely relaxed." Choices made when you are not at your best can have unfortunate and lasting consequences.
- "Not all readers become leaders. But all leaders must be readers." Another endorsement of STRUCTURE magazine!
- "There are many issues that cannot be resolved by the surrender of either side but only through a reasonable compromise which does not sacrifice principles." Always try to find common ground, and do not draw a line in the sand unless absolutely necessary.
- "About the meanest thing you can say about where the road leads that is paved with good intentions.
- "Men make history. History does not make the man." Although chance and circumstances play a role, it is ultimately up to you to shape your own life and career.

I want to emphasize this last point – if you take the initiative to lead, there is a good chance that others will follow you; if not, you will always stay on the sidelines and have to live with the course that others chart for you. As frequent STRUCTURE magazine contributor Richard Weingardt likes to say, "The world is run by those who show up." Are you going to make history, or let history make you? ■



Jon A. Schmidt, P.E., SECB ([chair@STRUCTUREmag.org](mailto:chair@STRUCTUREmag.org)) is a senior structural engineer at Burns & McDonnell in Kansas City, Missouri, and chairs the STRUCTURE® magazine Editorial Board.

### Editorial Board

#### Chair

**Jon A. Schmidt, P.E., SECB**  
Burns & McDonnell  
Kansas City, MO  
[chair@structuremag.org](mailto:chair@structuremag.org)

**Craig E. Barnes, P.E., S.E.**  
CBI Consulting, Inc.  
Boston, MA

**Mark W. Holmberg, PE.**  
Heath & Lineback Engineers, Inc  
Marietta, GA

**John A. Mercer, Jr., P.E.**  
Mercer Engineering, PC  
Minot, ND

**Greg Schindler, P.E., S.E.**  
KPF Consulting Engineers  
Seattle, WA

#### Executive Editor

**Jeanne M. Vogelzang**  
NCSEA  
Chicago, IL  
[ncsea@structuremag.org](mailto:ncsea@structuremag.org)

**Daniel Falconer, P.E.**  
American Concrete Institute  
Farmington Hills, MI

**Brian J. Leshko, P.E.**  
HDR Engineering, Inc.  
Pittsburgh, PA

**Evans Mountzouris, P.E.**  
The DiSalvo Ericson Group  
Ridgefield, CT

**Stephen P. Schneider, Ph.D., P.E.**  
Kramer Gehlen & Associates, Inc.  
Vancouver, WA

**Richard Hess, S.E., SECB**  
Hess Engineering Inc.  
Los Alamitos, CA

**Rob Kinchler, PE.**  
AISC  
Birmingham, AL

**Matthew Salvesson, P.E.**  
Dokken Engineering  
Folsom, CA

**John "Buddy" Showalter, P.E.**  
AF & PA/American Wood Council  
Washington, DC