

Leadership Is Showing Up

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

It is a tremendous honor for me to serve as the 26th President of the National Council of Structural Engineers Associations (NCSEA). Unlike most (perhaps all) of my predecessors in this office, I am not the owner of my own firm, or a partner, or a principal, or a project manager, or a department head, or a supervisor of any kind. How did an ordinary practicing structural engineer like me wind up in such a lofty position?



Like many in our profession, my undergraduate degree was in civil engineering. Therefore, it was natural for me to join the American Society of Civil Engineers as a freshman in college, a membership that I have retained ever since. In 1998, ASCE established the Structural Engineering Institute and I eagerly signed up as a Charter Member. I have been active in both ASCE and SEI in various ways over the years, including several leadership roles at the national level.

It must have been only a year or two later that I started receiving a magazine that I had never seen before. It was called STRUCTURE, and it consistently contained articles that struck me as being of immense value to a practicing structural engineer like myself. It also provided information about groups called Structural Engineers Associations; as someone living in Kansas and working in Missouri, I had never heard of those. There was even a National Council of such organizations, and it apparently had a committee for helping people start new ones in their states.

In the summer of 2001, I sent an e-mail to its chair, Marc Barter, asking whether there was any such effort underway in my area. The gist of his reply was, “There is now!” Before long, he had connected me with others who had also expressed interest, and four of us ultimately co-founded the Structural Engineers Association of Kansas & Missouri (SEAKM) – the first, and still the only, explicitly bi-state Member Organization of NCSEA.

I attended my first NCSEA Structural Engineering Summit that fall, although we called it the Annual Conference back then. The keynote speaker was Leslie Robertson, who gave an emotional presentation

about his most famous project, the World Trade Center towers in New York. This was only a few weeks after the tragic events of 9/11.

A couple of months later, I became aware of a new industry initiative called The Infrastructure Security Partnership (TISP). Its purpose was “to minimize the effects of terrorism on the U.S. through effective and efficient planning, design, construction, and operation of the built environment.” I promptly volunteered to represent NCSEA and did so for a few years. During the same time frame, I joined the Advocacy Committee and its Clients & Prospects Subcommittee, becoming chair of the latter in 2003; these are now part of the Communications Committee.

My “big break” came in 2005. Ron Hamburger, who was finishing up his term as NCSEA President, asked me to consider becoming chair of the Editorial Board for STRUCTURE. I was receptive, since I enjoyed writing and editing, and had worked with the publisher on articles previously. I was especially intrigued by the prospect of authoring a regular column on topics of my choosing. I took the job, and then kept it for the next decade, producing 60 bimonthly “InFocus” pieces along the way. During those years, I also participated actively in the NCSEA Structural Licensure Committee.

When I decided to step down from the Editorial Board in 2015, I was looking forward to taking a break; but it was not to be. Brian Dekker, then NCSEA Vice President and Chair of the Nominating Committee, asked me to join the Board of Directors for a two-year term as Secretary. That placed me in the rotation to become Vice President last year, and now President.

The point of reciting this history is to highlight the fact that *any* practicing structural engineer can become a leader in our profession. The single most important qualification is simply seeking and seizing ways to *get involved*. As Richard Weingardt, a prominent structural engineer in Colorado who passed away a few years ago, often emphasized in his many writings and speeches, “The world is run by those who show up.”

One such opportunity is on the horizon within NCSEA: developing a new Strategic Plan over the coming months. The current Mission Statement – “NCSEA advances the practice of structural engineering by representing and strengthening its Member Organizations” – has served us well, helping us focus on what makes NCSEA distinctive. Having now gotten our institutional house in better order, the next plan needs to be more genuinely *strategic*, beginning with a Vision Statement that is truly aspirational.

The Board of Directors, Committee Chairs, and staff will be direct participants in the process. However, we need input and energy from *all* of our constituents to be successful – not just this year, but also into the future. How will *you* show up and make a difference in our profession and our world?▪



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