

Mentorship: Making the Time to Share Your Story

(Story by Ben Matthews¹ from SAME LinkedIn and PowerfulPurpose.com websites)

Did you know China is currently producing 392,000 engineers per year? While that number is less than 1% of their total population it still is 6 times as many engineers as the United States produces each year. To make matters even more challenging, of the 60,000 engineers that are educated in the United States annually, almost half return to their native countries.

As we begin the 2010-2011 academic school year, what are you doing to make sure we have enough engineers to support our nation's future infrastructure needs? Some of you might be able to say, "I played in the ASCE golf tournament this summer, which provides scholarships to aspiring engineer students." While this type of financial support is definitely appreciated, aspiring engineers really want to know what engineering is about in a non-academic sense.



I ask that each of you reading this article take the time throughout this school year to have a conversation with a student about engineering. It doesn't matter if they are in 3rd grade or in college. Tell them about what you do, tell them about the types of projects that you have worked on, or show them how engineering and the built environment is all around them. By doing this, you are mentoring future generations.

There are many definitions of a "mentor" but I adapted the following definition based on a book that I am reading by Joseph Grenny called Influencer². A mentor is someone who "takes personal responsibility for the success of someone else". I love this definition because it has nothing to do with race, religion, sex or even age! My three year-old daughter can be a mentor to my one year-old son. My wife is my mentor. And professionally I have had many mentors and try to mentor others as much as possible.

I enjoy taking personal responsibility for the success of others. As many of you mentors have already discovered, there are many benefits to becoming a mentor. Beyond the personal satisfaction of seeing those that you mentor succeed, many times those "mentees" make YOU more successful. As a leader of multi-disciplined engineering teams, it was critical that I "mentored" my team members. Notice that I did not use the word "lead". I am a leader by title but I am a mentor by purpose. My purpose is to take personal responsibility for the success of each of my team members. I am a mentor. If my team members are successful, I will be successful.

There are many opportunities for you as an engineer to reach out and be a mentor, but I have highlighted a few below:

Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts Merit Badges: Did you realize that the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts both have programs designed to expose kids to engineering? As you read the Boy Scout merit badge requirements, you will notice that there are many needs for these young people to talk to and learn about engineers. You can reach out to your local scouting communities and offer to help with their requirements.

West Point Bridge Competition: The West Point Bridge Design Contest is a nationwide Internet-based competition intended to provide middle school and high school students with a realistic, engaging introduction to engineering. The contest infrastructure includes a mechanism for organizing and running local bridge design contests in conjunction with the national competition. You can start trying to organize a local bridge competition this fall that is supported by the United States Military Academy and the American Society of Civil Engineers.

MATHCOUNTS: This is a national enrichment, coaching and competition program that promotes middle school mathematics achievement through grassroots involvement in every U.S. state and territory. As shown on their website, if you enjoy math (what Engineer doesn't?!), it is a perfect fit for you to volunteer to help or even coach a team at your local school.

We need to consider that the median working age continues to rise while the retirement age is staying about the same. This results in our nation facing a critical risk that we will not have enough engineers to recapitalize our infrastructure in the next 50 years. Even though the economy is very challenging right now, that does not stop you from investing the time and energy to sustain your engineering community for years to come. Hopefully, you will make the time today to take personal responsibility for the success of someone besides yourself and be a mentor!

¹ Ben Matthews is a registered Professional Engineer in the State of Texas and a distinguished graduate from the U.S. Air Force Academy where he also played football. Ben completed his Master's degree in Construction Management at the University of Texas at Austin while serving on active duty. He met his wife at UT and they now have 2 young children. Since separating from the Air Force in June 2007, Ben has been working in the private sector. An active networker, he currently serves on the SAME National Board of Direction as the College Outreach chair. Ben works for Freese and Nichols in Fort Worth, TX as a Program Manager for federal clients providing asset management/infrastructure engineering solutions. You can link to Ben on LinkedIn or email him at samecollegeoutreach@gmail.com. Ben will be a guest on the Powerful Purpose Associates Radio Show, <http://powerfulpurpose.com/radio-show/> on October 4th at 12 pm EST to discuss the topic of mentoring.

² See <http://www.josephgrenny.com/>