

THE ZWEIG LETTER

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ACCELERATING DEVELOPMENT

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If you're willing to go the extra mile to help young professionals grow, they will also go that extra mile for you.

Employees often view their career growth as a linear path; promotions that eventually progress to leadership positions. This mindset has been instilled into generations of working Americans, and for good reason. We must develop core competencies required for success at each level. But as young professionals, we've wondered if there is a way to accelerate career growth for those with the aptitude and desire to be future leaders in our industry. We have seen young professionals in our client's organizations promoted quickly into leadership positions, so it seems that the accelerated approach is feasible in many industries. So, how can we do this in the AEC industry?

To be clear, we're not suggesting skipping steps in the career trajectory. In our industry especially, it's important to learn from the different roles we serve from entry-level on, but we think there is a way to expedite professional development.

While an up-and-comer must put in the time and effort (often beyond typical work hours), managers play a critical role in accelerating their growth. We think that by focusing on three specific things, managers can really assist in kicking-off a young professional's growth:

1. Identify the right person. In today's world, time is a precious commodity; therefore, it's critically important that a manager's investment of time yields return. Perhaps think of investing the time with someone you feel may serve as your replacement, so as they grow, you can also expand your area of influence.

To ensure managers select the right person to mentor or coach, we suggest looking for young professionals that possess intrinsic motivation. These folks have an innate desire to better themselves and to help those around them. They take ownership in small as well as large tasks. They take initiative to complete tasks without being told to do so. These people will put in extra effort beyond the scope of their job title.

Frankly, we don't think we are alone when we say these are also the type of team members with whom we'd like to work. If managers are able to swiftly identify young people like this and provide them support in the ways listed below, the chance of accelerating their growth increases considerably.

2. Get to know and provide constant feedback. As young professionals, we yearn for managers to express an interest in us and take us under their guidance, even if we don't verbalize it explicitly.

This doesn't solely take place through technical conversations; in fact, we think that getting to know your understudy personally is the best way to develop a rapport. By getting to know the individual behind the employee, a manager is laying the foundation needed for a successful relationship. Ultimately, this relationship is what facilitates the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and core values.

With that said, we can't talk about our favorite sports team all day; there needs to be a great deal of technical guidance behind these conversations. From the young person's perspective, consistent and constructive feedback on work performance is the most beneficial to our development. Examples of this may be providing feedback on effectiveness in client calls and quality of deliverables. Take the time to explain why you steered the client in a specific direction or why you worded that sentence differently. If you share these details with us, it eliminates the guesswork on our end and promotes deeper understanding.

We believe that managers who share the big picture and provide detailed feedback will better prepare their young professionals for the inevitable pitfalls associated with added responsibility, thus accelerating their employees' growth.

3. **Challenge.** While we've discussed identifying the right people, we want to elaborate on what else managers can do to help employees progress. Not only should managers provide feedback to employees, but they should also actively seek to challenge their employees. A good place to start is by asking young professionals their perception of areas in which they excel and areas they need improvement. If you've correctly identified the right person, they will be humble enough to evaluate themselves honestly, because their improvement and the team's improvement is paramount. Further, we want to work with managers who are willing to push us to expand in areas of excellence, but also willing to work with us in areas we are deficient. Challenge us to grow where we are weak, and be willing to engage when we have questions. This can be in technical knowledge or soft-skills.

Nurturing young people for leadership roles does take time, even if after identifying those motivated young players at an early stage in their career. In our experience working with senior and seasoned professionals, it is remarkable how apparent it is when someone does take the time to work with us when we need help. It demonstrates that person has a vested interest in our growth as employees. If you're willing to go the extra mile to help young professionals grow as professionals, they will also go that extra mile for you.

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