



# Finding the Courage to Lead the Way

BY LINDSAY A. WALKER, P.E., PTOE

SHUTTERSTOCK/DENIS SIMONOV

“Would you like to open an office for Kimley-Horn in Kentucky?” My April 2016 answer: “No.” And then, when the question came again in August 2016, my answer became, “Yes! Let’s see what happens!”

What changed over the course of those four months? I developed the confidence in myself that I no longer had to be “okay” with being “okay” in my professional career. I could do something different. I could challenge myself. I could be more than just an engineer—the door became wide open to build a practice, but with the backing and resources of a national firm.

*LeadershipITE* was a catalyst for this change in me. What did I learn through the course of *LeadershipITE* that prepared me for this professional challenge? It helped me focus internally—how I viewed myself—and externally—how to be successful through relationship building, conflict resolution, and working as a team. I evaluated what my personal brand is—what words I think describe me and what I aspire to be. My descriptive words include *motivated*, *honest*, *dedicated*, and now, *risk-taker*.

Most of us have a natural resistance to change and transition. I had to deal with this resistance before committing to taking on this challenge. Everything was going to change—office location, coworkers, office setup, and business systems. Personally, I would be working more, which required a commitment from my family to support me. I was fortunate that I did not *have* to make a change, so all of this was by choice and had to be prudent risk-taking. The “what if” questions had to go away, to be replaced with “I can.”

Part of my confidence in this risk taking is that Kimley-Horn is unlike any engineering and consulting firm that I have worked for or partnered with before. A person can be a leader in what interests them most in engineering. I could grow a practice with a focus in transportation. I think the firm is set apart by its:

- commitment to embracing technology and change;

- commitment to a succession plan by actively engaging in student investment and recruiting; and
- commitment to clients through highly skilled marketing and support staff with a diversity of backgrounds and a setup to be nimble in response to working on a range of assignments, from small \$2,000 projects to multi-million dollar projects.

The firm is strongly rooted in a metric-based approach where there are mechanisms in place for growing young engineers, transitioning them to task leaders, and finally on to managing clients as practice leaders. A deliberate approach is taken when determining whether to enter a new market, what staffing needs are, and where we can be successful. All of this forms a cultural mindset that leads to a set of values inherent to Kimley-Horn. Each senior hire attends a Culture & Philosophy course to become familiar with the firm's culture and business approaches. I got to meet 30 more professionals new to the company and working through their own transition plans. My takeaway to share: connections and shared experiences are so important to being successful!

My approach to engineering also had to change for me to be successful. That meant stepping out there and learning about new practices. Most of my previous work had been for public agencies. Land development is a strong engineering practice at Kimley-Horn, with numerous national clients such as Aldi, Thorntons, and Under Armour. I did transportation plans and traffic operations—I did not know what fire, health, or sign permits are required for a site plan for a Captain D's. Did I learn? Absolutely! Did someone with experience in Kimley-Horn help me? Absolutely! Our Kentucky office has been able to provide local assistance for some of these national clients. I have the local relationships, and Kimley-Horn has the practice expertise. The learning curve has been steep but so rewarding.



*The author, Lindsay Walker, being “bold” at the beginning of the year kick-off.*

Clients in Kentucky had to be coached through their resistance to change. Now that I had convinced myself that change is okay and even good, I had to convince clients that change is good and to try Kimley-Horn. What did we offer that other firms did not? Why should they select us to work on their projects? I had to relay all the company values and cultural mindset I was being immersed



*Aaron Heustess and Lindsay Walker celebrating the first year of their new office.*

into to clients in a way they could understand and that would be meaningful to them. Ultimately, I showed how we provide some new tools and a fresh perspective to project development.

Successful relationship building was mentioned as a tool learned in *LeadershipITE*. This means understanding the stakeholders through actively listening to what they need. I reached out to engineers at other firms who I had good relationships with. I established a core network of professionals who could use the transportation planning and traffic operations skills I was selling. I used those relationships to build new ones. Over lots of lunches in the past year, many good ideas and partnerships have been formed.

One way I challenged myself early on was to do something each day that made me uncomfortable. It's easy to pick up the phone and call someone you know to talk about a project. It's not so easy to call someone you don't know to talk about a potential project. One of these daily challenges paid off big time—I called a Kentucky-based firm I had never partnered with, took a long shot, and sold them my services as a subconsultant. They accepted us as part of the team, which led to a win, and now we're working on the number one project of statewide significance in Kentucky.

Kimley-Horn empowered me with the resources I needed to be successful. An essential element of this success is my partnership with Aaron Heustess, who grew up professionally with Kimley-Horn. During his 10 years of experience, he has had the opportunity to work in various practices and offices throughout the company. Aaron became my Kimley-Horn Rolodex, and I his Kentucky one. Going back to the personality assessments that I had experienced with *LeadershipITE*, we discovered we are complete opposites on the spectrum—which is good for maintaining balance in office dynamics and is imperative to keep in mind in how we approach staffing.

My change has resulted in change for others, causing Aaron to relocate to Lexington, Kentucky from Raleigh, North Carolina. We



have a new college graduate starting in June—my decision led to a job for him. We are actively working on additional staffing and are in a growth mode now that we have been successful in convincing other firms, developers, and public agencies to make a change and try us. I am truly humbled by this perspective and keep it in mind to help me realize how important it is to be a good leader.

Kimley-Horn holds regional kickoff meetings throughout the company every year in January. The theme for 2016 was “Be Bold.” It is hard to imagine doing anything bolder than leaving an established position with a reputation for doing good work in the state to opening an office for a firm with little name recognition in the market, all while there was a halt on state-funded projects. It was a perfect time to open an office!

This year’s theme for our regional kickoff is “Oh, the Places We’ll Grow!” We are embodying this theme in Kentucky. Our practices and staffing are expanding as we flourish here, and we excitedly look forward to seeing what new markets this growth may lead to over the coming year.

By sharing this experience, I am hopeful that others may be inspired to do what may seem risky, scary, or outside their comfort zone. Take a chance if you have that spark inside yourself like I did. It’s okay to follow it. There may be failure along the way, but if you

feel deep down it is the right thing, then believe in yourself and make a change. This has been a year of highs and lows, but I don’t regret taking the risk. [itej](#)



**Lindsay A. Walker, P.E., PTOE** received both her undergraduate and graduate civil engineering degrees from the University of Kentucky. She has 15 years of experience performing a variety of traffic engineering and transportation planning projects. This includes corridor studies, safety analysis, traffic analysis, traffic forecasting, and signal optimization. She has served all of the officer positions in the Kentucky Section of ITE. She is currently the Strategic Planning Annual Committee Chair for the Southern District of ITE as well as a director on the Kentucky Section of ITE Board. Her most recent adventure in ITE was becoming a graduate of the 2016 LeadershipITE class. She is also actively engaged in the American Planning Association Kentucky Chapter serving as the committee chair for special events/programs. She has three boys at home (ages 10, 8, and 4). Additional hobbies and activities include serving as homeroom mom at school, assisting with cub scouts, baking (cookies and fancy cakes), and swimming. One interesting fact is she has been to all 30+ major league baseball parks.

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