

A Conversation with Randy Vercauteren, RIT's Director of Parking and Transportation and Building Services

Facilitated by Luke Auburn

Luke Auburn: You're listening to the RIT Professional Development Podcast Series. I'm your host, Luke Auburn. Our guest today is Randy Vercauteren, RIT's Director of Parking and Transportation and Building Services. Randy began his career at RIT as a custodian in 1984 and has since spent more than 18 years in management at varying levels and facilities management services, and was appointed to his current role in 2008. We'll discuss his career path and approach to professional development. Randy, thank you for having us.

Randy Vercauteren: Thank you. I look forward to talking with you.

Luke Auburn: So looking back, what were the most important steps you took towards in advancing in your career?

Randy Vercauteren: I think looking back, I would say the most important is initiative. The way I became--when I got my next job after custodian, is that I grew up on a farm and I worked on a lot of equipment. But father was a tugboat engineer for the army core of engineers. So on the farm, we worked on a lot of equipment. And when I started working here, I noticed a lot of the vacuum cleaners and some of the floor machines did not work properly.

So, I was working on them, and there was one particular machine that was somewhere complex called the Von Schrader. And I had it all apart in the Ingle Auditorium. And our superintendent walked in and said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Every time I get a piece of equipment, it doesn't work properly, so I'm fixing this thing once and for all, so that it will properly so I can get my job done." And she said to me, "You know how to do this?" And I said, "I do know how to do this." And she said, "Can you work on all of our equipment?" I said, "Absolutely, I can work on all of the equipment." And with that in mind, I was actually

promoted to being a truck driver in shipping and receiving and I also opened a repair shop in the warehouse and repaired all of the custodial equipment all over the campus. So, that was my first move is just initiative. Do it because it was the right thing to do. You know, someone that had authority saw me doing it and then said, "Wow, I didn't know you could do these kinds of things. Let's get you in a role where you can help us out some more."

Luke Auburn: That's fascinating, how you just kind of found a need and filled a gap. So when did you know that you wanted to advance in your career? And what kind of motivated you to take action?

Randy Vercauteren: I knew I wanted to do more than what I was doing as a truck driver and as a small appliance mechanic. And I really wanted to get into the maintenance field, more into fixing things because I wanted to fix things on the buildings and not just things, you know, pieces of equipment. So, I applied for maintenance position and ultimately receive that. Paul Drozdziel was my superintendent at that time and gave me an opportunity. And I really enjoyed it. But I found that maintenance as a whole was not really running very efficiently in my opinion. And they were not having team meetings. So, I really started to think about people development and information and communication. And I communicated then, my performance appraisals, I was very open about my thoughts about some of the procedures and processes that we're using in the department. And I guess people like Jan Reich and Paul Drozdziel really took it off, because when an opportunity came up, they appointed me interim foreman and put me in charge of a crew. And so, I found that that was really a good fit for me to actually be leading people and helping them through the process of getting things done instead of me trying to be the one doing everything.

Luke Auburn: So, are these the people who helped you identify your direction? Like where did you go for information, help and support?

Randy Vercauteren: I have to accredit a lot of people with that from my parents and just talking with them to my wife in talking with her. And also, definitely mentors Jan Reich and Paul Drozdzziel early in my career. They showed a lot of confidence in me, they encouraged me to be confident in my decisions. Think them out really well, be confident in them. But I would say my biggest break at RIT came when we received the new director or we had a new director in FMS or that time we were called physical plant, that was Marty Becker. And when Marty Becker took over, he called in every front line supervisor or foreman or manager and talked to them about what we thought were the good things about our department and what we thought needed to be improved in our department. I have a lot of opinions about them, I had a lot of thoughts about that. I expressed them very openly and I thought it was a big risk to do that with Marty and to express those kinds of opinions. And about a month later, Marty called me into his office and he said, "You think very uniquely and very futuristic about our department. And I need people in leadership roles like that. As soon as I get a chance, I'm going to find a way to put you in a role where you have more influence over this department." So, that's really how it happened, is he just--when a position came up for manager for environmental services, he appointed me that role I didn't apply for. So, both of my leadership roles up to that point I never applied for, I was appointed to them by leaders who recognized either my initiative or my thought process or my strategic thinking, me sharing that with them, how I felt about them and then believing in me and then moving me up the ladder.

Luke Auburn: Interesting, it sounds like it was a gamble being so open but it ultimately worked out for you.

Randy Vercauteren: Well, I think being open is really important. I believe strongly in sure decision making. And I think that all of us together can make a better decision than one of us alone. And I felt that way as I felt my worker, I felt that way as a front line supervisor and I felt that way as a manager. I always felt that all of us together can make a better decision. But we can't do that if we don't share our opinions and our thoughts about it. There has to be done with respect. You always, always do it with respect. I never speak negatively about anybody, I

never speak sarcastically about things that are important. You always build up, you never break down.

Luke Auburn: So, how did you establish a plan for career advancement, was it formalized as part of your development plan in your previous position or do they happen more organically?

Randy Vercauteren: It happened more organically. As I was drawn into more strategic things, the department just liked me in those roles, and the more exposure that I had to various leaders across the campus, the more reputation I developed as being someone who is very customer oriented and very solution oriented. I always wanted to find a way for everyone that was involved to come out a winner. I believe strongly at win-win solutions. Sometimes a win-win solution is something we can all live with. It's not--Everybody is really, really happy about it and everybody can live with it. So, win-win has to be redefined as, you know, and instead of win-lose or nobody gets anything, now, let's find a way to make something happen.

You know, Marty Becker, our previous assistant vice president of facilities management, he changed some of the culture in our department, and one of that was the can't-do attitude. And he saw that with me and he said I was appreciated, that what he said. Whenever something comes up, your first thought is, "how can we do it" instead of, "Well, we can't do that" or "we never did that way," it's like "how can we do it?" And that's approach that I like to take is that how can we do it. And it just--it builds a reputation of trust and confidence with all the people that they want to work with you or they want to be led by you. And I don't mind being led, I have to be led. So, I don't mind following, but I hope that those that I lead don't mind being led by me and they are good followers. I think good followers make good leaders and I think good leaders make good followers, it goes in both ways.

Luke Auburn: That sounds like what you're headed to has really helped you in your career. What other advice would you give to someone who wants to have a successful career?

Randy Vercauteren: I think that one of the things you have to do is you have to make it known to leadership what you want to do. The person who has the most influence over your career path is your mediate supervisor. And there are a lot of studies that show that one of the most significant factors for a job satisfaction is the relationship you have with your manager or your leader. I believe strongly that I have to teach my leader how to lead me. And the way I do that is by being very open and be very respectful and that if something is not working, I need to let him or her know that it's not working with me and this is what does work with me. And I think we can develop a relationship then that leads to where we're both feeling very good about the relationship, we both feel like we're working together and not against each other.

In a situation, I believe that every person is different. So, you can't lead everybody the same but you want the same results for all those that you're leading and for followers also. Everybody that follows the leader, we were all needing something different from that leader. So, we need to let that leader know what's working with us and what's not working with us. And then, if one of the things you're looking to do is advance, you need to let that leader know that you want to advance and then ask for projects ask for ways to show that you can do work at the next level. Show that you think at the next level before you've been promoted to the next level, each level that you go up, you have to be more strategic in your thinking and you have to be more broad-based in the impacts on the entire university instead of just your role at the university. I think those are things. You know, get involve to the staff council or academic senate, student government if you're still a student. Get involved in other committees has to be on some large committees. When you see committee opportunities come, read the strategic plan, be aware of what RIT is trying to achieve and then actually speak about that and show how your role contributes to that success. Show how you understand that you're a spoke in a wheel that's very large, and that your spoke is equally important to all the other spokes.

I think those are all things that really a person can do to help position themselves to move forward as well as education. Of course, you should be knowledgeable of what you're trying to do. But I think more about it from--Education is just learning. And I'm not lessening education, but I think all of those real life experiences the interactions are what set you apart. Because we had a recent position--front line position open up 129 applicants in five days.

Almost all of them were bachelor's degree or above applicants for a job that required a high school diploma.

Luke Auburn: Wow.

Randy Vercauteren: So, what sets them apart were how they answer the question, what they demonstrated and the jobs that they've already been in and not their education. So, it's really once you get in front of somebody, your education has got you to that point, but now, what are you going to do when you're there? And that's what makes a difference.

Luke Auburn: It sounds like great advice. And finally, how do you stay current in your field today?

Randy Vercauteren: Certainly, I go to conferences and I network with peers, you have to network with peers to know what's going on. You need to be involved in reading publications that are industry specific. For example, I'm parking, I get international parking institute news, I get stuff from our parking software provider who have over 300 universities, so like I network and understand what they're doing. I read their papers that come out. In the facilities field, we belong to an organization called the APPA which is actually the higher education facilities officials. And they write all kinds of articles about cutting edge technology and cutting edge thinking in facilities management. So on both sides, you really have to stay current with professional in the field. You must stay aware of what's happening out there. Technology changes all the time and thinking changes all the time. You know, one time, it was total quality management, then, it became quality implementation. Well now, it's all about lean Six Sigma and things like that. So, they're very similar concepts but they progress in how they're applied. So, we need to stay current.

Luke Auburn: Randy, it's been a pleasure. Thank you very much for your time. That concludes another edition of the RIT Professional Development Podcast Series. For more information on how you can develop your career, visit rit.edu/cpd.