

Kim Chan: On Leadership and the “Bamboo Ceiling”

MEMBER PROFILE

By Marcia Jedd



Kim Chan (Metrolink project engineer), Photo © John Livzey, 2014

Kim felt the call to work in the field of transportation as a girl growing up in East Los Angeles. "Back in the 1980s, L.A. offered very limited transportation options. Transportation was something my parents could barely afford, so I wanted to work in the field to make it more affordable."

The need to push past cultural and gender stereotypes has been a constant in her life. She learned as a child to be resilient to overcome adversity. The eldest of four children, she came to the United States with her family, as refugees escaping Vietnam. "All of us were born in Vietnam, including my grandparents. My grandma died on the boat."

She recalls with gratitude the high school physics teacher who encouraged her to apply to a summer science class. The experience opened her eyes: college was *attainable*. Thus energized, she completed two undergraduate degrees in five years, in Asian studies and in civil engineering. She went on to complete two master's degrees—an M.S. in transportation engineering and an M.C.P. in transportation and urban planning—both at the University of California at Berkeley.

Fast-forward to 2012, and she has already enjoyed a career rich in helping make transportation accessible, affordable, and safe. Since 2010 she has worked as a rail corridor crossings engineer for Metrolink, the six-county commuter rail network governed by the Southern California Regional Rail Authority. Her primary function is managing Metrolink grade-crossing safety improvement projects that help ensure driver and pedestrian safety.

Kim began her professional career in 2003 as a senior transportation planner and engineer with Parsons Brinckerhoff in Los Angeles. She became familiar with the Metrolink program through her positions at Jacobs Engineering and AECOM Technology Corporation, having served as a senior project engineer, transit planner, and project manager.

Likening her current job to that of an orchestra conductor, Kim says she loves what she does. "I like working with different groups. You tell people what to work on and everyone is assigned a part. You also

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must be able to forge a consensus among the many different stakeholders and jurisdictions that we deal with at Metrolink."

Kim attributes her experience with WTS-LA—which includes her role for the last two and a half years as professional development chair—as a confidence builder in the workplace. It also provided the impetus for applying to the WTS Leadership Training Program.

She believes her participation in the program was particularly important in view of the unique challenges facing an Asian woman engineer in the male-dominated transportation sector. "Statistics show that Asian women in science and engineering are the least likely to make it to higher levels, despite higher academic achievement." Citing a study of Asian women engaged in science, technology, engineering, and math, she said the STEM study found that Asian women face a double bind: the "bamboo" ceiling that results from Asian stereotyping, and a glass ceiling because of implicit gender bias.

Geared to midlevel career women with promise for higher levels of responsibility, the four-day leadership program features workshops and panel discussions dealing with complex issues of people, policy, and politics. This year's content included a policy discussion with transportation leaders, and sessions devoted to self-assessment—including a presentation on emotional intelligence.

Kim found three particular presenters, all women in transportation, to be the most inspiring as they related their experiences in overcoming barriers to achieve success. "These are ordinary women who worked really hard, and they never thought they would be where their paths took them. In the beginning, they sacrificed a lot and overcame personal or professional obstacles—including lack of education and race and gender barriers—to get where they are today. The talent these women have is striking."

Among her invaluable take-aways, Kim cites the self-assessments that were reviewed in a group setting. Prior to their arrival, each attendee had submitted a DISC personality assessment (DISC explores four dimensions involving dominance, influence, steadiness, and compliance). "I learned I'm a good listener and I'm good at self-control and discipline. I may be less aware of how others see me, so I'm working on that."

Her action steps include keeping a journal and meditating. "We learned to take time to reflect on big things that we are coming up against, and to set ourselves up for the best scenario. Self-correction is about greater awareness. I also learned that meditation and reflection can help me review interactions I wasn't happy with, and areas I need to improve upon."

She summed up the leadership training experience using the analogy of "springboarding" from the high school summer science class that opened her eyes to college. "The WTS program gave me the confidence to see myself going further at my organization. One day I could be CEO!" The bonus was bonding with colleagues. Noting her appreciation of SCRRA/Metrolink's support of her participation, she added, "I would strongly encourage others to apply. It's an opportunity to assess your work and where you want to go."

In reflecting on the meaning of leadership, Kim cited a favorite leadership principle: a good manager does things right; a good leader does the right things. The insights and experiences gained through the WTS Leadership Program will serve her well in facing future challenges and achieving her full leadership potential—beyond the bamboo and glass ceilings.