

12 ideas that changed how I understand people

ONE OF THE MANY unexpected benefits of the Midwest Rigging Intensive (MRI) has been the sense that we are building a community. There were aspects of the MRI that were designed to do just that with formal and informal social events, team projects, and flipped classroom techniques that allow participants to train each other. What is surprising is the level to which everyone attending has been willing to share their hard-earned wisdom after years in this often-challenging field.

In that spirit, this article will look back at a session from MRI 2025 and share some hard-earned wisdom won from decades of work and life.

Originally co-presented with Bridget Solini, ETCP trainer and owner of Athena Theatrical, the MRI 2025 session was called “Understanding Strengths and Weaknesses” and was a play on words at an event that often talks about structure and material strength to turn and talk about leadership, management, and understanding people. Many thanks to Bridget for her input into this list and her willingness to share her stories at MRI.

This article is about growing each other by sharing personal stories. These are my stories. Yours may be different, and that’s the point.

Identity is not the content of a conversation, but the language used to express it.

When I lived in Champaign, IL, occasionally you would hear someone yell “I-L-L” and the only appropriate response was to yell back “I-N-I.” The message of that communication was not a spelling lesson, but a call to inclusion. If you knew the response, then you knew you belonged. We do this at work all the time and often unintentionally. We tell people that they belong by using a common language—sometimes literally by choosing English or Spanish or



Image descriptions: A large group of people sit in front of an industrial theatrical space and smile for the camera. There is a sign behind them that reads Midwest Rigging Intensive 2025 Welcome.

Polish (in my neighborhood). Common language is more often very subtle. Theatre people use terms like “shell”, “apron”, “call”, or “cast.” Many of our words mean something to theatre people that would make a Merriam-Webster editor cry and many of our terms change from one area of the country to another even among theatre people. (We shouldn’t even get started on what the terms are from country to country). Our shared language often makes us feel like we belong. That is both its strength and its weakness. It is easy to get caught up on the terminology and forget to look for the meaning. Someone may say “orchestra shell” in a place where locals say “acoustic shell” and it’s all too easy to correct the wording and forget that the message was about making a better experience for the musicians. Getting caught on the terminology has two effects: it distracts from the message and more importantly what we need to do with that message. It also pushes someone away. A person who has used the “wrong” term, even when it means the right thing, is a little less included. If it happens enough, then they don’t belong. Is that the intent?

Listening for the message rather than the language used to express it helped me understand that, when I don’t have a common language, I have a couple choices: I can slowly push someone away who may be very good at what they do, but take a little more effort to understand, or I can look for the meaning of the statement and potentially learn some really interesting things and meet some incredible people.

The truth lies somewhere in between.

When I was in undergrad, I was asked by a professor to describe something that had happened on a call. The master electrician was



Image descriptions: People sit in an industrial theatrical space, facing towards a large screen. They are engaged in a hands-on learning experience. There are ropes, ladders, and other equipment hanging from rigging equipment.

unhappy about how something went down and, frankly, I wasn't all that happy about it either. I finished describing what happened and the professor shot back, "Okay, I imagine the truth lies in between."

To him it was an off-hand remark. I remember it well because I was angrier at the professor than I was about anything that had happened at the call. It felt like he was calling my view into question. Did he think it was overstated? Did he think I wasn't paying attention? Of course, the events unfolded exactly as I'd remembered them—how could it possibly be any other way? It's been 30 years, so I've calmed down some since then. I look back on this moment regularly to remember how it felt like a loss of trust, but the reality is that the truth really was somewhere in between. The M.E.'s recollection of events was bound to vary in some way from mine. They weren't lying or exaggerating. They deserved as much trust as I did. The two stories likely had a lot in common but were seen from different perspectives by people with different experiences. The truth was not one or the other, but something else and likely something that shared bits of one story, bits of the other story, and potentially some other bits neither of us recalled.

I remember this moment every time I need to gather information about something I didn't witness. I think about it even for things I did witness. I often seek out a couple other views of meetings and events, especially when something is amiss or uncomfortable, because even though I trust my own judgement, the truth lies somewhere in between—and that's okay.

A well-cooked idea releases itself.

I have watched a lot of cooking shows in my life, all the way back to Rick Bayless on public television in Chicago. While all those shows have cooking tips, (that's the point, right?) there is one that I use all the time. One of the chefs was watching pancakes cook and said rather matter of fact, "when it's done, it will release itself." I have not scraped a pancake off a pan since. It turns out that it's true for almost anything. There is a moment when something is done cooking and releases itself from the pan—works for meat, eggs, all kinds of things. It sticks when it burns, so you do have to watch for the right moment. But at that moment, whatever you're cooking separates cleanly. The food simply doesn't need to be stuck anymore; it's done.

Turns out that it's true for ideas. When I find that I'm stuck trying to figure out what to write, what session to do, what solution to implement, I wait. I mull it over. In those quiet moments between tasks, I just let it cook, but I keep watching and I keep listening. Nearly every time, if I wait for it, there comes a time that I can feel the tension release. Muscles relax, brain fog clears, and a resolution takes shape. It's an active process; nothing cooks without heat. I need to revisit whatever is challenging me. I keep testing ideas, often over the course of days. (Apparently, really good ideas are barbecue.)

When the time is right, it's just right and the thought comes together cleanly. Bon appétit.



Image descriptions: The top two photos show people standing on a stage and wearing hardhats. They are engaged in different training sessions. The bottom image shows a large group of people sitting on a stage. Their backs are facing the camera, with the trainers and two large presentation screens facing out towards the auditorium.



Image descriptions: Each image features a group of people deeply engaged in different sessions. In the top four images, people are sitting and listening intently to someone teaching or offering training advice. In the bottom image, people are standing on a stage in front of a red stage curtain. Everyone is wearing a hard hat, looking up at the fly floor.

Listen. Don't guess.

As a teacher, I often got the same questions from students every semester or so I thought at the time. Somewhere in my 30's, I seemed to constantly find myself in conversations where the person I was talking to answered a question before I finished asking it. I was annoyed, a lot, and often. This is when I learned to say, "wait for it." Someone would start to cut me off, and I would just say, "wait for it." It was enough to get them to pause. Then I could say something like "wait for the whole question." I wasn't a student. I wasn't asking the same thing for the 20th time. If you were answering a question that could have been posed by one of our freshmen, then I could guarantee that you were not going to answer the question I had actually posed. Don't guess. Listen to the whole thing and listen well, because there is nuance here that I need you to pick up or I wouldn't have had a question to ask.

The painful part wasn't having to stop people constantly until they learned not to guess what my question was. The painful part was that when I went back to my students and really started listening, the nuance in their questions came through. The thing they didn't quite understand was subtly different than a student the semester before. The personal experience that they were trying to associate with the material was not the same. I became an infinitely better teacher when I learned not to guess what the question was but rather listen to what they really asked.

Expertise is knowing what you don't know.

In my experience, a competent person can get something done and done properly. Getting good at something means you can relate it to other things and figure out how to do it better. When you've done something enough to really understand it, you can use what you know to develop something new. When you master it, the connections to related ideas come more naturally. To be an expert is to see the line between the expanse of connections you've made and the adjoining knowledge. It's not insurmountable, figuring out what the next connection might be, but an expert can relax into knowing what they don't know... yet. There came a time when I could confidently say, "I don't know" and it didn't lessen my expertise. To the contrary, it made me feel more secure.

Conversely, I have grown impatient with people who declare their boundless expertise. It's a sure sign that they don't know what they don't know, and they will happily and confidently share a lot of things they don't know.

Give yourself and others time to think.

A long time ago, I served on a pit lift working group for ANSI E1.42. I started shortly after a round of public comments, and I left the group just before the standard was first published. The working group meetings at that time were led by Kurt Pragman. Kurt had a way of leading meetings that took me a while to get used to. He would pose a question and then pause for what felt like an eternity.

Without fail, 10-15 seconds into the pause someone would chime in, then someone else, and often a conversation would follow. It turned out that even in 2015, people on conference calls were managing multiple screens and infinite distractions. It took 10 seconds just to find the screen again and unmute. Whether in person or online, we were often taking on more than one task. We'd take notes, try to remember something we wanted to ask ten minutes ago, or think about how to get something to eat. Sometimes, we just needed a second to coalesce all the information that we had into a coherent question about the current topic. The pause gave us just enough time to organize and re-engage, so that the ideas we brought to the table were more thoughtful. At least that's how I remember it. That experience helped alleviate some of my fear of silence. I now remind myself that silence is not wasted time, it is thinking time.

Around this time that I started carrying a sketchbook with me. I'm one of those people who hears everything that I read or write as if it was being spoken inside my head. The same is true for things I need to remember. I hear them in my head if I think I'm going to need to recall them soon. Once a conversation started in the working group meetings, it was likely going to branch out in a few directions. It could be 30 minutes before we wrapped back around to where my question would be relevant again, so I learned to write my questions down. Once written down, I didn't have to hear it anymore. I could concentrate on wherever the conversation was going. I would still have old questions at my fingertips, when it was appropriate to bring them back up. In the meantime, I could fully invest in the topic at hand. To this day, I start many workshops by giving the participants paper so that they can write things down and free up brain space.

The best managers surround themselves with people who fill their deficiencies.

When I was looking for jobs early in my career, I hunted for work where I could be surrounded by people who were better at my job than I was. I wanted as many opportunities as I could find to learn from other theatre people. I still look for that. It's part of why I love working with the ETCP trainers on the Midwest Rigging Intensive. We have such diverse backgrounds that each of us has significant expertise in something that the others don't. That's what makes it fun. That's also true of the people who attend. The MRI trainers pride ourselves on involving everyone and drawing on all the expertise in the room, not just the voices at the front table.

I look for strengths and gaps any time I build a team. It does me no good to have a bunch of people in a meeting who all know the same things in the same way.

I do not need to be in charge.

The best teams I have led are the ones where individual people each have the freedom to develop things I would never dream of. In my opinion, supporting the dreams of others is a defining trait of leadership.

Leadership and management are two very different things... and both are vital.

A manager gives directions, coordinates the team, and controls the clock. My advisor from grad school was very fond of saying that "the work expands to fit the time allotted." It was a warning. Without a plan and a timetable, nothing gets done.

In contrast, a leader is someone who creates pathways to success. They don't have to be the principal in charge, the owner of the company, or the manager of the project. A good intern can be a leader by identifying the next thing they can do to help the project and bringing options to decision makers. Everyone should be encouraged to lead. My most successful teams work best when I lead by managing. Some teams are better when given a goal, a timeline, knowledge of the limitations, and then left free to lead themselves.

Register today for MRI 2026!

The Midwest Rigging Intensive (MRI) is ETA's hands-on training event for entertainment riggers, returning August 6–8, 2026 at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. Built around this year's theme of "Failure," MRI offers a real-world learning environment designed by ETCP Recognized Trainers and is designed to deliver all required ETCP education renewal credits.

Across three days, attendees participate in sessions that include topics such as: human failure, material failure, redundancy, risk analysis, rigging loads and forces, team building, and the realities of self-policing in an industry with minimal external oversight. The schedule also incorporates community building traditions such as Drinks with TDs, a long-running gathering that brings everyone together for a night of fun conversation and networking. Each session is led by a team of respected instructors, including Bennett Brian, Tyler DeLong, Erin Grabe, Brent "Mickey" Henry, Shane Kelly, Rebecca Knipfer, Ed Leahy, Verda Beth Martell, Dan McLaughlin, Tracy Nunnally, Bridget Solini, and Patrick Stewart, whose combined expertise spans touring, theatre, engineering, and safety leadership.

MRI is meant to be immersive, practical, and accessible. With Early Bird pricing, student rates, and discounted travel opportunities, MRI is one of the most impactful professional development opportunities for riggers at every stage of their career—an environment where learning is hands-on, questions are encouraged, and the shared goal is building a safer, more knowledgeable industry.



Register today! www.eta.org/mri

Honest and thoughtful criticism is kindness.

Good criticism takes time. It requires some knowledge of the people involved, the history of the project, and the future intent. It has a time and a place and a reason for being. It offers a path to success. A good mentor will have a profound impact. They lead without doing. They empower you without stepping in to fix something on your behalf. I have at many times in my life just wanted to be right, but I have found that I got the farthest when I listened. It's hard to hear criticism, but it is often vital to taking the next step. For the most part, if someone is actually making the effort to give me good feedback, they mean well because it takes time. This is one of those moments where I have to listen for the meaning regardless of the language.

Bullying is not criticism. A bully has no need to build you up, often responds in the heat of the moment, and is likely to try to step in and take your place. They don't deserve your time.

Trust is earned in the small moments

I will admit that there are many, many things that I love about the work of Brene Brown, a social scientist who has spent much of her career thus far researching vulnerability. She has YouTube videos, books, and a TED Talk that propelled her into the limelight. There is one story of hers that lives with me almost daily in the choices I make and choose not to make. It revolves around a marble jar. I won't tell the story, because she tells her own story better in a video called *The Anatomy of Trust* (<https://brenebrown.com/podcast/the-anatomy-of-trust/>).

The moral is that trust is earned in the small moments: the times that you brought someone coffee or shared a snack in a busy tech week, ran up to focus a light so they could keep cuing, checked the menu so that your friend with the food allergy could come with you to dinner, or remembered to ask how their sick dog was doing. Showing that you care is a constant effort, not a grand gesture. It's small moments that stack up. I try to build trust and community every day. It's often as simple as saying hello, to ensure that everyone in a room is acknowledged. Some days, it's not letting the moment go by. Anymore, if someone is wearing cool shoes, I'm going to say, "cool shoes."

Positivity is contagious.

When I recognize the good things, people stand up a little straighter, approach me more easily with questions or concerns, and smile more. Then something pretty incredible happens. They start complimenting each other and talking more and trusting each other more.

Please note that this is not pretending to care, ignoring that a project has problems in the hopes that people won't notice, or choosing to smile when there is nothing to smile about. It's not finding something to compliment or sandwiching your bad news between false positives. People can sense authenticity. Good things happen constantly and amazing things can happen if we take the time to call them out.

One more thing (it's actually a baker's dozen of ideas):

Improvement requires intention.

I mentioned earlier that these ideas were at the center of a session. That session was bookended by a variation on Mark Shanda's Build the Tallest Tower. At the beginning, teams built the tallest tower they could out of office supplies. At the end of the workshop, they did it again with the same teams and a slightly different set of supplies. In the second build, each person was encouraged to find a personal goal that they could work on or practice while still building the tallest tower with their team. At the end of the build, I asked how everyone did. Most folks were proud of their towers but had completely forgotten their personal goals. The sentiment in the room was that in accomplishing their team goal they had to forego their individual goals.

I'm a fan of the late Ryne Sandberg, Hall of Fame second baseman for the Cubs, who famously said at his HoF induction, "Hit a home run, put your head down, drop the bat, run around the bases, because the name on the front is more, a lot more important than the name on the back." The message was to concentrate on the team (the name on the front of a jersey) over personal achievement (the name on the back).

While I appreciate the sentiment, a baseball team where each player cheers on the other players at batting practice but doesn't improve their own swing is a losing team. Our responsibility to our team includes a responsibility to ourselves. Our ability to improve our own skills directly impacts the success of our teams.

Set real goals: some short term, some longer, some lifetime. Know what you are working for and how your personal improvement will make your teams better.

Shameless plug: All around this article are images from MRI 2025. One way to make yourself better would be to come to MRI 2026 to hear from the trainers, the other riggers, and to share your personal stories. See you in August. ■



Verda Beth Martell spent the first couple of decades of her career in theatrical production as a special effects technician and technical director. Over the last decade, Beth has transitioned from building scenery to designing performing arts centers with Theatre Consultants Collaborative as a Principal Consultant. Over those three decades, Beth has also been a tireless educator, formally and informally. She taught undergraduate and graduate classes and, for a time, chaired the Scenic Technology curriculum at the University of Illinois. Beth finds that the best way to keep in touch with current practice is to embed herself in conversations with current practitioners through conferences, working groups and organizing professional training for the Midwest Rigging Intensive and the North American Theatre Engineering and Architecture Conference. Beth is the co-founder of the Physics of Theatre Project with her research partner (and husband) Dr. Eric Martell and co-author of *The Physics of Theatre – Mechanics*. She is a frequent collaborator with ESTA, an ETCP Certified Rigger - Theatre, ETCP Recognized Trainer, and a Fellow of the United States Institute for Theatre Technology.