



An Honest Living

By Douglas Ashcraft, P.E., S.E.
Chair, Council of American Structural Engineers (CASE)

I really enjoy the profession that I chose. Besides having the opportunity to design structures that improve people's lives, I get the opportunity to work with some of the most honest and forthright people that I know. Admittedly, my sample size is rather small compared to the whole of our community, but the general population has a similarly high opinion of our profession.

Independent polls taken of Americans consistently rank engineers among the top ten of the most honest and ethical professions. It is interesting when looking at these lists to note that most of the professions in the top ten are those that involve personal one-on-one contact with the customer, such as doctors, nurses, emergency responders, etc. Engineers enjoy the same reputation even though our contact with the public is passive and mostly anonymous.

Perhaps it is that anonymity that leads the majority to believe in the honesty and integrity of the engineers that design such magnificent and highly functional structures. They ask, "How can someone be the creative mind behind such a major achievement and we don't know who it is?" They then conclude that engineers must be willing to help people by what they design because of the duty they owe to society. This duty is the linchpin of engineering ethics.

Engineers hold the safety, health and welfare of the public as the paramount purpose of their profession. All other interests, personal or professional, are subrogated to this purpose. In fact, engineers hold a

...a good time to remind your colleagues of your core values and your focus on customer service. "

duty to their clients, employers and their own professional community at a higher plane than their own personal interest. That is the ideal behavior of engineers and, for the most part, it represents the actual behavior as well. This behavior is manifested by an altruistic attitude of putting other's interests before their own, and an evaluation that a human life is more valuable than material gain or one's own reputation.

All things, unfortunately, are not ideal. There are many pressures that weigh against this idealistic behavior. A person's normal instinct for self-preservation can certainly stand in the way of putting other's interests ahead of their own. People often feel the need to inflate the value they place on their own reputation over a sense of duty. And let us not forget greed, which is a demon that afflicts many of us in some fashion and in varying degrees.

Managers of engineering firms should be alert during this present economic downturn for signs of stress among your partners and employees that may arise due to anxiety over economic conditions. It is this type of stress that may lead some to sacrifice their long held ethical mores and do something to protect their own financial situation or personal reputation at the expense of the company. It may be a good time to remind your colleagues of your core values and your focus on customer service. Let them know that you are open to hear their concerns, and that those that "blow the whistle" will be listened to and protected.

Employees of engineering firms must likewise take responsibility for the ethical behavior of their colleagues. Be alert for, and ready to report, behavior that you question and believe may lead to problems for the company.

If your firm does not have a values statement and code of proper behavior, I would urge you to develop one. The culture of a company is driven from the top down. If your employees see you as a manager

...engineers hold a duty to their clients, employers and their own professional community at a higher plane than their own personal interest. "

take ethical behavior and strong customer service as a priority, your employees will follow you in that same behavior. Your code of ethics must state things that should not be done and also express the positive duty you expect your employees to provide to the public and clients.

A great resource to help develop a code of ethics for your firm is the book, *Better Ethics NOW* written by Christopher Bauer, PhD., published by Aab-Hill Business Books, Nashville, TN. The subtitle of the book is "How to Avoid the Ethics Disaster You Never Saw Coming". It was the inspiration for this article. I heard Dr. Bauer speak at an ACEC conference a couple of years ago. This was before the economic collapse, and his book is even more pertinent now.

There are also good resources through ASCE and NSPE. These organizations have published codes of ethics on their websites. Use these as a starting point, and then make your code specific for your practice.

Let us all do what we can to keep the engineering profession one that continues to be recognized by the public as honest and ethical. ■

