

Editorial | Important Conference for Principals and Leaders in Structural Engineering Firms

By John A. Malcolm, P.E.



After experiencing “Gravity” at the theater, I left with a sense of inspiration and awe at witnessing an excellent film, a story about experts, highly trained astronauts, professionals, the best at what they do, able to focus in the most dangerous and stressful circumstances, with a calm reliance on their extensive training to deal with almost any situation. For those who haven’t seen the movie, Sandra Bullock and George Clooney are on a spacewalk when an accident causes everything to go terribly wrong. As depicted in the movie, maintaining focus on their training wasn’t easy, but was faithfully done with amazing results.

Training is similarly important for leaders of structural engineering firms of all sizes. Growth, success, retaining key employees, dealing effectively with conflict and the inevitable lawsuits common to our industry, and successful transition to a new generation of owners do not just happen. Leaders need to be sure they have the tools and information to respond to the expected and unexpected events that occur in a rational, informed manner. We need to prepare in order to make the best possible decisions. Engineers are not trained for this in school. My suspicion is that companies that take these issues seriously are the firms that prosper over the long run and create successful lasting legacies. Mission accomplished

The second NCSEA Winter Leadership Forum will be held March 20 and 21, 2014, in the beautiful wine country of Napa, California, at the Meritage Resort and Spa. I encourage principals and leaders in structural engineering firms to attend this conference to learn valuable skills that will enable them to effectively address keeping their firms on the path towards vitality and success. The conference is targeted to address issues – expected and unexpected – of small, medium and large firms.

The Winter Leadership Forum will launch Thursday, March 20th, with Steven J. Isaacs presenting *Get the Value You Deserve Without Ruining the Relationship*. This is an interactive session, introducing a new approach to negotiations, and will offer a variety of field tested ways to get the value and compensation you deserve from current and future clients. Steven Isaacs is a professional engineer and long-time speaker and educator with FMI Corporation, assisting firms in strategic planning, financial controls, project performance/profitability, negotiation, ownership transition, joint ventures and partnering.

Also on Thursday, owners and principals from small, medium, and large firms will discuss *Ownership Transition Case Studies* based on their professional experiences. Brian Dekker, President of Sound Structures, Inc., Brian Phair, CEO of PCS Structural Solutions, and Mark Aden, President of DCI Engineers, will present. Each speaker has a unique and interesting way of approaching this key issue. Firms that do not have a transition plan in place will obviously benefit, but so will firms interested in valuation because they are buying or selling, firms interested in ways to keep key employees, and firms wanting to improve their plans. These three presentations will conclude with a roundtable discussion facilitated by Steven Isaacs. This will give all attendees a chance to learn from each other.

Steven Isaacs will also be presenting *Baby Boomers Delay Retirements: Career Bottleneck at the Top*. The trend of older, experienced professionals wanting to work longer and wait for retirement creates challenges. Steven will discuss how to react to this trend and retain talented employees.

On Friday, Jennifer Morrow offers *Leadership is a Full-Contact Sport: Dealing with Conflict in the Workplace*. This session will focus on effectively managing issues in the office and beyond. Jennifer Morrow is the Executive Director of Commercial Services at ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) Systems of America. She consults with law firms and companies on the effective use of mediation, arbitration and all types of dispute resolution processes.

Jennifer Morrow and Kevin Sido share the next topic, *Managing the Cost of Conflict: Mediation, Arbitration or Litigation?* They will explore the full spectrum of dispute resolution processes and provide tools for evaluating which is best to use. This will guide firms toward making informed decisions and will help minimize the impact on principals’ time, business, and reputations. When the challenge appears suddenly, these tools can be invaluable.

Kevin Sido is an attorney and senior partner in the Chicago office of Hinshaw & Culbertson LLC. He has represented design professionals for 38 years, is an author and speaker on construction law issues, and is the editor of *Architect and Engineer Liability, Claims Against Design Professionals*. Friday sessions will conclude with his presentation *You’ve Been Sued – Now What? What Engineers Need to Know to Structure Their Defense*. Realizing that claims will inevitably be filed against structural engineers regardless of merit, this talk will give advice on what to do when the summons is served and in the months that follow.

This should be a great conference to provide leaders with the tools required to address issues important to their companies’ survival and continued vitality. Structural engineers are not astronauts, but without key training our companies are vulnerable to unexpected challenges. Copy that! Let’s avoid becoming stranded in the void!

After all this learning, there is a reward. No, not a spacewalk, but an opportunity to explore the California countryside. This is a good time to enjoy a long weekend getaway. The resort in Napa is 50 to 60 miles from the airports in San Francisco, Oakland and Sacramento, or just a little over an hour away by car. Shuttles can be arranged. The Meritage features wine tasting and an underground spa, as well as access to Napa and Sonoma Valleys, hiking and biking, golf, a three hour wine train tour, galleries and restaurants. Check the Meritage website for details. Go to <http://themeritageresort.com>. For further information and to register go to www.ncsea.com under Meetings. Over and out! ■



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