



## The Benefits of Networking

By Douglas Ashcraft, P.E., S.E.

Chair, Council of American Structural Engineers (CASE)

Leaders of CASE, CAMEE, Small Firms, COPS, Land Development, and Design Professionals Coalitions continue to work together to develop strategies for showing other firms the many benefits of joining ACEC and one of the design coalitions. Among the many benefits identified, one keeps coming up as having the most value. The ability to network with other design professionals and discuss issues that affect the business of engineering is seen as an invaluable benefit of becoming a member of ACEC and CASE.

Something that CASE tried this past January shows great promise in letting others see what CASE is about and provide incentive to join. CASE held its Winter Meeting in Houston in January. We contacted the leadership of the Houston/Gulf Coast Chapter of The Structural Engineers Association of Texas (SEAoT) and asked them if we could join them for their regular monthly meeting. They agreed, and CASE supplied the program.

The program consisted of round table discussions about four different issues affecting the risk profile of structural engineering firms today. Each discussion was led by a knowledgeable leader in the industry from different firms around the country. The four topics included *Building Information Modeling, LEED and Sustainable Design, Integrated Project Delivery*, and *Collecting Fees without Counter-Claims*. Attendees were asked to choose any of the four topics, and I was amazed to see each table fairly equally populated.

Kurtis Young, a principal in the Houston office of Walter P Moore, led a discussion about the benefits and risks of engaging in projects that are delivered by the Integrated Project Delivery model. Kurt explained that the Owner, Architect and Builder are all parties to the same agreement, in which they agree to cooperate in the best interest of the project and to not sue each other. All parties to the contract have specific responsibilities and are held accountable by an Executive Leadership committee, consisting of senior management from the three major stakeholders.

There were several at the table that had experience with this type of contract. They explained that profit for the designer and builders is at risk, being tied up in the construction contingency for the project. If the project is delivered for less than the budget, everyone receives more profit than anticipated. However, if some of the contingency is spent on over-budget items, everyone's profit suffers. All agreed that the key issue for success is working with partners with which you have had experience and can trust to perform.

Dirk Kestner, a project manager from the Austin office of Walter P Moore and a LEED Accredited Professional, started the conversation about the risks associated when an owner wishes the project to be LEED certified. Many areas of LEED point accumulation are out of the purview of structural engineers, and the SE's role is somewhat limited. That does not mean there is no risk for structural engineers nor does it mean that SE's should not get involved with the design team early to help move the sustainable discussion along. Designers should never allow there to be a guarantee for a particular LEED level in the contract; there are many issues associated with construction that can impact the project's ability to become LEED certified. Many new products and procedures will present themselves as sustainable and appropriate for LEED certification. Designers should take appropriate actions to verify those claims before allowing their use.

Building Information Modeling promises to enhance collaboration and condense information. David Odeh of Odeh Engineers led a group in discussing the contractual risks that must be addressed with BIM. Before a model is begun, the purpose for its creation must be agreed upon. Ownership and control of the model must be addressed in the contract. The question of what constitutes a standard of care with a new technology needs to be answered to properly assign risk among the parties.

Most engineering firms spend an inordinate amount of time managing accounts receivable. David Collings of Ames and Gough, the Chair of CASE's Insurance Engagement Committee, helped the group discuss ways in which design firms can collect what is owed without getting sued in the process. Project managers should be engaged with clients and held accountable for overdue collections. Some firms take overdue amounts off the bottom line, to give PM's incentive to be proactive in collecting fees. Be sure there are no valid reasons based on your performance for not getting paid; but, if not, aggressive actions such as stopping work may be necessary. Let the order to stop work come from higher up, so as to not endanger the PM's relationship with the client. Getting a Promissory Note signed is a good way to ensure collections and makes it easier to get a judgment against the client in case of non-payment.

Everyone agreed that the evening of networking between local engineers and members of CASE, from diverse locations and firm size, was a great success. Look for a CASE meeting near you, and help us as CASE tries to reach out to a larger audience. ■

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