

# We Need to Work Together or Risk Being Torn Apart

By Barry Arnold, S.E., SECB

Engineers, as a whole, are an impressive collection of the best and brightest graduates coming out of our universities. Their ability to think deeply and focus their attention on problems, analyze a variety of possible solutions, and find a viable answer is unparalleled. Engineers' minds are geared toward critical thinking and problem solving. We have reason to be proud – as long as our pride does not get in the way of a greater good.

That fact was brought out when I arrived early for an important meeting with a client. Alone in the large conference room, I busied myself making notes and answering e-mails. A few minutes later, I was joined by a woman and her male assistant. They sat at the far end of the room talking loudly so that their conversation could easily be overheard. The exchange went like this:

“Did you know there’ll be twelve engineers in the meeting today?” the woman stated somberly, with an apprehensive quality in her voice.

“Twelve! Oh no! We’ll never get anything done,” was her companion’s lament.

After a labored pause, the woman declared, “All engineers do is argue about what and who is right, all the while looking for someone to blame when things go wrong and devising a strategy to get more credit than they deserve when the project’s a success.”

The man stated, “Big egos, huh?”

“The worst!” replied the lady without letting a second go to waste. She quickly followed up the comment, saying, “Working with engineers is a lot like herding cats. They all tend to go in the same general direction, but all at different speeds, indifferent to those around them, and each with their own agenda.”

Having heard enough, I went to my companions and introduced myself as a structural engineer. I was hoping for a look of surprise or guilt, or some minor act of repentance in the form of a retraction of their gross generalizations. All I received was a look of sympathy.

I believe what hurt the most was the fact that, to a large degree, the lady was correct.

As a group, structural engineers are very fragmented across a number of superfluous

lines. We compare and contrast ourselves against those around us based on:

- Education: Ivy Leaguer schools vs. state universities;
- Degree: PhD vs. MS vs. BS;
- Office Size: Large vs. medium vs. small vs. working out of your house;
- Office Location: East coast vs. west coast vs. no coast;
- Project Size: Big vs. medium vs. small; and,
- Pending Disasters: Earthquake vs. hurricanes vs. floods vs. tornados vs. ice storms, etc.

As structural engineers, our primary goal and purpose is to hold paramount the health, safety and welfare of the public. Everything else is secondary – and likely of little consequence.

Psychologists tell us that we create these artificial boundaries as a means of promoting our own self-worth. It is the same old routine that is practiced on playgrounds across America today: “I did this... (fill in the blank)... and you didn’t; therefore, I’m better.” The logic is

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erroneous – seriously flawed, in fact – and detrimental to the health and vitality of a state-level SEA, as well as NCSEA, CASE and SEI at the national level.

It is vital that our professional organizations not become fragmented over petty differences. As a group of peers, we must respect input and advice from all of our members, along with non-member engineers and other interested parties. You do not need to watch very many nature programs on television to realize that a fragmented herd is easily hunted. The goal of the predator is to frighten, separate and ultimately cull the heard. When we as individuals distance ourselves from our professional organizations, we lose in two important areas: We are not able to support the goals, objectives and growth of those groups; and, we cannot reap the rewards, opportunities and benefits that membership offers.

Take, for example, a member structural engineer who will not attend local membership meetings because a particular competitor, to whom they lost a project, might be in attendance. This is unfortunate and counterproductive. Although it is always disappointing to see someone else receive work that we were actively seeking, this alone should never preclude us from participating in and contributing to an organization to which both parties belong. We can and should still work together for our common interests, keeping our eyes on the big picture instead of getting sidetracked by hard feelings over a short-term setback.

As individual structural engineers acting alone, we will not be able to progress much in promoting the causes of our profession. You may make some headway, but it will be painfully slow and will usually have little lasting effect. By contrast, as a contributing member of your SEA, CASE and/or SEI, your impact will be significant, substantial and long-term; you can help establish goals and define objectives that may guide the profession for many years to come. You can set standards and make improvements that will benefit the membership and society today and for generations into the future.

One fact remains certain: If we do not work together as a collection of valued and respected peers, we will certainly be torn apart, leaving the growth and value of the profession in question. Together we need to focus on the biggest possible picture, solve the most pressing problems, and chart a course to achieve the worthy goals of our professional organizations. The work is easier and more swiftly accomplished when everyone supports these organizations by providing input and assistance. ■

*Barry Arnold, S.E., SECB, is a Vice President at ARW Engineers in Ogden, Utah. He is a Past President of the Structural Engineers Association of Utah (SEAU), serves as the SEAU Delegate to NCSEA, and is a member of the NCSEA Licensing Committee. Barry can be reached at [barrya@arwengineers.com](mailto:barrya@arwengineers.com).*

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