

Editorial

Communication...

By Greg Robinson, NCSEA Vice President

It is said that first impressions are lasting impressions. However, I would also suggest that the skill and effectiveness with which you communicate is just as important. Providing credible communication will build trust and respect, core values that are critical for the success of practicing structural engineers.

When you communicate with others, they quickly conclude whether or not you are communicating on their level. If you do not present on the listener's level, you risk not being heard at all. Finding the appropriate level of communication is perhaps most difficult when you speak to the public. For the most part, the public is unclear as to what encompasses the structural frame of a building. It is important that structural engineers simplify and define structural terms and systems, such that the public can relate. The engineers interviewed post-9/11, as well as those interviewed during and after the 2005 hurricane season, knew how to relate to the public. Many of them took the time to explain the meaning of shearwalls, beams, columns and wind forces, in a way that the public could understand.

"Always consider diplomacy when you communicate."

Always consider diplomacy when you communicate. Structural engineers give direction and explanation to owners, clients, contractors and fellow engineers in just about every facet of the design and building process. Our diplomacy in how we communicate our directions, whether to other team members or to contractors, may result in a well-executed plan or a heated debate. Always consider what it would be like to be on the other side of the table before you deliver your instructions. Doing so will usually earn you the respect that you seek for yourself, as a structural engineer.

Listen before you speak. If it is a situation where you have completed many similar projects, you may already know the answer to the questions that will be posed. Do not be so eager to provide the answer, to what you see as a typical question, that you leave the client with the feeling that you have not given them, or their project, due consideration. In fact, you will find that most clients do want you to take the time to consider the options and provide them with the best answers.

Pay close attention and do not allow yourself to be distracted during a meeting. This is difficult in today's high-tech communication age with the constantly streaming emails and the constantly ringing mobile phones. Resist. If

you are expecting a telephone call that you know you have to take, let the group know that you are expecting a call, set your phone to vibrate, and step out of the meeting when you receive your call.

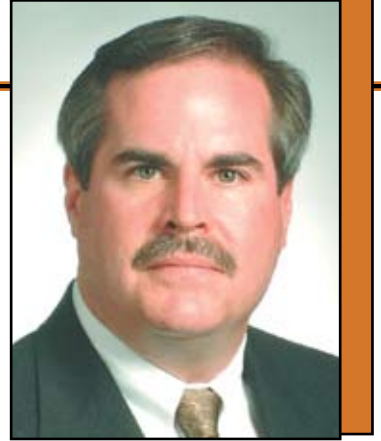
In a recent one-hour meeting, with eight persons attending, at least four mobile phones (including my own) blared a myriad of personalized sounds and tunes. One person had to be asked to leave the room, since it seemed acceptable to that person to carry on his own telephone conversation during the meeting.

Follow instructions. This can be critical. I had the opportunity to watch two professional groups present their qualifications to render services on a project. Each group was asked to simply present their team members and their experience with similar projects. Nothing else was required. During the presentations, it quickly became obvious which one of the groups had prepared their presentation in accordance with the solicitation and which one had taken it upon themselves to prepare material not asked for or required. The group that followed the instructions was awarded the project, for a very simple reason. The selection committee was concerned that the other group would be the one less likely to listen to the owner and work with other team members.

"...do not allow yourself to be distracted during a meeting."

Why, then, is communication so important? As structural engineers, we must take someone else's vision of a project, convert it to numerical models, and then produce a set of instructions on pieces of paper. If that is not complex enough, we often monitor and observe those instructions being executed by the contractor, only to realize that what we communicated was not what we intended. Is focusing on credible, skillful communications important? You bet. You simply will not get that many opportunities to communicate, if you obtain a reputation for communicating poorly. Therefore, make your presentations with care. Consider to whom you are speaking and work towards effective communication with your audience. Listen, avoid distractions (or being the distraction), and follow instructions. ■

"Listen before you speak."



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