



Leadership Opportunities in Our Offices, in Our Associations, and in the Public Sector

By William D. Bast, P.E., S.E.

The world needs great leaders. We need better leaders in our government, in our companies, in our associations and organizations, and in our committees and teams. There are many articles and books published on leadership, but this article is based on my thirty years of working with structural engineering offices, associations, and committees. I have seen firsthand the many opportunities that are available where engineers can demonstrate leadership.

“An army of sheep lead by a lion... will always defeat an army of lions led by a sheep,” a quote attributed to Alexander the Great. I first heard it from Peter Rogers, the former CEO of Nabisco. He uses the quote in several of his talks to differentiate leadership and management. The internet contains many interpretations of what this quote means. However, in the context of leadership, I believe that it is clear – the army with a strong leader will defeat the army with a weak leader, even if the army with the weak leader is stronger.

This analogy has many connotations but, in business, it points to the importance of the need for strong leadership within a company. A strong company needs strong leadership to be successful; a weak leader can weaken the strong members of the company. The weakening of the company also happens when a weak leader uses his or her authority to demoralize or make ineffectual the leaders and staff beneath him or her.

As a business owner and Past President of both the Structural Engineers Association of Illinois (SEAOI) and the National Council of Structural Engineer Associations (NCSEA), I have seen many opportunities for engineers to take on a leadership role and make a difference.

Leadership Opportunities within the Firm

Principals of engineering firms and project engineers are the leaders of the firm. The decisions that they make or don't make at the start of a project will often dictate the outcome and success of the project, months

or years later. The general direction for the procedures and methodology of the work to be performed by their staff, the design options to be pursued, the cost options to be weighed, and the nuances with the solutions must all be provided early on by these leaders for the team and the project to be successful.

One of my colleagues told me years ago that, as a principal of the firm, it is important to be very active in the beginnings of a project – setting the direction, goals, scope, strategies, and methodologies. Then, as the project proceeds, it is best to fade into the background and let the staff execute the project and allow them to do what they do best.

Leadership Opportunities within Your Engineering Association

On Sunday, July 2, 2000, three pieces of limestone fell from a building in Chicago, smashing a truck on the street but causing no bodily harm to pedestrians or workers.

The City of Chicago's Law Department responded to the incident by initiating proceedings to take away the SE license of the Engineer of Record for the façade.

SEAOI backed the EOR, who had a stellar reputation and was a very diligent and talented man. The SEAOI staff issued a press release in support of the EOR and requested a thorough investigation of the incident. Partly through SEAOI's efforts, as well as the substantial efforts of others, his license was not revoked.

The Leadership of NCSEA, SEI, and CASE have made a concerted effort and provided leadership in establishing SE licensure in all states. The commitment of the leadership of these organizations and their committees led to the formation of SELC (Structural Engineering Licensure Coalition). This organization has provided support and assistance to many states that were successful in obtaining SE Licensure, and many other states that are working toward SE licensure.

Leadership Opportunities within the Public Sector

Leadership opportunities in the public sector are abundant. To make a good decision, input from engineers is essential.

In late 2000, a City of Chicago Alderman proposed amending the façade ordinance to exclude the inspections of brick buildings. The Building Committee held a meeting shortly after announcing the proposed amendment, and I attended the meeting and signed up to testify before the committee. During my testimony, I stated that excluding brick buildings from the façade ordinance inspections had no technical merit or basis and that these buildings have all of the same problems as any other buildings clad in stone, terra cotta, or concrete.

After my testimony, the Chicago Alderman asked me, “Are you an engineer paid to do these inspections?” I answered in the affirmative. “Then no wonder you want to inspect the brick buildings, too!” he retorted. His response and challenge to my credibility gave me slight pause, but I reasoned that no matter what he or his committee believed, it was my responsibility as a leader to say and do what I believe is right regardless of the external pressures. I replied firmly, “You can say what you like, but the fact of the matter is that there is no technical reason to exclude brick buildings from complying with the ordinance!”

Fortunately, the committee made no decision that morning and reconvened the following week. At the next meeting, my colleagues from SEAOI were able to prepare a presentation that illustrated the façade problems of brick buildings, and the ordinance was not changed.

Leadership Requires Working Together

On Saturday, March 9, 2002, a 100-foot-long, custom-built scaffold collapsed while suspended midway up the 100-story John Hancock Center in Chicago, killing three people in a car on the street below.

SEAOI was contacted soon after the incident by the Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA) of Chicago, asking

whether SEAOI was in favor of the new Scaffold Act that the City of Chicago's Law Department had proposed in response to the incident. BOMA stated that the proposed ordinance would require all scaffolds in the City of Chicago to be certified by a structural engineer licensed in Illinois. The certification would apply to the rigging, as well as the shifting of all swing stage and pipe scaffolds.

Because there were over a thousand scaffolds in Chicago at the time, SEAOI realized that this Act could provide a lot of work for structural engineers. SEAOI also recognized that the cost would be an excessive burden to the building owners and, more importantly, they felt that the ordinance as proposed would not fix the problem.

SEAOI showed leadership by convening a committee to study the issue and propose alternate language to make the ordinance more effective and less costly. The committee was made up of an invited group of structural engineers, architects, contractors, and BOMA representatives. After a few meetings, the committee arrived at an alternative proposal which required all scaffold operators, workers, and inspectors to obtain a Scaffold Card, certifying their competence in the rigging and operation of swing stage and pipe scaffolds.

The proposal was sent to the City of Chicago's Building Department, and it was approved. The whole process was a very rewarding experience because we were able to bring together all of the affected partners to arrive at a solution that was not a compromise, but a truly creative solution that was amenable to everyone.

The Attributes of Great Leaders

From my experience, a leader's attributes are varied but must include:

- Being a servant leader. A servant leader is one who serves others, not expecting to be served. Being a servant leader means going to the end of the line and not taking the 'first fruits' because one happens to be at the front of the line.
- Being willing and determined to do the *right* thing regardless of the consequences or external pressures.
- Not worrying solely about political correctness, but saying and doing what you believe is right and exercising respect, tact and humility in your words.

- Looking for creative solutions to problems. Be willing to consider differing viewpoints before rendering conclusions.
- Staying within technical and objective limits and avoid *the spin* that can be applied by owners, developers, and attorneys to minimize your input and advice.

Conclusion

Good leadership is hard to find and much in demand these days. Engineers can and need to step up and serve in leadership positions. I urge you to get involved in your profession, your office, your community, and your families and churches – as leaders, leading the way with strength and humility. ■

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