

Celebrate the Structural Engineering Community

By Chad S. Mitchell, P.E., S.E.

For the longest time, I avoided following other structural engineering firms on LinkedIn or liking their posts. As the President of the Structural Engineers Association of Colorado, I have seen the positive impact of what engineers can do when they come together. But for some reason, I was still hesitant to celebrate the achievements of my peers publicly. Why? Mostly to avoid a perception by my supervisors and coworkers that I was thinking about leaving my current firm. Sitting at my desk a couple of months ago, on my first day back at work after attending the National Council for Structural Engineers Associations (NCSEA) Summit, I quietly proclaimed, “This stops today!!” No longer will I refrain from following or liking other firms for fear of how it might look. The week I spent in Anaheim, CA, at the Summit was magical and not just because I met Micky and Minnie. Witnessing the community of structural engineers at a national level was truly transformational.

We should see each other for what we are: a community, not just competitors. Building a community driven by mutual respect allows us to commend each other’s achievements and applauds a profession that brings excellent value and expertise to the public. By celebrating each other more, we will pave the path for the public to celebrate us as well.

The concept of mutual respect is best demonstrated after competitive sporting events. It is common for athletes to meet at midfield and embrace each other, even to exchange jerseys after competing at the highest levels. One of my favorite parts of watching the final round of PGA tournaments on a Sunday afternoon is to see the other professional golfers waiting just off the green on the final hole to congratulate the winner. Professional athletes compete at the highest levels on the field, but they also celebrate each other after the competition is complete. They respect the hard work it takes to compete. They enjoy the challenge of competition, and the challenge makes them better.

As engineers, we can also thrive on the challenge. We should challenge each other to increase the quality of our product. With higher quality comes higher value. There will always be a competitive side within our community. Whether it is new techniques or high-quality service, we continually compete

to win projects. We should use that competition to make the structural engineering profession better, not just to win projects. Let’s enjoy the challenge.

Demonstrating mutual respect not only drives us to improve our profession, but it also improves the perception of our profession in the public eye. Few members of the public truly understand what we do. If you are like me, when you first started your career, your family and friends thought you were an archi-

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tect. Even now, it is difficult to explain to the average person what it is we do and how our profession protects life safety. We are only in the news when a building or bridge collapses. Greater positive exposure will pave our way to greater respect and perception in the public eye.

One of the issues preventing us from receiving greater public exposure is that we, as engineers, lean towards being introverts. I know it is not always true, but it is close. I always say the best way to tell if a person is an engineer is if they are looking at their shoes when they are talking to you. If they are a structural engineer, they will be looking up at the structure above. Introverts do not typically draw praise to themselves. They try and avoid attention. This is why we are not celebrated for the real value we provide the public in our profession. What we do is equally as amazing as what the architects do. The public just does not know it yet. We need to ensure that the public sees us as a skilled profession, not as a commodity.

Since it can be difficult to praise ourselves, we need to celebrate each other more. The more positive exposure we receive, the more the public will understand the value that we provide. When we work *together*, we have more visibility. Celebrate each other!!

When asking a preschooler what they want to be when they grow up, their response should not be firefighter or doctor, but a structural engineer. Well, we might not knock off those lofty professions as top preschooler’s career goals, but we may inspire a high school

senior to choose civil engineering as their college major.

Retention studies repeatedly find that, more than money or working conditions, people who stay with their jobs are motivated by feeling like a part of something larger than themselves. By connecting to others within the community, we are not just elevating our practice; we are re-energizing ourselves and encouraging the bright young people who were drawn to our profession to stay in our profession.

How do we foster collaboration, encourage mutual respect, and drive visibility? Connect on LinkedIn with peers, not just clients. When a competitor posts a success story, like or comment, or better yet, reach out a congratulatory hand. If you do not have the bandwidth or expertise to handle a project, refer the client to a competitor you respect. Join one of your local structural engineering organizations; in addition to CEUs, you can grow a network of peers, mentors, and, dare I say, friends that all share a common goal and inspire you to contribute outside of deadlines. Volunteer at a local school to help kids get excited about the bones of the structure – let them see just how cool our jobs really are.

How will you explain to your employer why you are connected with your competitors on LinkedIn and giving them kudos? Bring information back to your employer with fresh ideas, code updates, resources, etc., and they will soon see the value of being plugged into our professional community.

Will everyone operate in good faith? Probably not. But I have the impression that, in general, our profession is filled with good, ethical people. Reach out – you just may be surprised. Challenge makes us better. Mutual respect and collaboration drive innovation. Increased visibility for our profession benefits all of us. Make that LinkedIn connection; join that professional committee; volunteer at your local school. You will be more fulfilled and, maybe someday, structural engineers will give firefighters and doctors a run for their money in the pre-K crowd. ■

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