

Tackling Conflict Head-On

By Michael Yost, Esq., and Aaron Mann, Esq.

Engineering is a profession based on truth and integrity. Firms and clients rely on an engineer's expertise, and they trust their engineers to conduct themselves ethically. Unfortunately, we have seen first-hand where lapses in ethical judgment, resulting from project issues, cut short an accomplished career. These lapses usually come from otherwise decent and honest people, and their actions appear inexplicable. In many circumstances, those lapses can be traced to the same cause – conflict avoidance.

There is a certain amount of conflict in every profession. How you handle that conflict and address our natural aversion to conflict, can make all the difference. In the context of engineering, conflict can arise in many different situations:

- Missed project deadlines;
- Unmet client expectations;
- Disagreements between project team members; and,
- Pressures to accommodate project needs, budget, or other factors.

On some occasions, the pressure from those conflicts builds up in the minds of people to the point that they no longer can see the right path forward. And that sometimes includes doing unethical things, including lying and data falsification. In these situations, practitioners often fall into the same trap:

- 1) The engineer delays the tough or awkward conversation. This is often accomplished by telling a small lie to try to explain the delay (“I am almost done,” when most of the project work has not yet even begun). They think that, if they can buy themselves more time, they can solve the larger problem; *but*,
- 2) The problem snowballs because they now have to address both the original conflict AND cannot reveal that they lied in the first place. Rather than diminishing the level of conflict, they have increased it dramatically.

They likely will not be able to resolve the original conflict successfully and now have the additional pressure of not being truthful. So they convince themselves that the only way out of the predicament is a solution that involves an ethical breach, such as data falsification.

Someone who is otherwise well-intentioned could fall into this trap to avoid telling the client they were further behind in their schedule than they initially let on. Likewise, it is not

difficult to imagine – when they have backed themselves into this corner – that they might tell other lies, manipulate data, or engage in other unethical behavior to avoid other hard conversations with clients or management. Consequently, engineers must explore how to prevent these types of behaviors from ever occurring in the first place.



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Do you view ethics training as being analogous to safety training? Consider this, while there are *rules* regarding jobsite safety, try to focus on the *hazards* that led to the creation of the rules. It is one thing to say “wear a hard hat because Rule 7 requires one.” It is another to say, “there are lots of things out there that could hurt you. We do not want that to happen, so please wear a hard hat.”

Likewise, it is not enough to simply say “do not lie to clients” or “do not water down your professional opinions because a client wants you to.” In typical situations, most people agree they should not lie to clients, and they will not change their professional opinions. Yet these are often the same people who – when placed in an extremely stressful situation – may take a very different path. Engineers must focus on the hazards and ask:

What are the day-to-day pressures put on your employees? It is important to train your employees not only in required technical skills but in conflict management skills as well. This will help them defuse some of the conflicts inherent in their work. As an added benefit, those soft skills can make them a more valuable consultant to their client. Having a senior person in the role of a project and client management mentor is key to the development of these skills. That mentor can also act as an internal counselor for your employee if their project has gotten off track (i.e., at the first sign of potential conflict).

Are you asking your employees to do the impossible? Life in a professional services firm is never easy, and professionals are often expected to carry a full workload in addition to other responsibilities. But are you stretching your employees too thin? If your employees are being asked to maintain an unsustainable pace consistently, they will find ways to justify cutting corners. This is compounded by the fact that complaining about having too much on your plate is often (incorrectly) viewed as a sign of weakness. We cannot be surprised when someone who truly has more on their plate than they can handle chooses less than ideal ways to resolve their situation.

Are your employees empowered to deliver bad news safely? If your management staff has a “yeller” who consistently responds to bad news with aggression and conflict, employees are going to stop providing necessary information to that manager. It is that simple. That is not to say that the problems will disappear – they will just be hidden. That is also not to say that unforced errors such as missed deadlines should be immediately forgiven. But if employees cannot deliver bad news safely, then the problems will remain unaddressed and fester.

What behavior is modeled within your office? Culture is ultimately not created by what people hear but by what they see every day. The example set, good and bad, will be emulated by others. Consequently, your organization needs to *demonstrate* ethical behavior in addition to ongoing ethics awareness discussions. This means a continuing conversation from leadership about ethics, and it means training employees to prepare themselves for hard conversations. Most importantly, it means a consistent demonstration of ethical behavior at all levels of your organization. Training is not enough.

Hard conversations are a part of life. Each of us owes it to our employees to focus on the hazards and help prepare them for what lies ahead. ■



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