

CE News Risky Business, No. 14

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.” A truism? Hardly. Just an old expression that has sadly outlived its utility. Its literal intent is to advise recipients of a free horse that they shouldn’t question the horse’s age (by examining its teeth); the horse is a freebie, for Pete’s sake. But the guidance isn’t good. If the horse is “used up,” it will quickly become nothing more than an expense, turning perfectly good fodder into fertilizer of questionable merit. If the horse is temperamental, it will become a danger to other animals, including homo sapiens. And there’s also the chance that the horse has equine infectious anemia (EIA), a disease that can destroy all other horses in the stable, meaning that you need to test it thoroughly before allowing it into your barn. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth? Like hell! In fact, you better look it in the mouth and every other available orifice, lest you learn the hard way that, while it may be of flesh and blood, it’s a Trojan nonetheless.

So what does all of this have to do with clients? Everything! Because, when all is said and done, clients are the horses you ride to take you where you want to go or, if you’re not that skilled a rider, where they want to go. Which should you let into your barn, your “stable of clients”? For many a civil engineer, the answer is, “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.” And that’s unwise. Just ask those many civil engineers who have lost small and not-so-small fortunes, not to mention productivity, peace of mind, and reputation, because they have found themselves associated with a client who, as it turned out, was a fool, a charlatan, or worse.

All clients need to be evaluated from at least two perspectives. If they do not pass whatever tests you establish – and you *do* need to establish tests – then you should not allow them into your barn.

The first test relates to where they will take you: Are they going to where you want to be? If your answer is something on the order of, “How do I know that? I haven’t gotten there

yet, ha ha ha,” you need to heed the axiom that, without planning, all roads lead nowhere, and nowhere can at times be a pretty scary place. For example, how would you like to be the civil engineer of record for a number of inexpensively developed single-family housing subdivisions in areas of the country that are particularly susceptible to “toxic mold” claims? (More than 30,000 are pending in Texas alone.) For a plan to be effective, the organization first needs to determine its reason for existence (mission), then perform a SWOT analysis to identify its internal strengths (S) and weaknesses (W), along with the market’s opportunities (O) and threats (T). From there, it’s simply a matter of establishing the nature of the goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics the organization should apply to achieve its vision (how it perceives itself performing at some time (e.g., five years) in the future) in a way that is true to its mission. Will meeting the needs of a given client help move a firm toward where it wants to be? If not, don’t accept the client.

Test two relates to clients’ attitudes. If the client says, in essence, “Climb aboard. I love to gallop, even though my eyes aren’t as good as they used to be, and every now and then I seem to trip for no reason at all.” You’d have to be a fool to jump into the saddle. What, then, do you call someone who asks no questions at all before going for a ride?

If you haven’t before dealt with a given client or client representative, look at the teeth! Ask, “How did you hear about us?” Another good question: “Who have you used before for this service?” followed by, “Why aren’t you using them now?” If the client is a private-sector organization, inquire about funding. And the same applies to public-sector projects. Inadequate budgets almost always lead to shortcuts, and shortcuts often lead to Hell, or at least one of its suburbs. The process involved is called contract formation, and you need to apply it to every project you pursue. Sit down with the client before you agree to serve. If you don’t know much about the client and/or client representative, probe. Ask questions and ask others. And even if you already know the client and client representative, learn about the project, the client’s aspirations for it, as well as the timetable and budget. Then, assuming you want to ride, you can move forward together by mutually developing a scope of service – i.e., a project plan – that, when implemented, will get you both where you want to be.