

## ***CE News* “Risky Business” No. 26**

I’m on the road a lot, conducting seminars for engineering groups. As varied as the locations may be, however, when I’m addressing project managers, I’m confronted by a constant: “Raise your hand if, within the past six months, you’ve missed a deadline,” I say, and every hand goes up. “Raise your hand again if one of those deadlines was one you set,” I say, and, once again, every hand goes up. Then I point out what should be obvious: Client representatives hate missed deadlines.

“Oh, but the quality of the plans makes late delivery excusable,” I sometimes hear. But that’s usually a self-delusional outlook, given that most client representatives are not in a position to evaluate a deliverable’s quality. But they can evaluate adherence to a schedule and budget.

I admire engineers because they are responsible for keeping our fragile planet habitable. I’m offended when I hear owner’s representatives and engineers’ interprofessional clients make disparaging comments about them. But I can understand clients’ viewpoint, given that many of their projects begin with the engineer-in-charge lying to them: “How long will this take?” the client representative asks. “Fourteen to 17 weeks,” the engineer responds, *knowing* that the client representative hears 14 and the engineer means 17.

Much the same happens when client representatives ask about fee; i.e., the engineer-in-charge cites a range whose low end will materialize only when absolutely nothing unexpected occurs. The likelihood of that happening is near zero and the engineer knows it, having fulfilled similar engagements dozens of times.

Interestingly, about 20% of the people in almost every class say they have an automobile mechanic they love; whom they trust implicitly and often recommend to others. Were the mechanic to err, they say, they would never sue. I ask, “When the mechanic says your car will be ready Thursday at 4:00PM, when is it ready?”

“Usually Thursday by one or two,” I’m told.

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“And when the mechanic says the repair will cost \$250, how much do you wind up paying?” The common answer: “About \$225,” because auto mechanics practice something project managers should, too: expectations management.

Like engineers, auto mechanics perform for any given engagement services they’ve performed many times before. They know about how much time they’ll need (allowing for known unknowns) and how much it will cost. They also know that people seldom squawk about time and cost estimates that are at the high end of “reasonable”... but everyone *loves it* when delivery beats the maximum time and/or cost they’re expecting. It delights them. It makes them feel special. It converts them to loyal, repeat customers who go out of their way to refer their mechanics to others.

Unfortunately, civil engineering project managers seem committed to promising what they think client representatives want to hear. But when the schedule and/or budget is blown weeks or months later, whatever good feeling was generated at the project’s outset is turned inside out. Client representatives would love to be able to say to their bosses, “I was able to get the engineer to deliver the plans ahead of schedule, and for less than we budgeted.” It would make them heroes in their organizations. How do you think they feel when they’re turned into goats; when they have to explain to their bosses why deliverables were late and/or over budget?

Client representatives dislike those whose performance makes them look bad, and that animosity can lead to liability problems in addition to lost clients.

Fact: You know about how much time you’ll need to perform a commission that’s similar to 30, 40, or more you’ve done before. Fact: You know how much your service will cost the client. If the amounts are, say, ten weeks and \$10,000, why not give the client representative a range of twelve to 15 weeks and \$12,000 to \$15,000, including a contingency allowance that will permit you to respond immediately to the unanticipated? Then astound the client representative by delivering in eleven or twelve weeks for

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\$11,850. “That’s fantastic!” client representatives will say, and they’ll come back for more and more, and never sue.

True: In some cases, twelve to 15 weeks may be too much time and, so giving that range will lose you the commission. Can you do it faster? If so, indicate the fastest delivery date (do not use a range because you know ranges can be misleading) and do what it takes to deliver by no later than that date. (Delivering late to a schedule-sensitive client representative is a sure way of losing the client.) And much the same can be said about fee. But, realistically, if you want loyal clients for life, deliver twelve hours early to their schedule-sensitive representatives, and charge \$50 less when those representatives focus on budget. It’s little things that say, “We care.” Of course, little things can also say, “We don’t care.” Either statement is pretty big.

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