

The Doctor's Office

by John P. Bachner*

“So, what’s the problem?”

“I’m upset, doctor. And depressed.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, I’m a geotechnical engineer.”

“So?”

“That means I have to deal with more uncertainty and risk than any other design professional. My judgment probably has more impact on construction than anyone else’s. If I’m wrong, buildings fall down. Bridges collapse. Dams burst.”

“And the problem?”

“I don’t get any respect. Clients treat me like I’m a necessary evil. I propose a professional study, and they cut my scope so they can pay less, even though I’ll have less reliable information to work with. And you know the observational method?”

“What Terzaghi and Peck developed?”

“Hey, how many geotechnical engineers do you treat?”

“I have a special couch just for them.”

“Well, my clients continually split the construction observation from the subsurface exploration, so they can get the observation for less, even though it can’t be done as well. And my colleagues -- other design professionals, including even some geotechnical engineers – never bother to suggest there’s a better way.”

“What do you do about such disrespect?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Doing nothing just validates what your clients and colleagues are doing. You want them to think you’ll do anything for a buck?”

“Hey, you’re supposed to make me feel better, not worse.”

“I’m here to help you help yourself feel better. And to do that, you need some self-respect. That’s something you’ve got to get on your own.”

“But if I argue with my clients and colleagues, they’ll get someone else.”

“Tell me something: Of all the projects in your market each year, how many do you do? What percentage?”

“About three percent, I guess.”

“So for every project you perform, there are 30 or 40 you don’t. So, assuming you’ve really tried to educate the clients and colleagues you already have, and not even one of them listens to you, maybe it’s time to find some new clients and colleagues and educate them. Tell them about the cost-benefit of a better scope. Explain why you’re in the best position to observe earthwork. Do they even know that the recommendations in your final report aren’t your final recommendations?”

“No one cares, doc.”

“Wrong. You don’t care. Not about your profession and not about yourself as a representative of it. I care about my profession, and all that I am is a psychiatrist.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, what I do over my professional career affects maybe 1,000 people. What you do affects tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, maybe millions. But I don’t let my patients tell me what to prescribe for them. Why do you go along with that stuff?”

“Look, doc, I have 20 people on staff who need me to accept whatever I have to so I can make payroll.”

“But think about the thousands of future geotechnical engineers who depend on you to not sell out your profession. Where would you and your generation be if the prior generation of geotechnical engineers did whatever their clients wanted? And think about this: If clients and colleagues don’t respect you, whose fault is that? You want respect? Earn it.”

“Payroll, doc. Payroll.”

“Not really. If you had to downsize, would the people you cut find new jobs?”

“In a heartbeat.”

“And because you focused on better clients and colleagues, would your expenses and risks decline? Would your profits increase? Would you and everyone else on staff be happier?”

“I guess. Sure.”

“And if you focused on performing high-quality service and attracting the best clients and colleagues – people who appreciate true professionals – would your firm start growing again?”

“You know what, doc? You’re right. But I got to tell you, you’re in the wrong profession. You should be the marketing coordinator for a geotechnical engineering firm.”

“If I did that, I’d have to have my head examined.”

**John Philip Bachner is the executive vice president of ASFE/THE BEST PEOPLE ON EARTH. CGEA is an ASFE Regional Organization. As a result, all CGEA members are Regional Organization Affiliates of ASFE, and are entitled to a variety of benefits. These benefits include a special ASFE newsletter issued six times each year, special pricing on a variety of ASFE materials, and ASFE member pricing on programs, such as ASFE’s continuing education courses and seminars, some of which are designed to enhance one’s writing skills. For details, click to www.asfe.org.*

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