

The Real Pro

by John P. Bachner*

My circle of friends includes people who sometimes retain geotechnical engineers. When I speak with these people about geotechnical engineers' integrity, they sometimes look perplexed. "You can't have integrity if you don't keep your promises," they've said. "Geotechs don't meet their schedules or their budgets."

"But what about quality?" I ask. "So what if a report is a little late or a little over budget. Doesn't high quality make up for that?"

"But I'm in no position to evaluate quality," comes the reply. "What counts to me is keeping your word."

I was thinking about that when I got into my car. It had been acting up lately so I drove over to my mechanic's shop. As usual, Bubba was busy, but he made time for me. "I'll check it out and call you in an hour," he said.

Bubba called 50 minutes later, told me what was wrong, and said it would cost about \$325 to repair. "Suppose I asked you to do it for \$275?" I asked. "Wouldn't do it," Bubba said. "I do it right, and \$325 is what it's gonna' cost."

"Okay," I said. "And when will it be ready?"

"Thursday at four."

"What if I said I wanted it Wednesday by three?"

"I could try to get it done early, but you can count on Thursday at four."

I realized that the way Bubba handled himself was exactly what geotechnical engineers' client representatives were talking about. I called my friend Doug Downs, P.E., a geotechnical engineer, and told him about my experience with Bubba. "Why can't you guys do that?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "We get into that situation and we're like deer in the headlights. The client rep asks, 'When can you have this,' and we feel we have to set an almost-impossible deadline so we don't lose the commission."

"What about fee?"

"Same thing. We don't like to talk about contingencies, how something extra should be put aside in case we run into something unexpected."

"How often does the unexpected occur?"

"About 80 percent of the time."

"Why don't you tell your clients that?"

"I don't know."

I was at Bubba's that Thursday at four and, sure enough, my car was ready. He'd also had it washed and vacuumed. "I'm sorry I couldn't get it done any faster," he said. "But I was able to save you a few dollars. It came in at \$290."

"That's great, Bubba." And then I went on to tell him about the schedule/budget problems that seem to plague geotechnical engineers and lead people to question their integrity and, by extension, their professionalism.

“What’s your secret, Bubba? You almost always deliver at or ahead of schedule, on or below budget. How do you do it?”

“There’s really nothin’ to it,” Bubba began. “I been doin’ this for a while, so when I check your car out, I get a pretty good feel for what it’s gonna’ need and the other work I got goin’, and I set a schedule I know I can meet. Now, I’ll always try to do better’n that if I can, because that always comes as a pleasant surprise, givin’ the customer more’n they bargained for.”

“Like having my car washed and vacuumed before you return it to me.”

“Sure. It’s a sign of respect. Shows I appreciate your business.”

“And the same with money?”

“Of course. You gotta talk about money. I’m in business. Business is all about money. Ain’t nothin’ to be embarrassed about. I sure don’t want to tell you less’n it’s gonna be, ‘cause then you’ll think I was tryin’ to cheat you.”

“What about the unexpected? How do you handle that?”

“Well, you got two kinds of unexpected: your expected unexpecteds and your unexpected unexpecteds. The expected unexpecteds I can tell you about up front, and that accounts for about 90% of the unexpecteds. The unexpected unexpecteds take you by surprise, and I always let you know that that might happen, and if it does, I get on the phone right away.”

“Where did you learn that?”

“From my daddy. He told me, ‘Son, no matter what you decide to be in life, the one thing you always want to be is a man of your word. One of the best feelings in life is to be trusted, and if you’re not a man of your word, you’ll never get there.’”

“In other words, keep your promises.”

“That, and bein' careful to only promise what you know you can deliver. If you can do better'n that from time to time, people will love you for it. If you break your promises, you just ain't a professional. Tell your friends that.”

“I promise I will.”

**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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