

Engineers and Public Relation



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ENGINEERS are known to be very comfortable with formulas and figures, and happy to design structures that will eventually benefit mankind. That is what they learn from the very first day at the university. When I was studying at the university more than 30 years ago, subjects on management, human or public relations were not part of the syllabus. These were things that an engineer learned and experienced after he graduated.

These are, in fact, part of the requirements for passing the Professional Membership of our engineering institutions including the Board of Engineers Malaysia. The professional experience in dealing with the public only begins when an engineer joins the workforce. This article intends to share the experience of the author in dealing with the public when he was a government engineer and also after retirement as an independent consulting engineer.

A NEW ENGINEER

A new engineer is normally a sheltered figure. He has a senior who will guide him in doing his job at the office, laboratory or even on site. Most likely, he will have a set of duties that have been earmarked for him. He may, at certain times, be required to accompany his senior or boss to attend meetings with clients and even the authorities. Only when his boss is confident that he is competent enough will he be allowed to attend such meetings on his own.

Dealing with technical matters or even legal matters is relatively easy compared to dealing with the public as the latter is more educated now compared to about 30 years ago. An engineer who has experience managing projects bordering residential areas or anywhere near where people reside knows how difficult it is to deal with neighbours compared to dealing with subordinates.

Dirty effluent discharge from silt pond, dust, noise and ground vibration from blasting work are some of the common complaints from them. While many of these complaints may be justified and deserve attention from the engineer in charge, the consequence may be disastrous if, for example, the authorities imposed a stop work order pending investigation. It is quite normal for the authorities to issue such an order to calm the situation. The loser will be the project proponent in terms of a delayed project and increase in cost.

THE PUBLIC AND THE ENGINEER

An engineer is normally a very respected figure because of his academic training and more so if he is a Professional Engineer or Consultant Engineer by virtue of his long training and experience. In the author's experience in dealing with the public on mining, quarrying and construction blasting work, the projects that had the least problems with the public were those that engaged the neighbours from the very beginning.

We must be willing to show that we care for the neighbours and explain to them the benefits of the project, the effect of the project while it is ongoing and the mitigation measures undertaken to minimise the probable problems. The discussions need not be very detailed, but the concern of the engineer is most likely to be sufficient to cool the atmosphere when the actual trouble happens, if it really happens, such as in quarrying when flyrock incidence happens.

When this happens, the public would want an explanation from the engineer and not from the technician. A quarry that engages the public from the very beginning is more likely to receive friendlier treatment from them when trouble occurs. This is especially true in Selangor where many quarries are operating near residential areas. A similar situation arises when projects are carried out near established residential areas where people are affected by the increase in traffic from lorries carrying building materials, noise, pollution and danger from accidents.

The personal presence of the engineer is actually very important from a psychological point of view. However, the engineer must be well prepared with his expertise, and be well mannered and patient in dealing with the public.

WAYS TO IMPROVE RELATIONS WITH THE PUBLIC

There are many ways to improve the relations with your neighbours and the public that engineers may not find in book. Some of them include:

- 1) Contribute generously, for example, by taking part in mosque activities especially during the fasting month (for Muslims) and attend events sponsored by your employer.
- 2) Show the neighbours that you are concerned about their wellbeing by conducting regular surveys on the effect of your project on them.
- 3) Get to know the village head, "penghulu", "wakil rakyat" or other respected figures in the neighbourhood.
- 4) Encourage your staff to have, for example, tea at nearby stalls or where the neighbours congregate and communicate with them.
- 5) Send the senior engineer to attend meetings with the representatives of the neighbourhood to show them that they are important. Some government departments make it compulsory for the quarry operator to have regular meetings with the representatives of nearby residents to give them a chance to air their complaints.

All these activities actually show the public that we care about them. We benefit from their cooperation and they benefit from our presence from a business and also goodwill point of view. Engineers are part of the society and must be willing to engage them and show the public that they benefit from our presence. Only then can we earn their respect. ■