

By CAM VATANDOUST, P.ENG.

The primary role of every engineer is to serve the interest of the public. This paramount task, as it relates to the daily work of engineers, can be divided into two basic functions: first, ensuring that all engineering systems surpass the most recent standards in public health and safety and, second, making certain that the public's interest is protected in decisions that have long-term effects on standards of practice and the development of corporate policy.

The latter objective poses a greater risk of conflict between engineers and senior management teams, especially when the company ideology may not be in sync with the long-term interests of the public.

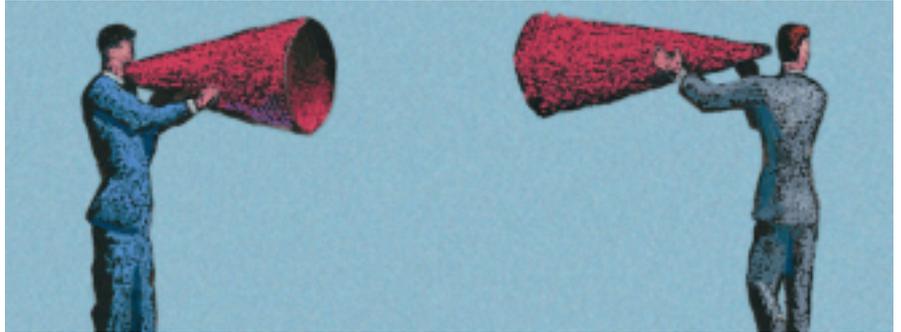
Changing agendas

In recent decades, engineers have had a much greater responsibility to fulfil in our society than just the traditional function of designers and inspectors. Advancing technologies have introduced new challenges to engineers in such new fields as biotechnology and alternative fuels research, and the expanding global marketplace poses new challenges to engineers and to corporations. As companies explore the global stage for innovative ways of ensuring profitability and of bringing their competitive edge to bear on rivals, engineers working within these companies must be prudent if they are to continue to protect the public's safety and interests.

The conventional focus of most corporations has been to increase the yield for the individual stockholder. This mindset has created tunnel vision within the corporate psyche and has kept corporations from addressing many issues perceived as secondary to their primary objectives and responsibilities.

Notions of corporate profitability and responsibility are changing, however, as corporations have come to a realization that they need to be seen as "responsible." This need has driven recent corporate undertakings that do not directly con-

Striking a balance



Corporate goals and engineering responsibility to the public interest aren't always synonymous. Because they are uniquely qualified to provide the necessary solutions, engineers must rise to the challenge in these times of changing corporate objectives and engineering roles to ensure public health and safety.

tribute to traditional corporate objectives. Engineers working in these new fields of practice are taking on roles, objectives and responsibilities that were not previously under their purview.

Conflicting objectives

As engineers, we must now continuously strive to balance the two potentially conflicting objectives of "serving the public" and "working within the corporate structure." But, sometimes, despite our best efforts and intentions, we do not serve the public interest to the best of our ability.

At times, the divergence of these two potentially competing ideologies is apparent only after we have faced difficulty in trying to meet both objectives. For example, investigators of the aftermath of a failed engineering structure rightly do not consider the design and construction company's corporate goals and objectives to be relevant during the investigation. Their only goal is to find the technical

cause and, ultimately, prevent similar future failures. Yet, the corporate culture of the engineer's employer may well have contributed significantly to the failure.

This leads us to conclude that engineers need to serve the public by developing and setting policies, goals and long-term ideologies that will move society forward and improve the lives of all its members. Whether in the private sector or the public service, engineers are well placed to meet this need because they are able to:

- simplify complex situations into reasonable and easy to understand factors; and
- make rational decisions based on these factors.

Although engineers are playing an ever-increasing role in taskforces and stakeholder groups working to determine procedures and processes to benefit the public, there is still much work to be done before engineers will automatically be recognized as key play-

ers and an integral part of decision-making processes in any industrial or service group.

The need for transparency

This developing corporate, economical and political landscape has brought with it a set of new performance benchmarks that were absent from corporate thinking only a few years ago. Arguably, the most important of these is the public's demand for transparency in decision-making processes and the elimination of "back-room" deals and agreements.

It is no longer reasonable to assume that only corporate profits determine the road to prosperity for a company; the public perception of what that company contributes to the challenges facing society is also important. As a result, more and more companies are becoming "good corporate citizens" and making decisions that far surpass their basic

obligations to their stockholders. They are driven not only by an interest in society's long-term improvement, but also by a wish to be seen as positive, caring forces of change within society.

Engineering credibility

Our efforts to improve public health and safety have given engineers immense credibility when dealing with situations that require third-party assessment and investigation. We must provide solid advice to our clients and serve the public by making recommendations that consider consequences far beyond the limited initial understanding of each situation. This is apparent in situations where procedures have to be set in place to prevent similar future problems that directly affect the public, such as when dealing with infrastructure issues like potable water standards. Again, however, this could be the

source of potential conflict between the role of engineers and corporate objectives.

My personal research and discussions with many colleagues on this issue of pure public interest versus both private- and public-sector corporate objectives leads me to conclude that, as engineers, we have a paramount role to play. We must be unbiased, logical, determined and imaginative in our recommendations. We must achieve the desired corporate goals and also make sure that public health and safety will not be compromised. We must be completely committed to being a positive force moving our society and all its members towards an ever-advancing civilization. Above all, this must be the dream of each one of us for our children and the better world with which we want to leave them. ▀

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