

Pursuing Excellence

by Charles L. Casper, SR/WA

Excellence—the quality or condition of being excellent. Superiority. Something in which one excels. (The American Heritage Dictionary).

Excellence is an exclusive, as well as an elusive condition. Excellence, like humility, is never achieved. Once we feel we have achieved, that in itself is proof that we have not.

Excellence is exclusive in that it consists of a quest or journey. We never arrive, but are always striving. It is much like traveling upward on a down escalator. If we stand still, we go backward. If we walk, we hold our own. We must run in order to get ahead.

Excellence is elusive in that few ever find it. It is never static, but always moving. The perimeters keep enlarging, even as we approach them. For those who do not choose to seek excellence in their lives, careers and relationships, they are destined to be relegated to the ranks of the mundane, the average, the "also rans."

To be average, one must realize that one is as close to the bottom as one is to the top. Will Rogers once said, "God must have loved the common man, he made so many of them!" No one wants to be thought of as common or average, yet many people are not willing to do that extra task, go that extra mile or yield that extra ounce of energy to lift them out of the "bog of the banal."

As a member of the International Right of Way Association, and as a professional in the field of real property acquisition; whether it be in the discipline of appraisal, engineering, law or negotiations; we must always be in quest of excellence. Whether an SR/WA, a candidate or a member of the Association, we cannot afford to do otherwise.

Whether we work for a local public

agency, a state agency, federal agency, a private company, or if we are self-employed, we all have bosses. We may have supervisors, department heads, boards or other intermediate powers over us, but we have even greater powers than these to please: the public and ourselves.

Complacency is a danger. It is like driving late at night on a long stretch of boring road. All too often, we fall asleep mentally, and before we realize it, we are off the road of competence and efficiency.

At the 1993 IRWA Education Seminar in Calgary, Alberta, I was privileged to listen to Cyndy Stevenson. She is a principal partner in the human resources firm of Stevenson, King and Associates of Calgary. Cyndy spoke on "Sailing through the Nineties," and much of her talk centered on environmental pollution by our attitudes and human tendencies.

By applying Cyndy's concept to our right-of-way profession, we can see ourselves as we are, and then envision ourselves as we might become. Don't we pollute our working environment with pollutants just as surely as we poison the ground, air and water, by discharging toxins? A list of some of these "personal pollutants," which poison our negotiation atmosphere, is given below. This is, by no means, an exhaustive list, and I am sure if you tried, you could come up with others to add to this list.

Personal pollutants

Prejudice, ignorance, impatience, laziness, selfishness, not listening, not being empathetic, vagueness, fear, arrogance, intolerance, rudeness, procrastination, carelessness, misinterpretation, being unprepared.

All these pollutants apply to us, especially in negotiating, but they also are applicable in our work as attorneys, appraisers, engineers and managers.

As the public becomes increasingly aware of their rights as citizens, and the limitations of restrictions which government entities or private contractors can impose upon them; it behooves each of us in the real property acquisition field to better prepare ourselves to know the entire scope of projects, from the pre-acquisition phase to the post-construction phase; convey clearly and concisely to the property owners all these facets and the various ramifications of the project; and finally, be able to follow up during all phases of construction, and after construction is finished.

It would be great if all persons dealing in a project through its entire course could be educated as to the process and the progress of each segment of that project. If the negotiator could see what the attorney has to go through, and the attorney could see what the appraiser is faced with; if the engineers could look at the project from the negotiator's perspective, there might be a closer rapport when projects are designed, acquired and built. In this age of specialization, it is difficult to fathom all the work that is required in seeing a project through from concept to completion.

How does one pursue excellence? I believe that, each morning, we have to get up and take a long hard look in the mirror. Do we like what we see? I don't mean in an arrogant manner, but in a soul-searching introspective look at where we are, and where we're going. We must be sure that honesty, integrity and dedication to high ethical ideals are more to us than just words in the dictionary. We must commit ourselves

daily, sometimes even hourly, to continuing the pursuit for excellence through: continued training, education and the exchange of information and fellowship with other professionals. We need to mix this with a generous amount of enthusiasm and plain hard work. Are you beginning to see why true excellence is both exclusive and elusive? It really is a journey, rather than a goal.

Local public agencies, state agencies, federal agencies, private utility companies and pipeline companies face a myriad of challenges in today's world—where land is increasingly scarce, and attitudes from the property owners are constantly changing, along with the requirements by public agencies (such as the Environmental Protection Agency), and private groups (such as Friends of the River or garden clubs).

In order to be informed professionals, we must constantly study and strive to equip ourselves with every tool at our disposal, to ensure that we are giving both our employer or client, our very best, as well as assuring the property owners that they have been part of a win-win situation.

Local public agencies today face a multitude of real property challenges. Many local public agencies must handle projects with limited funds, facilities and personnel. These could be airport projects, park and recreational projects, water and sewer projects, libraries or other public buildings, port facilities, as well as roads and bridges. Often, the state department of transportation will assist both with the money for project acquisition as well as construction.

Eclectic Professionals

Many times, too, although state and federal moneys are available for construction of the projects, the local public agency must pay for the acquisition of the real property, as well as obstruction removals and any related legal costs. Without dedicated professional help, either from staff people or private contractors, the project can become bogged down in politics as well as the morass of inexperience and inefficiency.

In this age of increasing specialization, we seem to be a society intent upon learning more and more about less and less. Much of this is necessary, due to the increasing complexity of tasks. Smaller local public agencies do not have the financial means necessary to hire specialists in several different fields in order to get a project completed. They must either hire a private firm that has a large diversity of skills, or go into the workplace and find specialists in each particular field the project requires.

Specialization is good, within reason, and the IRWA's declaration of specialty programs is commendable. I do maintain, however, that each of us in the Association need to know as much as possible about the other fields represented by the Association's members. For example, an appraiser needs to be familiar, to some extent, with the work of engineers, negotiators and attorneys. The SR/WA program is an excel-

lent means for assuring that this avenue is available.

It behooves us as an Association to be sure that none of the disciplines represented within our membership are weakened, but reducing the requirements and training mandated in order to attain a professional degree or designation. As each of us becomes better trained, better equipped and more proficient at our profession, we collectively become a stronger association, and each of us continues to be a bonafide participant in the great pursuit of excellence. □

Charles Casper, Vice Chair of the Local Public Agency committee is employed as Land Acquisition Manager for the Gwinnett County Transportation Department in Lawrenceville, GA. This is a metro-Atlanta County, which has experienced rapid growth during the past ten years. This growth continues today, coupled with the preparations for the 1996 Olympics.



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