



President's Message

BY FES PRESIDENT MARK MONGEAU, PE, ARDAMAN & ASSOCIATES, INC

WHY NOT US?

Do you remember the old Engineers' Week motto "Engineers... Turning Ideas Into Reality"? I was recently reminded of this motto while reading a wonderful book, *The Great Bridge: the Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge* by the best-selling author and historian David McCullough. In this book McCullough relates, in great detail, the conception, design, and construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, one of the greatest technological achievements in American history. Much of the story deals with the bridge's principal designer and engineering visionary, John A. Roebling, as well as with a number of other engineers of his time. To describe the perception of engineers in that period, McCullough quotes the biography of Louis Sullivan, the preeminent architect of the 19th century, "The chief engineers became his heroes; they loomed above other men... he dreamed to be a great engineer."

Imagine that. Engineers considered as heroes: by an architect no less. The book describes rock-star-like admiration for the men who advanced technology during the industrial age. The media with front-page stories, in-depth features, on-site celebrations and all manner of hoopla heralded every new major bridge, railroad, building, and addition to the "wonderworks" of the time. Imagine if we enjoyed that same level of celebrity today. We might see John Zumwalt III, PE on the Letterman show, Shannon LaRocque, PE interviewed by Bill O'Reilly, Kermit Prime, PE, FNSPE, DEE on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, Don Ditzenberger, PE guest hosting Tool Time and Ernie Cox, PE doing the Rumba on Dancing with the Stars. I could even realize one of my greatest dreams... Celebrity Jeopardy!

But alas, life for engineers in America has changed. Clearly, technology is advancing geometrically, and engineers are among the primary agents of this change. However, these days, the credit is given to those who either talk about or fund the advances (remember that Al Gore invented the internet), not those who actually envision change and make it happen. Engineers themselves are partly responsible for this unfortunate state. As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." We have, to a large degree, bought into the stereotypes. We seem comfortable, even honored by the labels "nerd", "geek", "egghead." We have heard them all and have come to accept them. We even use them ourselves. Make no mistake; no matter how we say them, they hurt us. They originated as and continue to be pejorative terms. They are the placards society hangs

around our necks to limit us. Recently, I had a conversation with a government official regarding volunteer opportunities with her agency. She had no problems with engineers serving on committees whose focus is narrowly limited to areas of infrastructure, but was puzzled by my suggestion that engineers might have a lot to add to groups charged with addressing broader societal issues. It didn't occur to her that engineers have the capacity to meet challenges dealing with education, crime, healthcare, poverty, and the like. In her mind, and in those of most of society, attorneys, politicians, and psychologists have a better handle on these issues. I don't agree.

Historically, social progress in America has been brought about not as much by social activism or political will, as by technological advancement and the work of engineers and scientists. Mechanization and advances in agricultural science and engineering transformed us from a rural, farming society to a more efficient urban one while, at the same time, increasing our ability to feed ourselves and the world. This same mechanization revolutionized productivity in our factories, which led to the end of child labor and excessive work weeks. Power plants and distribution systems lit our homes and businesses, creating a 24-hour society. In Florida, the introduction of air conditioning allowed the development and subsequent prosperity we enjoy today.

The 2005 Engineers' Week motto is "Engineers Make a World of Difference." Society could not function without us. We simply haven't been given the opportunity to work the problems, even though

that is what we do best—working the problem. Establish the end to be achieved, accumulate data, analyze the situation, prepare a course of action, implement the action, evaluate the results, modify the action (if necessary), achieve the goal and move on to the next problem. We do it every day and succeed many more times than not. It seems very obvious to me that this same direct and honest approach can be effectively applied to any and all problems, if only we were asked.

Personally, I've waited long enough for the invitation. I believe it is time for us to knock on the door and invite ourselves to the party, and ask a very simple question: Why not us?

- When looking for people to work out how to save social security... why not us?
- When school boards look for ideas to raise the performance of our children in school... why not us?
- When looking for help in solving the energy deficit... why not us?
- When looking to find a way to untie the Gordian knot of affordable health care in America... why not us?
- Who will step up to elected office to transform the way we govern in this country... **WHY NOT US!**

Of course, engineers will have to take their heads out of the cockpit and look at the sky. We must take the first step and offer our resources to serve our communities. Next, we must be persistent, and not accept the pigeonhole into which others

would place us. We need to obtain skill sets beyond our technical educations and learn how to effectively communicate our approach to the rest of society. We need to learn how to step out and lead. We cannot believe the naysayers who try to convince us that engineers are hopelessly introverted, boring and lacking in personality. These are the lies we are told to limit our reach. Do you remember those same types who used to tell little girls that they could not do well in math? Tell that to the MATHCOUNTS participants. We know that was bunk then, and so is the stereotyping of engineers today. I know for a fact, from personal experience, that the additional skills we need are learnable skills. The FES/FICE Leadership Institute, with the goal of helping transform technical professionals into community professionals, is a great example of a way for engineers to broaden their outlooks and gain some of these skills.

Engineering is a noble profession. Ultimately, we serve society, and we are deeply concerned with things beyond our personal interests. We accept a solemn obligation to advance our communities while preserving their health and safety. We build roads, bridges, industrial plants, satellites, computers, and power grids... but at the heart of our work, we build trust. Our neighbors have the right to expect that we will always work towards their best interest. In other words, they trust us. They trust that the bridge will safely support their car, that the electricity in their homes can be safely used, that the automobiles they drive will get them to their destinations in one piece, and that the water they drink will not harm them and their families.

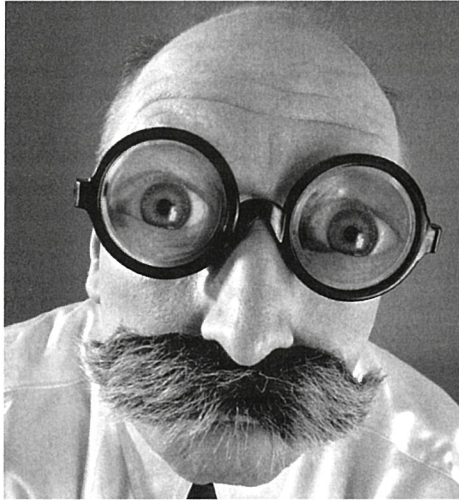
If they trust us in this way, why then will they not trust our judgment on a broader scale? I believe if we present ourselves in the right way, and help to address the wide range of challenges that face us, society will extend the trust they have in us. After all, we rarely fail to live up to the obligations we have accepted in our technical world. There is no reason to think we won't do the same as we roll up our sleeves to tear into a whole new set of challenges.

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Engineers... Why Not Us? ■

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