

MEMBER BEST PRACTICES



THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES TO PROJECT QUALITY

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There are dozens of factors that contribute to a successful highway construction project. The technical aspects of a project are important. In my long history of building roads, I have seen projects that were compromised by not following proper construction techniques, material quality issues, inclement weather, and a long list of other issues. But I believe there is one magical ingredient that contributes to the success or failure of a project—quality of relationships.

Two Levels of Relationships

The relationships that I am speaking about have two levels. There is the high level that is represented by the different entities represented on the project, such as the prime contractor, subcontractors, material suppliers and the owner's representative (engineers, inspectors, CEI consultants). Each entity might have a different perspective on the definition of a successful project. Some might define success as a good financial profit. Others might have the primary goal of finishing the project on time, on budget, and compliant with the plans and specifications. There is nothing wrong with either set of goals, but they can seem to be competing goals when an unexpected issue arises.

It is when unexpected issues arise that the second level of relationships becomes very important. I am talking about the individual level. Over the years, I have seen the attitudes that individuals bring into these tense situations contribute to the success or failure of a project more than anything else. During my last years with TxDOT, before I retired as the Construction Division Director, I had the opportunity to work directly with resolving disputes that elevated beyond the project team's ability to resolve.

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My PNP Theory

My experience with statewide disputes, along with my experience as an area engineer and district engineer, convinced me that it is difficult to come to a mutually acceptable solution to a dispute if one or more of the key staff on either side of the issue begins with a bad attitude. I came to think of bad attitudes as poison to the negotiations. I later started to classify attitudes as poison, neutral, or positive. I have applied what I call my "PNP Theory" many times, and in many different situations, and it has been enlightening every time and helpful very often. I would pause negotiations when I felt the tensions rising and discuss the three attitudes and ask the participants to consider their attitude and strive to be at least neutral and preferably positive. I would then take a break from the meeting to let the tensions clear and ask participants to consider their PNP status. I do not claim this to be a magic bullet that can solve every relationship problem, but I have never seen it hurt and have seen it help many times. Sometimes it was even me that had the poison attitude, and I was able to reframe and improve from the bad kind of P attitude to at least an N attitude.

Before you classify me as "touchy feely," ask anyone who knows me (including my wife), and they will testify that I am generally the opposite of that. I am not talking about everyone standing around a campfire, holding hands, and singing songs, but I do challenge you to give this PNP Theory some consideration the next time you find yourself in a dispute. It could even help in nonwork disputes, too.

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