

Perception and the Four Cs

BY BILL SCHEESSELE



Recently, there's been discussion about the engineering profession's "middling image," some of it in the pages of *PE* magazine. A number

of plausible reasons for this mediocre perception have been proposed, including criticism of technology, math/science-challenged educators, discouraging messages to prospective engineering students, and one particular comic strip.

Finding the cause of this perception is one thing. Fixing it is another. One of the best avenues to making a positive change is focusing on engineers' perceptions of themselves in this role and highlighting the profession's positive attributes and characteristics: credibility, confidence, character, and courage. Any of these attributes is powerful by itself. Together, they provide a formidable advantage for the PE.

Credibility

Many individuals rely on their products, services, or their company's name brand, history, or expertise to establish what they perceive to be their own "credibility." This can be a shaky foundation in the current business climate, when the general public's perception of a firm, due in part to headlines in the press, can have more ups and downs than a roller coaster.

True credibility, as exemplified in the engineering profession, is both established and earned. It's established based on your purpose being primary. Simply put, as an engineer, your purpose is to ensure that problems are solved and clients' needs are met. Meeting corporate or individual goals comes second. The result is earning trust on a very personal basis. Knowing your customers' world, understanding their challenges from their points of view, and knowing you can help solve problems from their perspective is a profoundly powerful position. Credibility is that value of being an integral part of helping a client, whether or not they actually buy their services or products from the engineers' firms. There is

no higher degree of trust. Credibility establishes trust, and trust is the basis of why people do business with other people—those who are committed to helping them. Score a point for engineers.

Confidence

Confidence is a firm belief, an absolute trust in something, someone, or oneself. Confidence, in any situation, is the act of knowing precisely what to do, how to do it, and why it works. Confidence in themselves and their process evolves as a result of study, practice, and learning. To attain confidence, engineers must persevere under pressure. PEs have been challenged by some of the most difficult education, examination, and experience requirements in engineering.

Most engineers have learned that in any stressful situation, they will do exactly what they have been trained to do. Effective development in any role must teach not only the knowledge of what to do in a particular situation, but also how to do it. Additionally, that learning must provide a true understanding of why a particular strategy, technique, or approach works. From this basis of knowledge, each engineer must apply it, practice it, struggle with it, and refine it. In "owning" a process, engineers understand what confidence is all about. Engineers trust in themselves to act according to best practices, and from this firm belief and conviction, they personify confidence in solving the most vexing problems. Score more points for engineers.

Character

Character is anchored in principles, values, and ethics. The notion that serving the client should be placed above profit, whether the client is an individual, a company, or the public at large, is inherent in the engineering profession. Time and time again, the lesson learned is that virtue isn't its own reward and that principles and profit are not mutually exclusive. *The Engineer's Creed* probably states this philosophy best: "To place service before profit, the honor and

standing of the profession before personal advantage, and the public welfare above all other considerations." Double the score for engineers.

Courage

Courage can be defined as "the attitude of facing and dealing with anything recognized as dangerous, difficult, or painful instead of withdrawing from it." In small decisions or in big actions, all engineers at some time in their lives are challenged to be courageous.

Courage grows out of confidence. For engineers, courage comes from having confidence in themselves—knowing who they are and abiding by the principles that anchor them. It develops from having confidence in their role as professionals and accepting their strengths and limitations. Courage is all about making the tough decisions and doing the right thing, which becomes easier when they are anchored in their principles and values. Courage is not without fear or uncertainty; but it is being brave enough to conquer fear and uncertainty, and believing in their purpose and themselves. Ultimately, courage is about character. Triple the points.

Tally the points. There's no doubt that engineers score high in professional circles. An engineer's individual credibility is the value established by helping others with their challenges, solving them, and earning trust. Having confidence in themselves, engineers come prepared knowing what to do, how to do it, and why it works. An engineer's character is anchored in the profession's principles, values, and ethics, providing the keystone of courage to do what's right for the client. That's integrity of the highest level.

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