

THE **ZWEIG** LETTER

The voice of reason for the AEC industry



CLIENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE

August 17, 2020

It's more important than ever to stay close to our clients, to understand their changing needs, and to help them achieve their business goals.

Back in 2016-2017, we at SCS Engineers were strategizing how to bolster our organic growth in what was then a sluggish economy. We decided we needed to focus more on client outcomes rather than simply completing projects. We had to broaden our perspective and become part of our client's delivery team, completely dedicated to helping them achieve their business goals. We rolled out training, communication and client feedback programs, implementation tools, and follow-up tactics to educate, align, and execute on the plan. We called this our Client Success initiative.

All significant mindset or culture changes take time and receive varying levels of initial acceptance. CSi was no exception. And frankly, soon after we launched the initiative, the economy took off and we, like most of the AEC industry, rode the wave. Our organic growth exceeded plan and we were busier than ever serving clients, even though we hadn't made huge strides in implementing the initiative. There was so much work on the street that it more or less walked in the door.

With the effects of COVID-19 on our psyches and the economy, it's more important than ever to stay close to our clients, to understand their changing needs, and to help them achieve their business goals. During and on the other side of this pandemic, clients will be forced to cut back on spending and will be looking for ways to stretch their dollar – to get more for less.

In such a world, understanding our client's objectives and focusing on delivering business value will be more critical than ever. It will be the differentiator that will determine our success as AEC firms, especially when we are competing for fewer opportunities. We must align our thinking or perspective with that of our client. After all, most of our clients are not in the business of doing engineering work.

Perhaps an example will help get the point across.

Take for instance a Brownfield or voluntary cleanup project in which our client, a developer, conducts their due diligence of a site to assess its viability for their envisioned master planned community. They must evaluate the entitlements, land use, and zoning restrictions, available surface transportation and utilities, and geotechnical and environmental conditions, among dozens of other factors. All this to satisfy themselves that they will be able to develop the site as planned, and their investment will yield the planned return. It's not uncommon for our clients to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in due diligence – on a property they aren't sure they will ever own. And they don't realize any return on their investment unless they purchase the property, construct the project, and start selling or occupying their final product.

So let's look at a couple of scenarios, focusing on the mindset of the environmental firm assisting the developer, as that's the area in which I'm most experienced.

In scenario one, the environmental consultant conducts Phase 1 and Phase 2 site assessments following appropriate protocols and delivers final reports that are positively good. The consultant's work is within budget and completed when

required, during the due diligence phase. The developer has an idea of the environmental condition of the site and a report they can submit to a bank to satisfy their requirements for a loan.

In the second scenario, the environmental consultant meets with the developer prior to starting the work to understand their goals for the project. They go over the conceptual layout and discuss the overall schedule, not only for due diligence, but also the desired construction schedule and sales plan. They discuss the approach government agencies have taken on similar projects, and the consultant shares their experience on approaches that have been used successfully to address the expected environmental conditions.

They discuss how environmental conditions can affect the project, such as restrictions on stormwater management areas, groundwater use, soil conditions, worker health and safety, etc. The consultant informs the developer about potential government programs that might be available to help the project. The final reports are positively good, and the consultant presents the findings to the developer and the developer's team to help develop strategies to overcome or deal with environmental constraints and make the project a reality.

The first consultant sees the project as an environmental project and frankly, they are providing commodity services. The second consultant understands their client's business and views their role as being part of the development team. Their project is much bigger than environmental work. They aren't just environmental consultants; they are community builders.

So the question is, do our clients want us just to solve technical problems, or do they want us to deliver business results? Or perhaps we need to look at it this way – do we want to be commodity service providers or advisors delivering business value?

Eduardo Smith, P.E. is senior vice president of client success at SCS Engineers. Contact him at esmith@scsengineers.com.

Click here to read the full issue.