

Engineers and the weight of words

Words such as “corruption” and “collusion” are on everyone’s lips these days. Since these words can lead to serious consequences, they carry quite a weight. Engineers must be mindful of the words they use, especially when they are embroiled in a highly emotional conflict situation . . .

This is exactly what a certain young man¹ should have done, November 7, 2011, when speaking before Chelsea’s municipal council. This young man was surrounded by hundreds of unhappy citizens who had come to protest the municipality’s project to lower Lake Beamish’s water level in order to verify the dam’s condition. Worried about the environmental repercussions involved in this type of work, the riverfront residents didn’t understand the city council’s rush to approve the project and questioned a preliminary report produced by an engineering consulting firm.

“This reeks of corruption”², said the young man in question at that point. He presented himself as an engineer, even though he was still a junior engineer at the time. He then alleged that the report was “based on false data”³ and he even went so far as to insinuate that there was a link between the engineering consulting firm and another firm’s residential project.

By using such colourful language, the so-called engineer also tarnished the reputation of the engineers involved – namely Chelsea’s Director of Public Works and Infrastructures and engineers at the firm responsible for the report – by casting doubt on their integrity and recommendations, speaking disparagingly of them and attacking their conclusions without proper knowledge.

DIRECT CONSEQUENCES

These words definitely made an impact. . . but probably not the one the young man expected. Aside from being quoted by two newspapers and the subject of a demand letter from the City of Chelsea, they led the Ordre des ingénieurs du Québec’s Syndic Office to conduct an investigation and file a complaint before the Disciplinary Council. What follows is a summary of the five charges laid against the junior engineer:

- 1) having lacked integrity and made misrepresentations with respect to his level of competence and his title, thereby violating section 3.02.02 of the Code of ethics of engineers;
- 2) having presented himself as an engineer, thereby violating section 3 of the Regulation respecting other terms and conditions for the issuance of permits by the Ordre des ingénieurs du Québec;
- 3) having expressed his opinion on matters dealing with engineering not based on sufficient knowledge and honest convictions, thereby violating section 2.04 of

the Code of ethics of engineers and section 8 of the Regulation respecting other terms and conditions for the issuance of permits by the Ordre des ingénieurs du Québec;

- 4) having damaged the reputation of the engineer at the head of Public Works and Infrastructures, thereby violating section 4.02.03 of the Code of ethics of engineers;

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- 5) having damaged the reputation of engineers employed by the engineering consulting firm, thereby violating section 4.02.03 of the Code of ethics of engineers.

The Disciplinary Council qualified the respondent’s conduct as serious behaviour casting a shadow over the profession as a whole. Moreover, the Council took into account the fact that the respondent had no disciplinary history, regretted his actions and pleaded guilty to all five counts. Another mitigating factor: the junior engineer wrote a letter apologizing to the City’s Director General, which was published in one of the newspapers that had reported his comments.

Consequently, the Disciplinary Council rendered a decision that had a deterrent effect for the respondent, that set an example for the profession and that ensured the public’s safety. Found guilty on all counts, the respondent was the subject of a reprimand, ordered to pay two fines totalling \$2,000 and stricken off the roll temporarily for two periods of two week, to be served concurrently. The Disciplinary Council also published a notice of its decision in a newspaper published in the area where the respondent works.

After consideration, words can carry an enormous weight and speaking publicly as an engineer should never be taken lightly.

1. Case CDOIQ 22-12-0409, Maxime Fréchette, Jr. Eng.

2. From « Le dossier du lac Beamish sème la controverse à Chelsea », *Le Droit*, November 8, 2011, p. 10.

3. *Ibid.*