

Competence, a question of self-management skills as well (Part 1)

Everyone understands competence in terms of known or learned skills (“knowledge”), and technical and scientific skills (“know how”)¹. But competence goes far beyond this expertise: it also deals with the relational aspect of things, namely “soft skills” or “self-management skills”. Although some misunderstand or disregard them, self-management skills are essential for all engineers who wish to practise in accordance with the highest professional standards. Here are a few fundamental notions relating to the third component of competence, self-management skills.

A COMPONENT OF THE “COMPETENCE” VALUE

Let us recall that competence is one of the four basic values of engineering, along with a sense of ethics, responsibility and social commitment². As an element of the “competence” value, self-management skills lead engineers to base their practice on a behaviour which allows them to fully assume their responsibilities. For example, engineers must be open-minded with respect to their interpersonal relationships. They must practise active listening and lead in a way that promotes objectives being attained. They must also be able to question themselves and learn from their experiences in order to improve their practice.

ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS

Competence also comes with a fundamental duty that governs every engineer’s professional practice. Many obligations set forth in the Professional Code and in the Code of ethics of engineers, with which engineers must comply at all times, relate to competence.

Some provisions deal specifically with engineers’ self-management skills. One way or another, they point to a behaviour which is respectful of the people engineers meet as they carry out their professional activities, such as: acting with dignity, and showing transparency, objectivity, moderation, courtesy and open-mindedness in their interpersonal relationships as well as their communications.

COLLABORATION

Engineers must collaborate with their colleagues. Clearly, maintaining cordial and respectful relationships with colleagues promotes the successful accomplishment of projects, mandates and other professional activities. Collaboration allows to serve clients appropriately and to act in their best interests. In practical terms, this collaboration can take several forms.

For instance, an engineer must advise his or her colleague if he or she is called upon to examine or replace such colleague’s engineering work³. Similarly, engineers must at all times acknowledge their clients’ right to consult another engineer and, in such cases, they must offer their cooperation to the latter, namely to share relevant information⁴. Consequently, it is important that engineers accept to cooperate with colleagues in these cases. However, it should be noted that collaborating does not mean abdicating one’s professional independence⁵.

There is no place for discrimination in the practice of engineering. Engineers are called upon to work with people from other communities with their own sociocultural baggage, whether it be here in Québec or in countries where the laws and regulations, climate and business culture are radically different. Engineers must demonstrate open-mindedness and flexibility and they must be able to collaborate with one another.

On that topic, section 4.02.07 of the Code of ethics of engineers dictates that an engineer may not refuse to collaborate with a member of the Order, in professional dealings, on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, national, ethnic or social origin and for any ground mentioned in section 10 of the Charter of human rights and freedoms (c. C-12). Similarly, section 57 of the Professional Code stipulates that no professional may refuse to provide services to a person because of the race, colour, sex, age, religion, national extraction or social origin of such person. Such behaviours can be penalized through disciplinary sanctions, even if the victim of discrimination has other recourses.

GOOD FAITH, RESPECT FOR THE WORK AND THE REPUTATION OF OTHERS

Dealings among members of the profession must be guided by good faith and respect for others. This obligation is specifically spelled out in section 4.02.03 of the Code of ethics, which stipulates that an engineer shall not abuse a colleague’s good faith, be guilty of breach of trust or be disloyal towards him or willfully damage his reputation.

Engineers can try to further their career or disagree with a colleague’s work, but they must do or say things properly. As such, engineers cannot take upon themselves the credit for engineering work which belongs to a colleague, namely by signing plans prepared by such colleague⁶.

Similarly, engineers cannot take advantage of their capacity of employer or executive to limit in any way the professional independence of an engineer employed by

them or under their responsibility, in particular with respect to the use of the title of engineer or the obligation of every engineer to commit his or her professional liability⁷. Nor can they induce a colleague to commit an offence against the laws and regulations governing the practice of the profession⁸.

If engineers are asked to examine a colleague's work or provide a professional opinion relating to such work, they must do it objectively and thoroughly. They cannot, under pretence of freedom of opinion or expression, offhandedly damage a colleague's integrity, for example, by making malicious comments with respect to that person⁹. Abusive or defamatory comments, untimely remarks and doubtful references relating to a colleague's or firm's reputation or past difficulties should be avoided¹⁰. However, an engineer pointing out a colleague's errors does not, in itself, constitute injury to reputation.

Respect for one's colleagues also extends to an engineer's publicity and other representations. Engineers must ensure that they do not invade a person's privacy or undermine a person's reputation¹¹, discredit, denigrate or disparage the services offered or rendered by other engineers¹².

Thus, engineers' relationships must be characterised by collaboration, good faith and respect in order to achieve self-management skills that measure up to the profession. In our next article, we will deal in greater depth with this component of competence, more particularly as it relates to engineers' relationships with their clients.

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1. Several articles featured in PLAN magazine have already dealt with this topic as well as with the engineer's obligations relating to this matter, specifically, articles published in the May 2011 edition entitled "Respecting one's obligations towards man: an essential duty of utmost importance", and in the October 2011 edition entitled "Before accepting a mandate, step back and take stock!"
 2. The Guidelines to Professional Practice contain an entire section devoted to the values of the profession.
 3. Sections 4.02.04 and 4.02.05 of the Code of ethics of engineers (the "Code").
 4. Section 3.01.04 of the Code.
 5. Section 4.02.06 of the Code.
 6. Section 4.02.03 (a) of the Code. On this topic, please refer to: *Ingénieurs (Ordre professionnel des) v. Paré*, CDOIQ 22-02-0268, Professions Tribunal (750-07-000002-068), November 17, 2007; *Ingénieurs (Ordre professionnel des) v. Rivard*, CDOIQ 22-05-0322.
 7. Section 4.02.03 (b) of the Code.
 8. Section 4.02.03 (c) of the Code.
 9. On this topic, please refer to: *Ingénieurs (Ordre professionnel des) v. Thibaut*, CDOIQ 22-96-0010, Professions Tribunal (500-07-000250-989), August 4, 1999.
 10. On this topic, please refer to: *Ingénieurs (Ordre professionnel des) v. Bourdages* CDOIQ 22-95-0007.
 11. On this topic, please refer to: *Ingénieurs (Ordre professionnel des) v. Paré*, op. cit., note vi.
 12. Section 5.01.01 of the Code.