



Delegation and Initiative in the Engineer-Client Relationship Credit

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

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Delegation and Initiative in the Engineer-Client Relationship

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Introduction

When a client hires an Engineer, he wants a clone with skills and resources. Typically, the consulting agreement requires the consultant to deliver a report or set of plans by a certain date, at which time the client pays him for the report. In this course we shall see, however, that the client is not buying a report or set of plans like he buys a carton of milk. He is hiring someone to do something that he would do himself, the way he would do it, if he had the necessary expertise, resources, and inclination. In short, he is delegating.

The Engineer is not a mere hired hand. She must look beyond the minimal requirements of the Statement of Work to discover how to meet the client's needs and act in the best interest of the client. The Engineer must take the initiative to make decisions for, and act on behalf of, the client. The level of initiative must be balanced against the client's desire and need to control the project. What are the constraints on the actions of the Engineer? Are there constraints explicitly defined in the contract? Does the client have unstated implicit constraints? What are they and how do you identify them?

In this course we will explore these questions.

Risk

In the Engineer-Client relationship, each party is taking on risk. The client is giving up a measure of control in exchange for the consultant's engineering expertise and skills. From the client's standpoint, this loss of control carries with it a certain amount of risk. Conversely, the type and level of control delegated to, and accepted by, the engineer directly relates to the nature and degree of liability and risk being accepted by the engineer. Again, the risk may be specifically identified or it may be implicit. Implicit or assumed responsibility and risk create opportunities for conflict and cost. Identification and allocation of risk is one of the key guiding principles in managing the balance between delegation and initiative.

How is Client-Engineer Delegation Related to the More Familiar Supervisor-Employee Relationship?

What is the nature of Client to Engineer delegation? Delegation is usually discussed in terms of the supervisor to employee relationship. Management theory and literature are rich with

guidance related to supervisor to employee delegation. A portion of the course will attempt to transfer some of those lessons to the client-consultant relationship.

How is Providing Services Different from Providing a Product?

Further, we will examine client-consultant communication from the standpoint of providing intangible services as well as providing the deliverable product i.e. a report or set of plans. The communication, as we shall see, may be plainly stated and explicit or, on the other hand, may contain much that is assumed or implicit. These factors have significant implications for risk management.

What does a Client Want and/or Need?

A client is usually involved in some venture, pursuing some goal that stretches or exceeds the expertise available within his organization. The consulting engineer is being hired to fill at least a portion of that gap. The client may need advice or recommendations regarding some decisions that he needs to make. Alternately, the client may need someone to perform some particular task, such as compile a set of plans and specifications. He may, however, need someone to act for him, as a "faithful agent", directing work and making decisions on his behalf.

Note: The National Society of Professional Engineers Code of Ethics uses the term "faithful agent". "Engineers, in the fulfillment of their professional duties, shall: ... Act for each employer or client as faithful agents or trustees."

When the client is not himself an engineer or architect, he may not actually know what he wants or needs. This is not to imply ignorance. The client is typically someone who is successful in his or her own field such as business, or law, or medicine. What the client lacks is the specific expertise and experience of an engineer. In this case, the consultant must first assist the client to determine his needs.

The client will want to reserve some decisions for himself. Other decisions may be left to the engineer. Determining this balance is delicate.

Understanding the Supervisor-Employee Relationship

To better understand the balance between client and consultant, let us examine two articles regarding delegation in the context of the supervisor to employee relationship.

Delegation

In the first article, "7 Levels of Delegation.", John McKee describes how, when a supervisor delegates, he distributes control in varying degrees. Authority can be granted to the employee or retained by the supervisor across a spectrum of levels. McKee provides the following list of supervisory instructions:

Levels of Delegation

1. Wait and be told, or do exactly what I say.
2. Look into this and tell me what you come up with.
3. Give me your recommendation, and other options with the pro's and con's of each. I'll let you know if you can go ahead.
4. Decide and let me know your decision. But wait for my go ahead.
5. Decide and let me know your decision. Go ahead unless I say stop.
6. Decide and take action, but let me know what you did.
7. Decide and take action. You don't need to check with me.

These seven instructions demonstrate increases in the subordinate's level of freedom, autonomy and responsibility with corresponding guidance regarding appropriate reporting and feedback. Each step demonstrates a change in the balance between decisions held by the supervisor and decisions permitted to the employee.

Initiative

Similarly, Stephen Covey in *Principle-Centered Leadership*, presents a list called "Levels of Initiative". These address the same issues of balance from the perspective of the subordinate. When contemplating an action, a subordinate must decide whether to act only in response to specific requests or to use their own judgment. Following is a slightly modified version of the list:

Levels of Initiative

1. Wait to be told.
2. Ask if you have a question.
3. Study it and make a recommendation.
4. Do it and report immediately.
5. Do it and report routinely.
6. Do it but don't bother to tell

Delegation and Initiative are Two Sides of the Same Coin.

Delegation is explicit permission (and requirement) to take action. The subordinate is allowed to use his own judgment because the supervisor trusts that the employee understands his wishes and priorities well enough to "clone" to supervisors judgment. The supervisor assumes that the risk of unwise action by the employee is slight enough to permit this loss of control.

Initiative is action taken without explicit permission or instruction. The employee feels that he understands the wishes of the supervisor well enough to implicitly assume that he has permission (or responsibility) to take a certain action. Taking the action places risk on the employer without the employer's specific permission.

How is the Client to Engineer Relationship Different?

These levels of delegation and initiative between supervisor and subordinate are somewhat analogous to the balance between client and consultant. Significant differences exist, however, in the relation to power, respect, and familiarity.

Power

Both employees and consultants are, in a sense, "hired hands". The client and the supervisor are in a position of power with, ostensibly, the ability to hire and fire. In either role, that of the employer or client, he expects compliance with his commands and instructions. The level of power held by the employer over his employee is, however, quite different from that of client over consultant. Employees, typically having only one job, are significantly more dependent on their employers for their livelihood than consultants who typically have several clients. Loss of a client or particular assignment may hurt the consultant's income but the impact of that loss pales in comparison to an employee's loss of his job.

Respect

There is similarly a difference in level of respect. The client views the consultant as more of a peer than he might consider an employee. Further, when working with a consultant, the client's lack of expertise carries little social stigma, whereas an employer is often hesitant to acknowledge his ignorance to a subordinate.

When handing out assignments, it is usual for a supervisor to describe the required task to the employee, who merely requests changes and adjustments. On the other hand, it is not at all unusual for a consultant to prepare a draft "Scope of Work" and for the client to suggest variations.

Familiarity

Further, the employer and employee typically have shared experience working together. They are accustomed to each other's habits, methods, and styles of communication. The relationship between the client and consultant is, on the other hand, typically temporary and sporadic. The employee knows the supervisor's expectations through habit and custom. Unless, however, the client and consultant have had extensive experience working together, there are no such habits to fall back on. Even when a consultant and engineer have worked together in the past, it is important to clarify how the current situation is, or is not, like the previous instances.

Managing Unshared Expectations

We see that the client and consultant can take less for granted. Their relationship requires attention to avoid the potential misunderstandings of unshared expectations and assumptions. Implicit expectations are those that go unstated because it is already assumed that the other party knows what those expectations are.

Listen Carefully

The consultant must listen keenly to what a client says, and how he says it, to detect unstated assumptions. Implicit, unstated, customary, and assumed expectations present many opportunities for misunderstandings, mistakes, waste, and cost. You, the consultant, are now aware of the need to monitor unstated expectations. Is the client similarly aware?

To detect these unshared expectations, the consultant needs to be intentional in communications with her client. It is usually wise to discuss, at least informally, any suspected misunderstandings as soon as evidence suggests their existence. If the misunderstandings seem significant, formalize the clarified understanding in writing.

Make Communication Explicit

For those who are unaware of the need to make implicit assumptions explicit, these conversations can become socially tedious. Although it is important to observe good social habits in all relationships (particularly when tact is called for), in client-engineer relationships, careful communication is important enough to risk some social awkwardness.

Even though human interaction will always have a significant portion that is implicit, much of the client-consultant relationship needs to be contractual, formal, and explicit. This is particularly true in those situations regarding the big bug-a-boos, time and money. It is therefore important that the original Statement of Work be clear, complete, and unambiguous.

Client's Typically Retained Authority

As the client and consultant work together to draft a Statement of Work, the client will want to retain to himself the authority to make certain decisions such as the decisions to:

1. Spend money on a feasibility study.
2. Implement the feasibility study and commit to the cost of project design.
3. Put the project out to bid.
4. Accept the contract and begin construction.

Though the engineer or architect's advice may be sought, these key decisions are almost exclusively made by the client.

Engineers Typically Retained Authority

On the other hand, purely engineering decisions, like whether to use 8 inch or 10 inch diameter sewer mains, or the number, size and configuration of reinforcing steel in the foundation, are typically solely within the engineer's domain.

The Situations In-Between, Determining and Clarifying Authority

Between these extremes are a number of decisions that might be made by either the client or engineer. Should the building have built-up or single membrane roofing? How many HVAC control zones should there be? Do you pave the parking lot with concrete or asphalt? These types of decisions are sometimes made by the owner, with engineering advice. Other times they are made by the engineer with final approval by the owner.

Factors in Determining Authority

The client and consultant need to come to an understanding about how to make these kinds of decisions. To develop this understanding they must take into account a number of considerations.

Risk

An important consideration is risk. Whoever makes the decision shoulders the risk. If the decision produces a negative outcome, it is generally expected that the person who made the decision must pay the cost. However, when a client makes a decision based on an engineer's recommendation, the engineer continues to retain a measure of liability. The risk assumed by the consultant falls along a spectrum. Making out-right decisions for the client entails the highest risk. Recommendations assume a somewhat lesser risk. Giving advice tends to lower the risk further.

Recommendations vs. Advice

The difference between a recommendation and advice can be illustrated by comparing the recommendation:

"I recommend single membrane roofing with maintenance."

with the advice:

"Single membrane roofing is a specialized procedure. Give the client the option of single membrane roofing them is a specialized procedure. It is easier to find a contractor who knows how to do it."

The recommendation, by advancing only one option, does not elicit other possibilities. The advice is presented, along with other options, and the client's liability. The engineer is not taking initiative to present more than one option.

Preference and Capability

Another consideration is the engineer's experience and expertise, he often prefers to let the client decide. In good conscience, allow the client to assume the associated risk. When a client may want the engineer to make many decisions for him.

