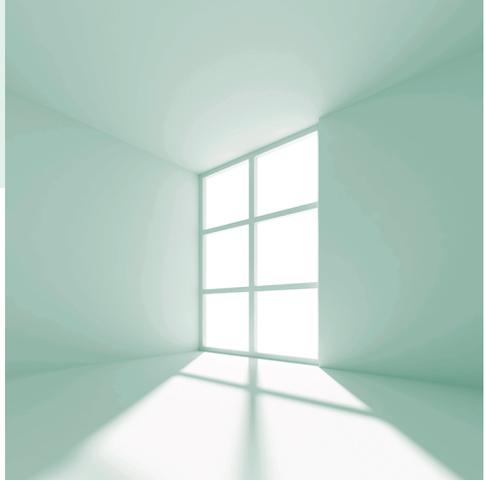


# 3

## GETTING ALONG



## CHAPTER TOPICS

- Inspector as Facilitator
- Respect
- Keeping an Open Mind
- Giving Bad News
- Difficult People
- Common Mistakes

**I**n the role of inspector, getting along with people may be the single most important attribute for gaining compliance with the code and confidence from the public that the building safety department provides a valuable service to the community. These so-called people skills should appear in one form or another on every job description for inspectors as a requisite skill. Getting along doesn't mean waiving code requirements, showing favoritism or being the contractor's buddy. It does mean an ability to relate to and communicate with people, facilitating code compliance to achieve safer buildings. While the previous chapter is about proper attitude and a systematic approach to inspection, this chapter is specific to interaction with people.

Whether justified or not, it is no secret that many people dread, or are at least uncomfortable, dealing with the building department. They've heard stories. It's human nature to share and sometimes



embellish negative experiences with a government regulatory agency, and some stories become local legend over time. We have all heard some variation of the adage that people who have had bad experiences are more likely to tell someone else than people who have had good experiences. For interactions with a building department, some people have come to expect an unpleasant confrontation with unfriendly and inflexible autocrats enforcing arbitrary and unreasonable rules. This vision is the stuff of sitcom television—the kind where we laugh at the misfortune of somebody else trying to deal with some surly bureaucrat who has no sense

of humor and an absurd set of rules. Of course, comedy can be a great exaggeration based on a kernel of truth. And the truth is, on occasion, some building department personnel have not always been easy to work with. That is changing. There is a heightened awareness that the building department needs to get buy-in from the public to be successful. A large part of that success hinges on inspectors developing people skills in addition to the technical skills that have always been emphasized.

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## INSPECTOR AS FACILITATOR

The first hurdle for an inspector in gaining acceptance of building safety regulations is to change the public's perception of inspectors as regulators to one of inspectors as facilitators. Facilitation means that an inspector works with the builder or homeowner to find solutions. As discussed earlier, the codes encourage innovation and alternatives that meet the intent of the code. The inspector's job reaches beyond a simple duty of enforcing rigid rules—it requires an open mind and flexibility. This does not diminish the need for technical expertise. To the contrary, it raises the bar in becoming familiar with construction methods and materials, and staying current with the ever-changing building construction technology. Likewise, having a good base of code knowledge is essential. This is where it all starts for the inspector. Without technical expertise, intent cannot be applied. Once the inspector has established that base knowledge of the code, the next step is to learn how to accurately apply the code provisions to real-life situations that come up on the job site. Once the inspector becomes known as a person who is knowledgeable and works

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Facilitate: To make easier, to help bring about.

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with builders to help solve problems, the building safety department and its inspectors can start to be seen as a resource rather than an adversary.

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## RESPECT

The manner and attitude of an inspector approaching a job site sets the tone of the inspection and can make the difference in successfully gaining compliance with the code. First and foremost, it is essential that an inspector be respectful to contractors, owners, installers and others on the job site or at the public counter for that matter. The goal as always is to achieve compliance through cooperation and understanding. There is never a need to be critical or demeaning, and such behavior on the part of the inspector is counterproductive, no matter the number of code deficiencies or quality of the work. When coupled with technical knowledge and effective communication, showing respect and courtesy to others helps build respect for and the credibility of the inspector and the department.

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## KEEPING AN OPEN MIND

In previous chapters we have discussed the intent of construction codes to recognize innovation and provide flexibility in methods and materials. This requires an open mind on the part of the inspector to recognize there are many alternatives available and there is always more than one way to achieve compliance with the intent and purpose of the code. As stated in the codes, it is the inspector's responsibility as delegated by the building official to accept alternative methods and materials that are satisfactory. This fundamental rule applies to all

aspects of necessary inspector skills. An open mind is equally important in an inspector's interaction with people. In order to consider alternatives, we must have an open mind and listen attentively and patiently to what is being proposed. In fact, developing skills as a listener may be the single most important first step to success as an inspector interacting with people. It signals respect and a willingness to thoughtfully consider ideas and opposing points of view. It invites interaction and leads people to think of the inspector as approachable and willing to work toward solutions. An inspector with an open mind considers the big picture—the end goal of ensuring safe buildings and the best way to get there under varying circumstances. This means considering a builder's skill, knowledge and limitations. For example, a homeowner acting as the contractor may have very limited experience and require more time and patience from the inspector than the seasoned contractor. The inspector needs to keep an open mind and anticipate where problems might occur in the course of construction. While interacting with customers on a particular inspection, spend some time discussing the next phase of the project and review aspects of that next phase that have the potential for being done wrong. This approach pays off particularly when working with homeowners or inexperienced builders, and helps them get it right the first time. It's certainly better to spend more time on the front end of the plan review, permit and inspection process than to face expensive corrections down the road.



Also, keeping an open mind applies to agreeing on reasonable requests and schedules of the owner and builder. For example, it is important to consider any contributing factors to delays in the schedule and to set realistic deadlines for corrections based on factors that are beyond the control of the contractor.

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## GIVING BAD NEWS

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**Empathy:** The ability to understand and be sensitive to another person's feelings.

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Inspection of construction is arguably the most important function of a building department in ensuring that buildings comply with the minimum requirements of the code to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public. This basic premise places an objective person (the inspector) with no vested interest in the outcome on the job site to verify construction meets the code. In a perfect world, any identified deficiencies and their correction would be minor. Unfortunately, even with the best of intentions, construction trades workers and installers make mistakes, and the fixes can be costly. The inspector is left to give the bad news to the builder. In delivering bad news it is important for the inspector to have empathy for the other person. Empathy is simply understanding how the person feels. You understand because you know how you would feel and probably have had similar experiences—this is often expressed as walking in someone else's shoes. It doesn't mean apologizing for your decision or for the code provisions, and it certainly doesn't mean waiving any code requirements. Having empathy is just a matter of being understanding and recognizing the impact of your actions. It is also important to explain the reasons for the code requirement and why the work needs to be corrected. It is never appropriate to say "because the code says so." The inspector needs to know

and be able to explain and support the code provision. This topic is covered in greater detail in the chapter on communication.

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## DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Most people want to do the right thing and to get along with others. This goes for the builder and property owner as well as the inspector. Difficult people are the exception rather than the rule. Nonetheless, inspectors will encounter difficult people and need to become skilled at working with them appropriately. The preferred approach and one that works most of the time is to work respectfully with people to find solutions to bring the work into conformance with the code. With the right approach, in most cases, people are willing to cooperate. Once they understand the reason and see the benefit of compliance to a particular code provision, most comply willingly. However, the inspector will on occasion encounter people who are difficult to work with in all situations, and the inspector needs to learn how best to handle interactions with difficult people. There are various reasons for opposition to the efforts of a building department. Some people resent any kind of regulation. They don't want to be told what to do and they don't want to pay permit fees for the "service." For others, it may be a reaction to a particular rule or something they are told to do to come into compliance with the code. Or, the person may just be difficult by nature or having a bad day. Often, with a patient approach, the inspector is able to reason with the individual, explain the benefits of complying and work out a satisfactory solution. When dealing with difficult people who are argumentative, demeaning or critical, it's important for the inspector to not take it personally. A word of caution is appropriate here. By "difficult," we mean negative, irri-