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GETTING ALONG



CHAPTER TOPICS

- Plan Reviewer as Facilitator
- Respect
- Keeping an Open Mind
- Giving Bad News
- Difficult People
- Common Plan Review Mistakes
- Key Points

In the plan reviewer's role, 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 plan reviewers, and all building department staff, as a requisite skill. Getting along doesn't mean waiving code requirements, showing favoritism or being the contractor's buddy. It does mean having the ability to relate to and communicate with people, facilitating code compliance to achieve safer buildings.

While the previous chapter was about having the proper attitude and creating a systematic approach to plan review, 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 of what is perceived as arbitrary decisions, long waits, curt responses and poor attitudes, and many other negative experiences. It's human nature to share and sometimes embellish such 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 viewpoint 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 all staff, including the reviewers, developing people skills in addition to the technical skills that have always been emphasized.

PLAN REVIEWER AS FACILITATOR

The first hurdle for a plan reviewer in gaining acceptance of building safety regulations is to change the public's perception of reviewers as regulators to one of facilitators.

Facilitation means that a reviewer works with the design team, builders and homeowners to find solutions. As discussed earlier, the codes encourage innovation and alternatives that meet the intent of the code. The reviewer'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 the intent and requirements of the codes, construction methods and materials, and staying current with ever-changing building construction technology. Likewise, having a good base of code knowledge is essential. This is where it all starts for the reviewer. Without technical expertise, intent cannot be applied.

Facilitate: To make easier, to help bring about.

Once the reviewer has gained the requisite base knowledge, the next step is to learn how to accurately apply the code provisions to real-life situations that come up during plan review. When the reviewer becomes known as a person who is knowledgeable and works with the design team, homeowners or builders to help solve problems, the building safety department and its staff

can begin to be seen as a resource rather than an adversary.

Reviewers have the opportunity to work alongside builders and inspectors in the field when construction-related issues arise and code-compliant solutions are sought that require a higher level of expertise and familiarity with the project design as reviewed. The reviewer can provide the basis of approval to assist in the understanding of how it was viewed from their perspective.

RESPECT

The manner and attitude of a plan reviewer during interaction with the public or while working with design professionals, homeowners and builders during plan review set the tone of the relationship and can make the difference in successfully gaining code compliance. First and foremost, it is essential that a reviewer be respectful to contractors, owners, design professionals and others. 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 reviewer is counterproductive, no matter the number of code deficiencies or quality of the work. Reviewers are perceived in a position of authority and are often viewed as intimidating. Their behavior reflects not only on the department but also the entire jurisdiction. The reviewers must introduce themselves and be active listeners to the applicants. They must also be willing to engage in a friendly conversation to establish rapport with proper time management and the task in mind. When coupled with technical knowledge and effective communication, showing respect and courtesy to others helps build respect and credibility for the reviewer and the building safety department.

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. In addition, new products, design methods and innovations are created and discovered during the code publication cycle. This challenge requires an open mind on the part of the plan reviewer to recognize there are many alternatives available to achieve compliance with the codes. When the codes implement performance-based provisions and provide several approaches to achieve their intent and purpose, the result will always be more than one way to achieve compliance. As stated in the codes, it is the building official's responsibility to approve alternative solutions provided they meet the intent of, and are equivalent to, that prescribed in the code. The building official may authorize the plan reviewer to make such decisions to the extent authorized.



Although an alternate method, material or design is not required to be approved, where such alternate solutions meet the conditions of the code, approval must be granted for the code compliance approach pursued by the designer. These fundamental rules apply to all aspects of necessary reviewer skills. An open mind is equally important in the reviewer's interaction with people. In order to consider alternatives, the reviewer 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 step to success as a reviewer interacting with the public and industry

professionals. 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 reviewer as approachable and willing to work toward solutions. A reviewer 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 based on the compliance approach sought. This means effective and clear communications with the design team to understand the compliance approach and be able to follow it. For smaller projects that are not prepared by design professionals and are generally subject to the prescriptive application of the code, it means considering the applicant's skill, knowledge and limitations. For example, a homeowner or a contractor designing their own project may have very limited experience and require more time and patience from the reviewer than the seasoned design professional or contractor. The reviewer needs to keep an open mind and anticipate where problems might occur in the course of construction. While interacting with applicants on a particular project, it's best to spend time anticipating construction issues that impact code compliance and explore solutions and alternatives. This approach pays off particularly when working with homeowners or inexperienced builders and helps them get it right on the plans. 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 to meet with design professionals, the owner and builder for correction verifications or to discuss owner changes or construction-related plan revisions. This is significant as, more often than not, a plan revisions review may delay the construction progress. In addition, correction verifications will delay the plan approval and permit issuance.

GIVING BAD NEWS

As discussed before, the review of plans for a proposed construction project is an important function of a building department in determining if buildings comply with the minimum requirements of the code to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public. This basic premise uses an objective person (the plan reviewer) with no vested interest in the outcome to verify that the proposed construction plans meet the code and grant approval leading to permit issuance. In a perfect world, any identified deficiencies and their corrections would be minor. Unfortunately, missed code requirements such as allowable area, building height, sprinkler requirements, occupancy classification and location on property, to name a few, are significant and may result in a change to the building geometry and size, the addition of fire-resistive components and sprinkler protection. These changes may add to the construction cost and the project schedule. In addition, a change to the building geometry and size may have major consequence to the project feasibility and development. Complicating matters further is the tendency for the design team to have the jurisdictional staff deliver this information (bad news) to the project's proponent or owner and blame the jurisdiction for the code requirements. The reviewer is left to deliver the bad news. In doing so, it is important to have empathy for the recipient(s). 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 one's 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

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

important to be able to explain the reasons for the code requirements and why the work needs to be corrected. It is never appropriate to say, “because the code says so.” The reviewer 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.

DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Most people want to do the right thing and get along with others. This goes for the design team, builder and property owner as well as the plan reviewer. Difficult people are the exception rather than the rule. Nonetheless, reviewers, and in general, building department staff, will encounter difficult people and need to become skilled at working with them appropriately. The preferred approach, which works most of the time, is to work respectfully with people to find solutions to bring the project into conformance to the code. With the right approach, in most cases people are willing to cooperate. Once they understand the reason and see the benefit, most will comply willingly. However, reviewers will on occasion encounter people who are difficult to work with in all situations, and they need to learn how best to handle these interactions. 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 comply with the code. Or, the person may just be difficult by nature or having a bad day. Often, with a patient approach, the reviewer is able to reason with the individual, explain the benefits of complying and work out a satisfactory solution. When dealing with difficult people