

# BUILDING BLOCKS

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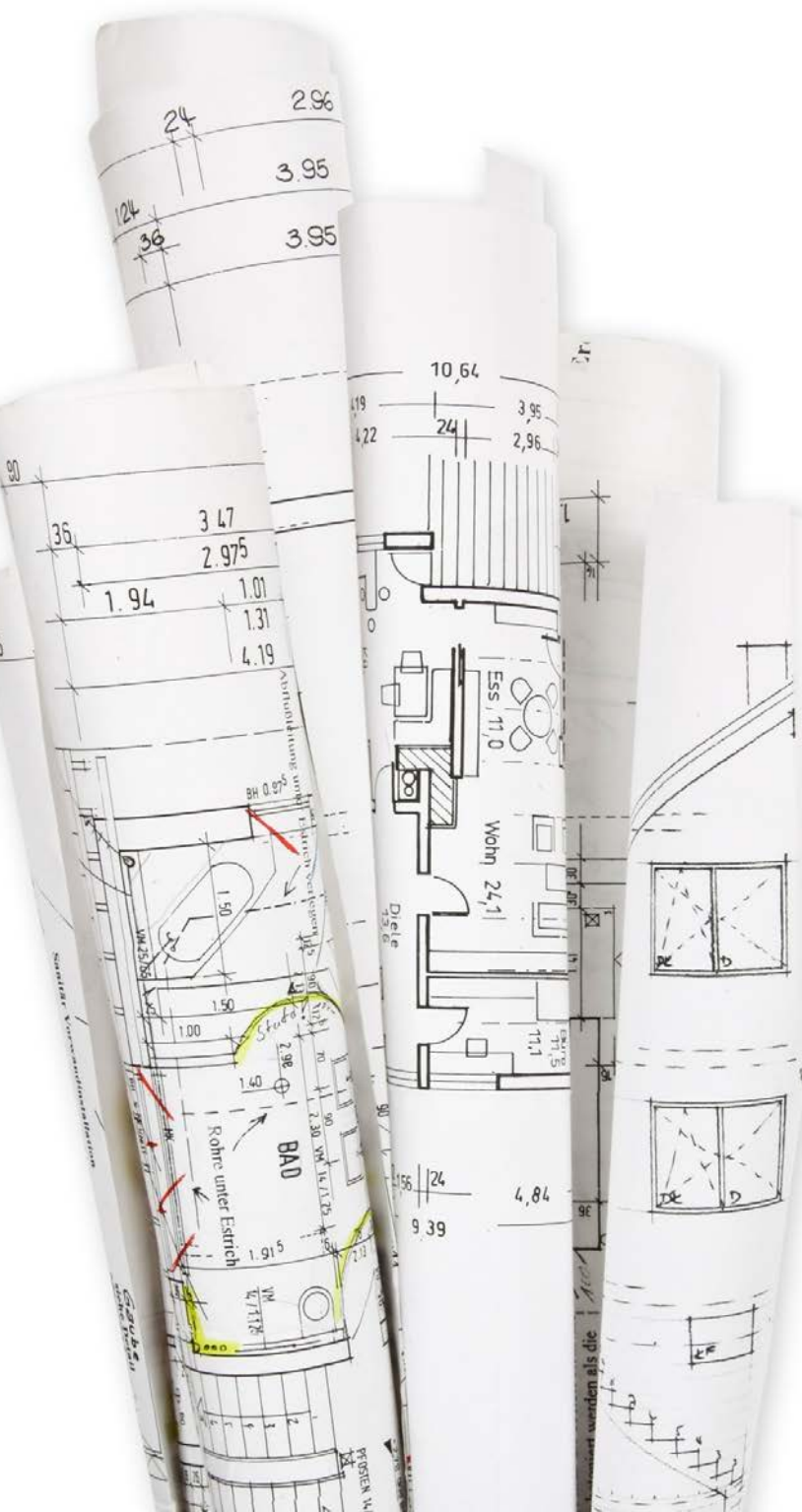
## COMMUNICATION SKILLS – #3 OF THE TOP 10 RISK MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES FOR DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

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In the October 2019 issue of Building Blocks, we outlined the top 10 risk management principles regarding design professionals for the next 10 months, one principle at a time, focusing on one each month.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, in the third of the top 10 principles, the January, 2020 issue of Building Blocks is focusing on “Communication Skills.” The top 10 principles are based, in part, upon the Council of American Structural Engineers’ (CASE) “Ten Foundations for Risk Management,” and the National Council of Architectural Boards’ (NCARB) two of the six educational modules titled “Practice Management” (PcM) and “Project Management” (PjM) of the Architectural Registration Examination (ARE). The first five risk management principals relate to practice management, and last five risk management principals relate to project management.

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<http://www.thebluediamondgallery.com/typewriter/c/communication.html>

Architects and engineers are generally known for their technical and graphic abilities, rather than their communication skills. Nonetheless, effective oral and written communications will benefit a design practice in numerous ways. Design professionals must successfully communicate internally and externally to match expectations with perceptions, among those they work with.

Developing and practicing good communication is the key to success of all design professional firms. An exceptionally gifted practitioner, be they are a project manager, designer, technician or administrative personnel, may not achieve success if he or she is unable to effectively communicate ideas to others.

And if communication skills are lacking, the firm should proactively seek training in this area of professional development for all members of your firm.

## COMMUNICATION INTERNALLY WITHIN YOUR FIRM

Utilize internal communication tools, including project status reports, meetings with agendas, action item/coordination lists, checklists, etc. Many firms also include selected post-project reviews, especially designed for less experienced staff members, to learn from the successes and problems encountered throughout the design, production and construction administration phases. Establish protocols for who in your firm is responsible for communicating to others outside the firm, obviously with clients, but also with consultants, building code officials, suppliers, contractors, etc. And most importantly, document your communications. The wisdom is:

*If it's not documented, it is as if it didn't happen.*

Opinions vary on the need and extent of taking exhaustive notes when listening when someone is speaking. Perhaps transcribing what is being said can get in the way of the message. However, nothing is worse than not being able to establish your position or prove your case, if you do not have the documentation to back up your defense in a dispute. And because of message erosion occurs so easily, the way in which information is communicated is significant, especially verbally.

## COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR CLIENT

Understanding your clients' needs and goals are a critical and required step in effective communication, as a "meeting of the minds" leads to seamless interaction. Clients make judgements about the professionalism and effectiveness of their design professional based upon on how they communicate. For example, a prospective client may summarily discard an architect's or engineer's qualifications submittal due to poor spelling and grammar, or excessive typographical errors. Potential clients may view poorly delivered communications as an indication that their design professional is disorganized, and a sloppy and inattentive practitioner.

Sometimes architects and engineers are accused of phrasing their communications in professional jargon that is incomprehensible or confusing to their clients. In The American Institute of Architects' Best Practices "In Praise of Plain English," Chapter 6.05, Bill Schmalz, FAIA, CSI discusses:

*... how writing in plain English-that is, using simple words and simple sentences whenever possible, even for complex topics-can make your writing more likely to be read, understood, and enjoyed.*

In addition, practitioners need to take the time and effort to learn their clients' language, rather than trying to impress them with obscure terms. Learning a client's language can include attending clients' conferences and conventions, to better understand the concerns and problems, as well as the successes, of their industry. It may also include sharing information about your design discipline as a professional presentation at your clients' events.

## COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR ALLIANCES

Your alliances (a relationship based upon a need or an affinity in interests) include anyone who is on your project team outside of your firm, such as your consultants, building code officials and construction contractors. Communication must flow in both directions throughout the project team. A breakdown in communications with these alliances can create a troubled project. Establish a rapport with those in your industry. The American Institute of Architects' Code of Ethics & Professional Conduct, Ethical Standard 1.6, Allied Arts and Industries, states that:

*Members should promote allied arts and contribute to the knowledge and capability of the building industries as a whole.*



<https://pixabay.com/vectors/hearing-listening-ear-communication-30097/>

## SECOND PART OF COMMUNICATION IS LISTENING

Effective communication is a two-way street. Listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process. If you cannot hear what someone is saying, perhaps you are not focusing on what you are going to say next. Listening is perhaps the most important of all interpersonal skills that you and your firm members must develop.

Listening is so critical that many firms should consider providing listening skills for their staff members. Certainly, good listening skills will lead to better client interactions, greater productivity and fewer mistakes. In addition, listening skills usually lead to more creativity work. Read more at

<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/listening-skills.html>

## IN CONCLUSION

Design professionals may not have had a class in college on communication. But all is not lost; training the skills of effective writing, speaking and listening are available. And architects and engineers can continuously hone these skills as they gain more experience in their practice.

<sup>1</sup> The above risk management principles have been adapted, in part, from an article that originally appeared in the June 2012 issue of *STRUCTURE* magazine, published by the National Council of Structural Engineers Associations (NCSEA), and is **reprinted with permission**. The top 10 principles of risk management for design professional are 1) A Firm's Culture & Ethical Practices, 2) Mentoring And Education, **3) Communication Skills**, 4) "Go/No Go" Policy, 5) Contracts & Ownership Of The Firm's Documents, 6) Develop A Scope Of Services With Appropriate Compensation, 7) Produce Quality Contract Documents, 8) Construction Phase Services, 9) Utilize A Certificate Of Substantial Completion, and 10) Dispute And Claim Handling.  
<https://cseengineermag.com/article/principles-and-tools-for-risk-management/> and *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 14<sup>th</sup> Edition, 6.2 Communicating with Clients.

## **About the Author**

*Eric O. Pempus, FAIA, Esq., NCARB has been a risk manager for the last 15 years with experience in architecture, law and professional liability insurance, and a unique and well-rounded background in the construction industry. He has 25 years of experience in the practice of architecture, and as an adjunct professor teaching professional practice courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels for the last 30 years. As a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and a member of the AIA National Ethics Council, he has demonstrated his impact on architectural profession. He has presented numerous loss prevention and continuing educational programs to design professionals and architectural students in various venues across the United States and Canada.*

*The above comments are based upon DesignPro Insurance Group's experience with Risk Management Loss Prevention activities, and should not be construed to represent a determination of legal issues, but are offered for general guidance with respect to your own risk management and loss prevention. The above comments do not replace your need for you to rely on your counsel for advice and a legal review, since every project and circumstance differs from every other set of facts.*

***Disclaimer:*** *The viewpoints expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily approved by, reflective of or edited by other individual, group, or institution. This article is an expression by the author(s) to generate discussion and interest in this topic.*



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# CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMS:

## Speaking Engagements:



### ***“Engineering Law & Ethics”***

Half Moon Education Seminars, Eau Claire, WI  
February 7, 2020 - 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.  
The Radisson, University Toledo Medical Center,  
Toledo, Ohio



### ***“Practice Management (PcM), Architecture Registration Examination (ARE 5.0)”***

AIA Cleveland  
March 7, 2020 – 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.  
Fabo Architecture Studios, Cleveland, OH



### ***“Ethical Concerns That Your A/E Clients May Encounter”***

ae ProNet Spring Conference, Nashville, TN  
March 18 – 19, 2010, Time to be Determined



### ***“Project Management (PjM), Architecture Registration Examination (ARE 5.0)”***

AIA Cleveland  
March 28, 2020 – 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.  
Fabo Architecture Studios, Cleveland, OH



### ***“Ethically Looking Outward – Architecture/Interior Design Perspectives”***

The Alberta Association of Architects  
Banff, Alberta, Canada  
May 9, 2020 - 10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

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