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- The process of design and construction is never easy or free of conflicts and disputes.



Douglas W. Kueffner, AIA, is the Chairman and a Principal at WTA Architects, a mid-sized architectural firm located in Saginaw, Michigan. A practicing Architect for over 36 years, Kueffner served the AIA at the Chapter and State levels including Saginaw Valley Chapter President in 1994 and Michigan Chapter President in 2011. He has recently served as a juror for the AGC Build Michigan Award program for the past 5 years.

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Reflections on the Role of a Construction Administrator

Douglas W. Kueffner, AIA, WTA Architects

It started last spring with a slight limp - nothing that would cause unnecessary alarm. It escalated, as Larry simply said, to "some medical problems I'm dealing with." It wasn't long before the "C" word was being muttered. It was prostate cancer, with suspicions of bone metastasis, all spreading fast. Soon he was on disability and then, at the beginning of this year, he was gone.

Last fall, Architect Jeff Hausman, AIA, wrote an article for this magazine that talked about design and construction as a team sport. Jeff suggested that we start to think of our respective professions as team members, striving for common goals. Today we will examine one of the key positions: the design team's construction administrator.

Larry Riley, AIA, a former partner and Vice President of Construction at WTA Architects, passed away earlier this year. He spent the last 25 of his 40-year career as a construction administrator for our Saginaw based firm. His position demanded that he act as the liaison between the architectural project managers, managers in the office, and the construction firms contracted to build the owner's project. His role also involved constant communication with the client. For years I used to think this was one of the easier jobs in our office. All one had to do was simply follow the drawings and specifications developed by the design team and observe a bit of construction. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Dealing with the loss of a long time employee, a fellow partner, and a valuable resource to our firm has caused me to reflect upon Larry's passing. It's become quite apparent to me that the role of a construction administrator is a difficult and often thankless job when we consider all of the parties involved.

First and foremost, a building project is most likely a 'one of a kind' solution to a complex set of requirements, needs, and expectations established by the client. A building project is not at all like a consumer product that has been researched, tested, refined, and then mass produced when all of the challenges and product issues have been resolved. Most every construction project is unique. The project will, or could, be built by a number of local contractors or construction managers. The contracting firm will be led by its management team consisting of a project manager and an on-site superintendent. The building team is even further diversified with a group of subcontractors and suppliers assembled from an even larger pool of bidders and vendors who are attempting to be a part of the team. Each subcontractor has its own specialty, its own unique characteristics and its own set of project concerns. Dealing with all of these diverse interests requires a special blend of talent and experience.

In addition to the issues and concerns of the construction trades, the architect's



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construction administrator must also balance the nuances of the design team and the technical staff. Are the documents complete or are important pieces vague or missing? And let's not forget the structural, mechanical and electrical engineers whose work must be carefully integrated into the design. Specialty consultants such as food service designers, audio-visual consultants, civil engineers, or other specialists can further complicate the process. In a perfect world everything is seamlessly coordinated, but as we all know, we do not operate in a perfect world.

Put everything together and the role of the construction administrator seems almost overwhelming. At some point, the majority of the construction problems on a project will find their way to the construction administrator's doorstep, and will require their experience and expertise to find a resolution. If you dwell on it long enough, one begins to wonder how anything actually gets built. Trying to understand all of the information and juggle all of the personalities on a construction project is a daunting task. How does the construction administrator even begin to achieve a balance between all of the conflicting roles and priorities? How does someone even prepare for that position?

Larry and I shared some classes together at Lawrence Technological University in the mid-seventies. Design studio was not his favorite; rather Larry seemed to develop an interest in the technical aspects of the profession. Upon graduation, Larry spent the first 15 years of his career in a drafting and detailing role that ultimately led to his understanding of construction and a level of expertise that became invaluable to his role as a construction administrator. His work on the boards helped hone a set of skills that served him well in his career on the construction side of our profession.

After Larry's passing, I started to accumulate a variety of thoughts and comments about Larry and how he handled his position. The comments came from all of the representatives involved in a construction project. Clients, owners of construction firms, construction firm superintendents, project managers, subcontractors, suppliers and even trade workers. All of them shared similar comments about their experiences with Larry. It took a while but over time I slowly realized that there was an overriding set of fundamental values that Larry followed in his day-to-day relationships with everyone he met on every construction project.

First of all, they all commented that he was a nice guy. Then they continued with simple assertions that he was easy to work with, he treated everyone with respect and - above all - they thought he was fair and honest, even when they disagreed with his observations. In my 25 years working with Larry in his role as a construction administrator for our firm, I cannot recall one time that anyone in



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the construction industry reflected negatively on how Larry treated them - and in today's often contentious and litigious world, that alone is a miracle.

I truly believe that these comments are really a testament to Larry's character and the fundamental values of honesty, integrity, and fairness he brought to his role as a construction administrator. There is an important lesson here for all of us to learn from. I am certain that we've all experienced the personalities of people that raise their voices, pound their fists, and try to coerce or intimidate the other party to come around to their way of thinking. We all know it doesn't work. All that behavior does is strengthen the resolve to work against the voice of demonstration.

I began to wonder what could be learned from Larry's example of honesty, integrity, and fairness and how I might apply this to my daily work. Because of this, I've gained an appreciation for what it takes to serve in the role of a construction administrator. I'm also truly convinced that if we treat all parties on a construction project with respect, honesty and integrity, we will all benefit from this experience. This approach applies to all parties: owners, contractors and architects. I believe we all stand to gain from this approach.



If you agree with me, the next time you are involved in a difficult issue on a construction project, ask yourself a few in depth questions: Am I really being honest with everyone else on the team or am I trying to protect my company's position at the expense of the other parties? Are we treating the other parties with respect and integrity or are we boosting our image at the expense of everyone else? And always strive to understand the issues and concerns from all sides of the discussions.

The process of design and construction is never easy or free of conflicts and disputes. It is a world filled with uncertainties and unknowns, conflicting interests, and multiple opinions. But one thing is certain, treating all parties involved on a construction project with dignity, honesty, and respect will make a difference for the better. Larry Riley, AIA, construction administrator, may not have been aware of the positive attributes that he brought to his role, but he made quite a difference. We can all do the same.

