

A Little Empathy Goes a Long Way

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America seems to be in love with adversarial relationships. The law is built on them. More and more simple disagreements seem to end up in court. Most of us have a favorite sports team, a group of elite professionals with whom we experience the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat. We want the world to be divided up into “good guys” and “bad guys,” “winners” and “losers,” and we have very definite ideas of which of these groups we are members.

Perception Test

Choose the oxymoron:

- A. Reasonable auditor
- B. Honest contractor

Scoring:

If you chose “A” as the oxymoron, you are probably charged with the administration of the property system for a defense contractor. Your last direct contact with a government auditor was 11.5 months ago, and you viewed it much the same as having an employee of the Internal Revenue Service offer to balance your check-book.

If you chose “B” you are probably a government property administrator spending several months of your year traveling from site to site examining contractor’s property systems. You may spend many nights lying awake wondering what diabolically clever ways your contractors are finding to hide problems from you.

The very fact that you found the test amusing (I hope) highlights the need for a general change of attitude on the part of both contractor and government property administrators. The attitudes illustrated in this little quiz are much more prevalent than even we in the business are ready to admit. They are also the major stumbling blocks to efficient, painless, and even cost-effective management of property in a government contract setting.

I believe that the best method for combating these problems is one that would assist us in a number of other areas in our lives: empathy. We need to be willing and able to develop a healthy level of trust and understanding in our relationships with our property counterparts.

First, let me speak to my fellow contractor property folks. We’re talking about developing a relationship here. The keystone of any relationship is communication. Talk to your GPA. Whoever he or she is, and whatever your doubts, they are human beings. If you deal with them with honesty and with integrity, they will respond. That doesn’t mean

that they’ll ignore a flagrant disregard for the regulations, but they will be in a better position to work with you.

You are a professional, act like one. You are in a much better position to know where the problems are in your system than your auditor. Don’t spend your time trying to hide them, spend it figuring out how to fix them. Formulate a plan, implement it, and document the results.

Your GPA is overworked, understaffed, underfunded and unappreciated. Sound familiar? Your auditor does not want to close you down. Remember, if they put you out of business, they don’t have a job.

Now, for you government folks. The contractor’s property manager is living in a no-man’s land. His manager sees him as an unrecoverable expense. His property “owners” see him as the enemy. The last thing this person needs in his life is someone coming in and creating more trouble. Talk to your contractor. He is also human, and will probably respond surprisingly well to being treated reasonably and fairly.

It is in your contractor’s best interest to have a compliant system, and he knows it. Work with him. You may be amazed at how much easier your job gets.

Win-lose relationships are fine for football teams, but we don’t have the luxury of treating our chosen profession like a game. We are the professionals of the property world. It’s up to us to create an environment in which both sides realize that we are working by the same rules, for a common result. With honesty, integrity, and communication, we can undo the common misconceptions we have about each other, and in so doing make all of our lives a little more pleasant.

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