



Landon Blake is currently project manager and project surveyor for a small civil engineering and land surveying company in California's Central Valley. Licensed in California and Nevada, his many activities include speaking and teaching at group conferences around the state.

Finding the Courage to Say "No"

My father died in May. He was 52. The loss of someone close to you, especially your father, forces you to examine your life. You ask, "Am I following the moral principles that I was raised with, even when I'm under pressure to compromise?" This loss in my life and three recent situations I observed in my career as a land surveyor have prompted me to write this article. Boundary surveying is a branch of surveying that is susceptible to shady practice, as it may seem easier to cut corners in the boundary surveying

proposal to the small surveying company and several other companies in the area. The RFP asks for complete topographic mapping, including aerial photography and utility research. Along with the complete topographic mapping, the RFP asks for a "record boundary".

Construction of a "record boundary" basically involves the following steps: 1) Drafting the bearings and distances in a map or deed to create CAD linework representing the parcel boundary. 2) Anchoring the vector geometry created from the bearings and distances to one found property corner monument. 3) Rotating the vector geometry created from

Why does the architect specifically request a "record boundary"? Because he or she doesn't want to pay for a proper boundary survey. Is this the type of project that the small surveying company should turn down? Or should it take the job because it really needs the work, even though it knows the winning proposer won't get paid for a proper boundary survey? (The architect doesn't want to pay for a proper boundary survey, but will no doubt rely on the "record boundary" shown on the topographic mapping provided by the land surveyor for tasks like the location of structures against building setback requirements.)

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Scenario #2

Bill has always taken a great deal of pride in his work as a boundary surveyor. He has a reputation within his company and among the local surveying community as a professional with an excellent work ethic. Other surveyors are pleased to follow in his footsteps on a parcel boundary retracement. However, the local economy has been ravaged by the housing downturn and economic recession. The company he works for is under intense pressure to compete. Prices are being driven down, and potential clients are demanding more work for less money. In a meeting with the owners of the company, bad news is delivered to Bill. The company can no longer afford Bill's pursuit of "perfection". Bill must find a way to lower costs on boundary surveys so the company can be more competitive. If necessary, Bill must reduce the time spent on document research and the time field crews spend searching for property corner monuments. If Bill says "no" to these adjustments, his job and the jobs of his staff will be on the list for elimination if a layoff becomes necessary.

component of a project than in other areas. (How much time can you really shave off a topographic survey?)

In each of the scenarios that follow, names and other minor details have been changed to protect the innocent and guilty, but the basic facts remain the same.

Scenario #1

A small surveying and engineering company receives a request for proposal from an architect. The architect has been hired by a local school district to design and manage improvements to several campuses in a city where the surveying company regularly conducts business. The architect has sent a request for

the bearings and distances to a second found property corner monument.

The creation of a "record boundary" does not typically involve the following actions that a prudent and professional land surveyor would conduct: 1) Interpretation of controlling calls contained in the vesting grant deed. 2) Review of maps and deeds for adjoining parcels. 3) Chain of title research to establish junior-senior rights. 4) Research of easements, leases, and other encumbrances of record. 5) Identification and location of physical features providing evidence of parcel boundary location, adverse possession, prescriptive use, or properties rights not documented in the public record.

Scenario #3

As a land surveyor working under the direction of engineering staff in the public works department of a local county, Judy has historically identified monuments that may be disturbed as part of road improvement projects conducted or funded by the county. This allows the county to meet the requirements of state law related to monument preservation on construction projects. However, at a recent meeting with managers of the department, Judy was instructed to eliminate the review for surveying monuments within the project site. Management is trying to stretch road improvement dollars, and this review work was one item deemed unnecessary considering the current budget constraints.

It Takes Courage

You may be required by your own ethics to say no *before* a project is acquired, *during* a project, or *after* a project is completed. Doing so, however, may result in: 1) Turning down a prospective project or prospective client. 2) Refusing to compromise standards of professional practice to meet budget or schedule pressures within your organization. 3) Refusing to neglect your professional duties to the public. (For example: filing a public record of your completed field survey.)

Given the current state of the economy, saying “No” may be one of the hardest professional decisions you will ever make. Most land surveyors have few alternatives if their bosses or clients are unhappy with that answer (and in most cases they *will* be unhappy). Few of us have potential employers beating down our door, or clients flush with cash and project ideas ringing our phone off the hook. To make matters worse, competition for projects and clients is intense. If you aren’t willing to say “yes” against your better judgment, another surveyor probably will, too, and will do the task for less money.

Potential Consequences

Let’s not sugar-coat reality. Saying “no” to your client or your boss can have serious consequences. Taking a stand on your professional ethics by turning down work or refusing to compromise your standards is very serious.

What may be the result? 1) You may lose clients and new projects. Ultimately this could lead to the closure of your business. 2) You could be fired, laid off, have your working hours reduced, or be otherwise punished and marginalized in your organization. 3) You may gain a

reputation as someone who isn’t “reasonable”, “practical”, or “in touch with economic realities”.

So Why Do the Right Thing?

Some might wonder why any land surveyor with a house payment or a family to feed would do “the right thing”. Doesn’t everyone need to make a few compromises to stay afloat right now?

This type of reasoning can be deceptive. It can also be pervasive. You will find this reasoning throughout our profession and the places we work. That doesn’t mean there aren’t good reasons for saying “no”. However, recognizing these reasons and doing the right thing requires that a land surveyor examine the bigger picture, and consider more than his or her own interests.

The reasons to say “no”, even when it takes great courage, include the following:

- 1) Saying “yes” can have long-term negative impacts on our profession.
- 2) Compromising on professional standards does not ultimately benefit the organizations we serve.
- 3) Giving into pressure to cut corners does not ultimately serve the best interests of our clients, even if they fail to understand this fact.
- 4) As licensed professionals, we have a duty to protect members of the public.

The Bottom Line

I struggle in my own professional practice to say “no” when it takes great courage to do so. I can easily think of more than one situation in the last 18 months in which I avoided having a difficult conversation because I was worried about the impact on my company or on my family’s financial welfare. I frequently face pressure in my own work to reduce costs and increase efficiencies. It is becoming more and more difficult to justify to clients and management the costs for work needed to meet legal and ethical requirements I have as a licensed land surveyor.

I suspect I’m not alone in my struggle. Other boundary surveyors around the United States are no doubt being squeezed by the same pressure. When you need the courage to say “no” in your own professional practice, ask yourself this question: “What would my father expect me to do in this situation?” That may stiffen your spine and lift your chin a bit.

I’d rather decide to fail in business as a boundary surveyor because I said “no” when it was required, than decide to be successful in business because I said “yes” when it was the wrong thing to do. I believe my father would agree. *A*