

Mr. or Ms. Janitor et al.

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Toward the end of my Transport Processes Design course, between the times when all the necessary transport material had been taught but the final design project was not yet due, there was a day that I took to talk with the junior-level students about professional issues. I used as a framework for the discussion an old version of an IEEE code of ethics. Most professional engineering societies have codes of ethics, and some of them, including the present IEEE code, have become quite elaborate; the one I used was relatively simple.

In this presentation, I talked about professional responsibilities for practicing engineers; I talked about keeping their knowledge current and joining societies; I talked about whistle blowing, working for adequate compensation, and conflicts of interest; I talked about the actions of the Morton Thiokol engineers in the Challenger space shuttle disaster, and I talked about why engineering firms in Maryland found it cheaper to give kickbacks to then Baltimore County Chief Executive Spiro Agnew than to incur the overhead expenses of unfunded engineering proposals. I also talked about the engineer's responsibility to the public, and how an engineer was expected to give service to the public for free despite the fact that elsewhere in the ethics code it states that engineers shall perform their professional activities for fair and adequate compensation. I illustrated this provision by reminding the students that the tuition they paid for their excellent education at the university, as expensive as it was, covered only a portion of the costs, and that their educations were being underwritten in part by taxes paid by the citizens of the state of Maryland. Thus, they had a responsibility to the public to give of their expertise whenever it was appropriate.

But, more than that, I said, even the janitor who they see sweeping and mopping the floor each day, emptying the trash can, and cleaning the bathrooms, is helping to educate you the students. Students owe something to the janitor and to the others whose service is often overlooked.

As faculty members, we can easily point to some of the people and organizations without which we could not have achieved as much as we have. Some that come to mind are the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and other local, regional, and national funding agencies. We know that our graduate students and post-doctoral associates have also contributed important energy and ideas to our work. If we are lucky enough to have laboratory technicians or graduate teaching assistants, then they, too, are usually admittedly given a portion of the credit for our successes.

But what of the invisible people whose labors are often forgotten? Without them, conditions would become intolerable or, in the extreme, impossible. Yes, the janitors are part of that forgotten cohort, but so are the people who change the light bulbs in our offices and labs, or the plumbers who fix clogged toilets, or the painters who keep our facilities looking decent. There are the grounds people who beautify our campuses, or the highway people who patch the streets so that we can come to work or go home in our automobiles without a teeth-jarring ride. Even harder to appreciate are the police who occasionally give us tickets for infractions but who also protect our parking spots from interlopers. There is the waiter or waitress who serves us lunch, or the counter person at the fast-food joint, or, when we brown-bag our lunch, there is the janitor again who empties our garbage from the trash can.

These are just the people who we encounter directly. Of course, there are others who help supply our electricity, our clean running water, and the food that we eat. Let's not forget them. We depend on so many.

Everyone knows how good it feels to be complimented for the good work we have done. Recognition from the boss or from colleagues has very positive and salutary effects. There are people, such as the janitor or garbage collector, who are so far down on the social ladder that they don't often hear appreciation for the work that they do. They are, sadly, often ignored.

It only takes a short amount of time out of a busy schedule to take notice of the nice job that the janitor or the groundskeeper or the painter is doing. A word of recognition and encouragement is certainly in order. A little "thank you" can be important, not only for the recipient, but also for the one who says these words. These people not only make our lives easier, but, through their taxes, they may also be helping to pay our salaries. They deserve recognition.