The Tale of the Boss that Took Too Much Credit
Dawn Ferris

Editor’s note: Do you have a tale you’d like to share—good or bad—about life as a soil scientist or an experience you’ve had in the field? If so, email it to Dawn Ferris at dferris@sciencesocieties.org. You may remain anonymous if you like.

My first “real” job out of my Ph.D. program was with a consulting engineering firm that specialized in transportation projects. These were not necessarily small projects, but primarily federal, state, and county highways that required environmental review documents and all of the permitting that goes along with these types of projects. I learned a lot working for this firm with respect to talking with DOT employees, government officials, permitting agencies, the public, and also the other professionals that I worked with, which included engineers, landscape architects, planners, and surveyors. Those professions I just mentioned are all professions that carry licensing as a requirement of practice, with the exception of planners, which carry a certification. I should also point out that when an individual is licensed (or certified) they are also required to sign an ethics statement and uphold that ethics statement. I know all of that now, but being fresh out of graduate school, I didn’t know a lot of details about being licensed or what ethics statements required. And thus begins the tale...

First, let me provide a little insight to this particular firm and how it was run. The owner of the company was a driven individual that had built a very respected and successful firm and seemed to be delaying retirement because he loved what he did so much. I didn't have much interaction with him until one day when coming into the office after doing wetland delineations for one of our projects. I was about to walk into the office when he stopped me and very seriously said, “You are going to change into business attire before you walk in the office.” Not even a question, but a statement. Now, I can’t imagine that I looked great. Have you been out doing delineations during the summer on a morning when the dew is heavy, and it is already hot and humid? You don’t exactly stay clean. But how do you go from jeans and a t-shirt (and, admittedly sweaty and dirty) to business attire in 10 minutes with no shower facilities? Unfortunately I had to because the management (or certications) were very important. And thus begins the tale...

Through the owner of this firm was run like a well-oiled machine, and protocols were well established. It meant money (and many times safety issues) and were necessary. It has been the case that I had to punch a time in 6-minute increments (those of you that are in consulting know what I am talking about here). The management style was definitely one of top-down, with several layers. And on the way out, I had to walk into the office in business attire before you walk in the office..." Not even a question, but a statement. Now, I can’t imagine that I looked great. Have you been out doing delineations during the summer on a morning when the dew is heavy, and it is already hot and humid? You don’t exactly stay clean. But how do you go from jeans and a t-shirt (and, admittedly sweaty and dirty) to business attire in 10 minutes with no shower facilities? Unfortunately I had to because the owner of the company wanted none of his professionals looking like the field technician. Appearances were very important.

I think I was an exception in most cases due to the fast-paced environment. The person with a soil scientist background in the firm, my credentials also helped in that I had the opportunity to provide input on larger federal projects, as well as many of the smaller projects for cities and counties. Through the owner and his values, the firm was run like a well-oiled machine, and protocols were well established. It meant money (and many times safety issues) and were necessary. It has been the case that I had to punch a time in 6-minute increments (those of you that are in consulting know what I am talking about here). The management style was definitely one of top-down, with several layers.