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 owner of the company wanted none of his professionals looking like the field technicians. Appearances were very important.

Through the owner and his values, the firm was run like a well-oiled machine, and protocols were quite strict. Mistakes meant money (and many times safety issues) and were not looked upon favorably. It has been the only place that I have worked at where time was accounted for 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 of management. We had to punch a time clock on the way in and on the way out. Junior staff, which was me at that point, were rarely, if ever, allowed to speak or meet with clients.

I think I was an exception to this in some cases due to the fact that I was the only person with a soils/hydrology/wetland background in the firm, and I think that my credentials also helped. The wonderful thing about working in this firm was that I did get to work with all types of professionals and learn from them as well as teach them about what I did. I had the opportunity to provide input on many of the projects because impacts to natural resources and the environment had to be addressed in all state and federal projects, as well as many of the smaller projects for cities and counties.
While some may cringe to hear this, my favorite professionals to work with were the engineers; we worked well together, but also came to learn from each other.

Unfortunately, I was not part of the engineering group even if I did spend the majority of my time working with them. I didn’t have a PE, so my immediate supervisor at this firm was a woman who was a certified planner. She was extremely talented and good at her job, but also very insecure, which I didn’t realize until much later. Her job was to ensure that the environmental review documents were completed and compiled correctly, in a timely manner, and on budget. Environmental review projects, especially the federal Environmental Impact Statements (EIS), are large and complex documents, so this can be a somewhat huge undertaking given that there is usually a Draft EIS, a Final EIS, and a multitude of other reports along with many public meetings. Therefore, my supervisor did have a fair amount of pressure on her to make sure her team, and by extension the firm, was providing quality work to all involved.

As I began my career with this firm, I was thrilled to be working on these types of projects. The sheer complexity appealed to me along with the puzzle of making all of the pieces fit together in a meaningful way that can lead to understanding the project, its alternatives, and consequences to the point where a decision can be made. To me, they are one of the best types of projects because they require a team approach due to the amount and depth of information required. By law, they also require public input and comment, which adds a whole different dimension to the complexity of the project.

**Give Me Some Credit**

For the first few months, all went well while I was getting up to speed, learning the regulations and starting to write portions of these documents as well as putting together permit applications for some of the projects. I don’t think it occurred to me to really listen to my supervisor talk to others about the work we did until I was asked about a permit application that a co-worker thought I had been working on. It was a complex individual wetland permit that required a lot of detail on the impact and mitigation, which meant getting the client and the agencies to agree on many details. I had worked with a few of our engineers on the design features, and we felt that we had come up with a good solution for the project and it was looking like the agencies were going to concur. My co-worker told me that my supervisor was taking the credit for the ideas and the success with the agencies. I have to admit that I was naïve enough to think that could never happen. I didn’t want to believe that what I had worked so hard on and was looking at as a success for those of us working on it was being claimed unfairly by someone else. Internally it hurt because I wanted to prove my worth to the firm since it seemed like they didn’t necessarily know or understand what a soil scientist could add or where I best fit in the structure of an engineering firm. I was proud of what our team had accomplished, and it looked like that was being minimized.

After that, I started paying more attention, and it didn’t take me long to figure out that no matter what I and others did to contribute to a team effort, she consistently told the clients and her superiors what she did and how she made it work. I listened to her talk to her boss at one point and heard a lot of “I” this and “I” that. She didn’t give the team credit for the work we did and the hours we put in but instead passed it off as her own work. On reports, only her name showed up as an author. I think that last point was my undoing. Having just come out of academia where people get credit for their work (or at least this was my experience—I admit that academia also has ethics issues), I just couldn’t put up with that type of behavior. For those asking themselves why I didn’t go over her head and say something, well, I eventually did. It didn’t do any good, and I think I was looked upon as the trouble maker. Maybe I just wanted a sense of fair play with acknowledgement of work done well.

In the end, I knew that my supervisor was at that firm for the long haul, and I would be the one that would need to leave. Eventually I did leave and went to another consulting firm that provided me with many new and different opportunities. Was it the best decision? I honestly don’t know. Was I too naïve or new to the business world to handle this correctly? Probably. I will never know how it could have turned out to stay there; they were and are a great firm. It was hard to leave knowing I had a group of people I enjoyed working with and was successful with, while at the same time having fun doing the work. I look at the firm’s management today, and I see a lot of my old colleagues are running the company.

In the years that have passed since my time at that particular consulting firm, I have seen and experienced many examples of poor ethical behavior. I imagine most people that have spent any amount of time in a career could say that. Whether it is poor judgment, being uneducated as to what is appropriate, or just plain doing it on purpose, it doesn’t make it any easier to deal with or confront. As professionals, especially those with licensing or certification, we need to be more cognizant of what goes on around us and help educate those just starting in their careers as to what is acceptable and listen to those that come to us with concerns.

**A Final Thought on Ethics**

In closing, I just want to point out that ethics are important in many different ways and in many different situations; this tale only hits on the “don’t take credit for other people’s work” scenario. Recognizing ethical issues as well as doing something about them is difficult, especially for the people being impacted by a breach in ethics. I am continually surprised (and disappointed) that I get so many complaints about the soil science certifications through SSSA carrying a requirement for 1 CEU in ethics out of the 40 required every two years to keep
a certification current. Ethics issues happen. I sat on the Minnesota Board of Architecture, Engineering, Land Surveying, Landscape Architecture, Geoscience and Interior Design and saw many professional ethics cases come in front of us during my tenure there. We have had ethics issues within the SSSA certification program. These are the types of issues that put a bad name on professionals and instill distrust in the eye of the public. Licensing and certification mean that we are held to a higher standard and that we have credentials that show we are qualified to do the work we do—and that includes paying attention to professional ethics and how you and your fellow professionals interact with clients, colleagues, and the public.

Want to learn more about ethics? Check out the archived version of a recent webinar presented by Dawn Ferris titled “Ethics: Or, That Little Grey Area You Need to Pay Attention To...” at www.soils.org/certifications/cpss-cpsc/self-study. The cost is $25. CEUs available for certified professionals.