So you say you’re about to attend your first bid letting? Well, no use being ill-prepared! Let me give you a little preview of what you’ll be witnessing:

At a few minutes to 2 o’clock (all bids are due by 2 p.m.), you enter a hazy room filled with tired, anxious people. The let-ters are the sterile, erect cast of characters perched behind the long table in the front of the room. The let-tees are all assembled in the audience, facing the head table, doing their very best to balance their broad, builder-type bodies on the tiny, wobbly, rock-hard folding chairs provided for the proceeding.

It’s Tuesday, Aug. 17, torridly hot, and the south-facing windows in the room—the only windows in the room—are painted shut. The A/C is broken, and the stale, musty chamber you’re about to enter hasn’t completed one entire air-change in all of its 35 years in existence. But it doesn’t matter. This is no time to be concerned over petty human comfort. These people have assembled for a reason; a common, powerful, allying purpose. These people have assembled for a bid letting.

A builder’s fate will be decided today.

He Who Hesitates . . .

You pause momentarily in the doorway to scope the room and take in the this auspicious moment. You’ll note this later as being your first mistake, for you’re immediately trampled from behind by Bill Brown of B & B Builders, who is just now storming through the doorway to deliver hi proposal, only seconds before the bid deadline expires. His elbow catches you square in the back, and you go from vertical to horizontal in the blink of an eye.

Momentarily stunned and a bit disoriented, you pick yourself up, dust off — and bamm!!! — you’re blind-sided once again by Ethel Frump from Cornerstone Construction, who (you’ve come to realize) is a rather large woman—and surprisingly quick for her size. This time, you wise up in time to grab hold of the door frame and pull your bent, broken body out of harms way—only a millisecond before three more bidders blast their way through the threshold, diving, battling and stretching for the head table, sealed proposals in hand.

You assess your situation. Your injuries appear mostly internal, so you crawl to me rear or me room and find an empty chair. The clock strikes two. The bid deadline has now passed, and proposals will no longer be accepted. Herman Frail of Frail Construction didn’t make it, and now lies weeping in a dejected, molten mass just inches

Editor’s Note: The names of companies and people used in this article are fictitious and are not meant to represent any real company or person in the industry. The names were selected with an eye toward making you snicker.
away from the table—another sad, bid-letting statistic.

Harold Hackney, the stuffy city admin-is-trator, ignores the sobbing diversion and calls the meeting to order. Though criminally over-dressed, he won’t break a sweat throughout the entire ceremony. In front of him, lying on the table, are 26 yellow, legal-size envelopes that hold the proposals, all bearing a label that says, “City of Plymouth Sludge Storage Building,” the construction of which awaits today’s victor.

Hackney addresses the crowd. First, he’ll announce the name of the bidder and then note whether their bid package includes the usual requirements: a bid bond, acknowledgment of addenda, signatures, affidavits and more. Next, he’ll announce the proposer’s base bid number, followed by the alternate bids (of which there are 17).

Your vision is beginning to clear up now, so you survey your surroundings. You look out the window and see Brent Jansen of Jansen Builders (whom you’ve dealt with in the past) leaning up against a tree out front, his back to the proceedings. He’s on his cellular phone and still thinks he’s got two minutes left before the bid deadline. He’s speaking frantically and waving his arms. He drove 82 miles per hour through six residential neighborhoods to make it here on time. Other builders in the room are pointing at him and laughing. “He’s not going to be happy,” you think.

You turn your attention back to the room. The membership is a virtual “who’s who” of the local building community. Everyone is here, many of them your customers. You, of course, are here to see which general ends up with the work. There’s a good-size job in it for you if it’s one of your guys, or you may even be able to pick up a new client if it isn’t. As for you, you’ve already done your bid work. Yesterday you faxed your quote to every bidding general you knew about (at least the names you could get from the Dodge Report). You talked to a couple of generals later that day and found out your number was pretty solid, so you think you stand a fairly good chance of walking away with some work.

Hackney reads the first proposal . . . then the second . . . then the third. He speaks slowly and deliberately, and seems inordinately pleased with the sound of his own voice. His plodding pace slows the proceeding to a crawl as the surrounding air grows thick and stale. The room filled with hot bodies only adds to the swelter, and the unmistakable aroma of a locker room begins to dominate your senses. You write down the bid results as they’re read, but beads of perspiration drip from your forehead and onto your pad, rendering many of the numbers muddy and unreadable. Hackney drones on for what seems an eternity, and your left leg is now asleep.

Still, you manage to take an interest in the proceeding. “Hmmm, these base bids seem kinda’ high,” you think. “I thought the Dodge Report said this was a $200,000 project.” You continue recording the base bids: $348,000, $356,000, 337,500, $340,500 . . . .

Only in America . . .

The architect, Siah Iwantmormoni (pronounced “I-want-more-money”) is seated at the head table, next to Hackney. He’s beginning to squirm a little now, for it was he who gave the owners the original $200,000 budget for the job (which, coincidentally, happened to be the maximum amount the owners had allowed for the project at the time). The architect’s budget number was just low enough (imagine the luck!) to allow the city board to award the architectural package to Siah’s firm. He was happy to be awarded the work, but for now, he’s hoping for a miracle . . . or a mistake.

But help doesn’t come. Hackney continues on, “. . . $365,000, $390,000, $402,000 . . .” and you continue to write down the results. You notice as each bid is read, Siah sinks lower and lower in his chair. The other members at the table (which include the public
works director, mayor, councilman and a couple of city engineers) begin to cast glances in Siah’s direction. Siah, busily engaged in calculating his fee for redrawing the plans, doesn’t acknowledge them. When he finishes his estimate (“...of course, this is only a budget number...”), he sits upright in his chair, his spirits once again buoyed by the number at the bottom of the paper. He checks hi watch and adjusts the small, electric fan blowing on his face. “This is win-win”, he tells himself... suppressing a smile.

The pile of yellow envelopes grows smaller. Only two left. “$388,000,” Hackney snarls, no longer even attempting to disguise the growing mutiny in hi voice. He throws the proposal on the pile, glares over at the architect and curtly snaps up the last envelope. Siah has again drifted off into deep thought, chagrined over not having the proper Chianti for tonight’s much-anticipated Beef Wellington dinner. Meanwhile, Hackney opens the final proposal. It’s from T & J Construction. Now, it just so happens that Ted from T & J has been seated next to you throughout the letting recording the results on his laptop. But you’ve noticed from very early on that something isn’t right. From the moment Hackney began reading the proposals, Ted hasn’t looked well. “Maybe it’s the heat,” you think.

Hackney peruses the final bid, but pauses momentarily before reading it aloud. Then, he adjusts his glasses and announces, “Base bid: $188,000!” You notice a hint of a smile forming at the corners of his mouth. Siah looks up from balancing his checkbook with renewed interest in the proceedings. A soft gasp rises from the room as everyone does the math. T & J’s alternate bids are then announced, and they also appear to be the lowest of the day. Hackney thanks the bidders and members at the table and adjourns the session. As the throng rolls out of the room, you turn to Ted to congratulate him. But he doesn’t move. The room continues to empty and soon it’s only you and Ted in the audience. Ted is still, motionless, staring straight ahead.

Suddenly, with a technique best described as catatonic, he springs from his chair and to his feet. Ignoring you, he tucks his laptop up under his arm and looks poised and calm as he approaches the head table, by all appearances, a man confident in his bid and his abilities.

“Congratulations, you’re low,” greets Hackney, arm outstretched and wrist bent suspiciously downward. “Boy, you really saved the day. I don’t know what we would’ve done without your bid!”

The other members of the table file past Ted as he returns the handshake, but Siah remains standing behind Hackney grinning abrasively.

“Thanks?” Ted says.

You’re still seated in the back row. You watch as the trio spends the next few minutes exchanging information, and soon Ted turns to leave. After a few steps, he pauses and takes a seat in the front row, apparently to record some notes on hi laptop. Your shirt is soaked through with sweat, and, when you get up, it sticks to the back of the chair. You make your way cautiously up the aisle, but you’re sensing it may not be the best time to approach Ted. You stop a few feet behind him as he’s plugging his mobile phone into the communications port of the laptop. As you watch over his shoulder, you see him log onto the Internet.

“Well, he seems to be taking this pretty well,” you think “Boy, if I just left $150,000 sitting on the table, Id be a wreck!”

But Ted remains cool and confident as you watch him type into his browser: “http://www.bankruptcy.com.”

About the Author
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