



by Peter M. DeVita, P.Eng.
President

Recently, I have been pondering my term as your 2000-2001 President, which will come to a close at PEO's AGM in April. I feel that I have pushed hard to move issues forward—at times perhaps too hard. I am very pleased with what we have accomplished so far.

Yet we have just begun to come to grips with myriad issues facing the profession. It all happens too fast for any one President. We struggle in the first half of our term to learn the ropes, and just as we begin to get the hang of it, it's all over.

In my view, the President's role is to lead Council in addressing the significant issues faced by the profession. He or she should not necessarily offer answers, but rather should pose the right questions and get Councillors thinking about the right subjects. The President is like a coach, who strives to get the best from his or her players.

Managing the learning curve

With over 70 people on staff and a \$12 million annual budget, PEO has become a substantial organization. There is considerable effort required to bring a new crop of Councillors (half of the elected ones) up to speed every year.

While Councillors are learning the ropes every year, the new President is scrambling to drive action. But we are out of phase. For Councillors to make a good decision there are three necessary steps—"educate," "discuss" and finally "debate." Each of these steps should be completed at a separate meeting, leaving adequate time for individual reflection.

If there are enough meetings and workshops, by October or November, Council may be ready to make well-considered

Reflections on governance

Is it time for a three-year presidential term?

decisions on the new issues of the day. This leaves only a short period of time, and only a few meetings, before a new Council takes office at PEO's April AGM.

To our detriment, engineers too often either discount or ignore human factors. No one can make a good decision without an adequate understanding of the facts, no matter how brilliant the individual. It takes time. We don't give ourselves that time.

Extending the President's term

The fact is that a one-year term in office for PEO's President simply isn't enough. If the President cannot lead effectively, where does that leave Council? Where does that leave the Ontario engineering profession?

It seems to me that a three-year term for the President would permit superior leadership to develop. Of course, we would need to make other adjustments to make a three-year term more feasible. Possible options include dropping the Past President as an official voting position, perhaps relaxing pre-experience requirements for Presidents (i.e. the one-year term as President-elect), and maybe even considering financial compensation so that a greater number of engineers could afford to serve as PEO President.

The national scene

How does a one-year presidential term (common to all provincial and territorial engineering associations) affect governance at the national level? At every engineering association's AGM, a new President takes office. Recently, association Presidents decided that they would meet twice a year coincident with the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers' board meetings. This means that, at every meeting, half of the Presidents will be new. This is hardly an effective way to coordinate our efforts in addressing national issues.

Why does it matter whether Presidents know each other? Have you ever tried reaching consensus with a room full of strangers? When even one new member joins a group, a period of readjustment is required. It takes time to develop relationships and the sense of trust that is necessary for a group to work together. Presidents who are experiencing problems in their provinces/territories need to feel comfortable sharing their concerns. It is in sharing that we learn about effective solutions others are using to solve the same problems we may be having, saving ourselves a great deal of experimentation.

What should be done?

The profession, particularly in Ontario, needs to look at what has to be done to put people in Council positions long enough to solve significant problems.

I have asked the Executive Committee, acting as a Governance Task Force, to take a new look at how we govern ourselves. But will we have enough time to understand the key points and make an informed decision? Your current (2000-2001) Council has only one meeting remaining, in February, before the new Council takes office. After that, about half of Council's elected members will change at the AGM, and the education cycle will start again.

Personally I am hoping that, this time around, there will be enough understanding and political will to make at least one important structural change to our governance system—changing the President's term of office.* Let's see what happens at the February meeting. ♦

**Note: If Council were to approve this change, it would take a few years to implement, since it would require the Attorney General's approval and could only begin to be applied with the first President elected following approval.*