

Lasting impact:

George R. Comrie, P.Eng.



by Michael Mastromatteo

Identifying priorities, allocating resources and measuring corporate success are top of mind for PEO's new President.

If one were to identify a prevailing theme in the election campaign literature, inaugural address and subsequent comments of PEO President George Comrie, P.Eng., the call to efficacy would likely come to mind.

Perhaps terms like efficacy and being proactive are overused in the rhetoric surrounding corporate governance, but in Comrie's case, one gets the sense that these are more than just buzz words.

Consider his platform for President-elect: "We have an unparalleled opportu-

nity to be proactive in refining and extending our model of professional competence to bring it in line with the expectations and needs of today's society ..." and "... I am committed to improving PEO's governance and management by establishing a culture of execution and accountability."

If achievement in the corporate world, and longtime interest in engineering regulation are the yardsticks, Comrie appears to have an enviable track record. He registered with PEO in 1973, shortly after completing his Master of Engineering degree at the University of Toronto. His early professional

career began as a lecturer with the university's industrial engineering department, followed by more than 25 years as an executive with Resource Management Consultants and, later, Data Design Systems Inc. Today, the father of four daughters combines his PEO role with work as Manager, Transportation Development (Rail/Transit Systems) at Wardrop Engineering Inc. in Mississauga.

Comrie has the somewhat unique advantage of being fluent with the PEO lexicon since his early days as a newly licensed, upwardly mobile P.Eng. His initial work at the U of T's industrial engineering depart-

ment kept him in touch with mentors Ralph Anderson, P.Eng., and Philip Hughes, P.Eng., both of whom were highly active in PEO administration. "I would have coffee in the morning with these gentlemen in the staff lounge," Comrie reflected, "and involvement in PEO affairs was taken for granted. It was something you did as part of the professional faculty." He has remained active with the PEO Etobicoke Chapter throughout his career, and has served on several association task forces and committees, especially those focusing on education.

In his first interview with *Engineering Dimensions* since being elected PEO President, Comrie discussed the key challenges awaiting the chief executive and Council. "The number one thing that I would like to change about the culture of the organization is that we have historically been a reactive organization and, usually, by the time we find out that something is going on that's going to affect our environment, there's already a lot of water under the bridge—and I think that has to change."

self-governing model dedicated to public protection.

"We've got into the habit of not taking the initiative and they (the provincial government) have got into the habit of not expecting us to take the initiative," Comrie said, "and if this carries on for much longer, people are going to say, is there really a point in having a self-governing engineering profession, or do we have other ways of protecting society?"

This emphasis on keeping PEO relevant was reflected in Comrie's inaugural address to PEO Council April 24 during the 2004 Annual General Meeting. He said the proliferation of government regulation and qualification mechanisms has cast doubt about the unassailability of the current self-regulatory model. In addition, demands by technologists and others working alongside engineers for their own titles and rights to practise require an agreement among all players for standards of competence and practice, and on "appropriate regulatory mechanisms."

To avoid such a scenario, he has already been at work strengthening links among executive, Council and staff to identify priorities and to map out strategy.

"My biggest priority is to try to provide leadership and to help Council take hold of things that it wants to get done and when it hopes to get them done," Comrie said. "I'm talking about execution in terms of the discipline of getting things done. We've got to be concerned about what we want to accomplish and what constitutes success for us."

In this sense, it appears Comrie plans to bring his experience as a computer systems executive to bear on PEO. He is cognizant, however, of the tact, diplomacy and flexibility required of any successful leader. Comrie recognizes that whatever personal priorities he has for PEO must be shared and accepted by Council, membership and staff. "It's not my agenda, it's Council's agenda," he said. "And if I am trying to go in a particular direction and I can't sell it to

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Undoubtedly, provincial government consultations surrounding Bill 124 (*Building Code Statute Law Amendment Act*) and Bill 56 (*Brownfields Statute Law Amendment Act*) have affected the engineering environment. Some critics have cited these two bills, coupled with public outcry over contaminated drinking water and electricity supply interruptions, as examples of where Ontario's engineering community could have been put in a more positive light.

Comrie, however, doesn't point fingers. Instead, he proposes a confident, assertive approach that would allow PEO to identify key issues, marshal appropriate resources, and ultimately obtain results that benefit the public and Ontario P.Engs. A proud declaration of engineering's *raison d'être* would validate continuing reliance on the

Other priorities cited by Comrie in his first speech to Council include a re-examination of the "one size fits all" approach to professional licensing, especially as it applies to measuring and maintaining competence. Comrie also favours close collaboration with the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE) to identify engineering-related issues that might require changes to public policy, and to present recommendations to the provincial government.

"We've had all kinds of indications from both the current and past government that they are receptive to this," Comrie said. "They are basically saying, 'tell us what you think needs to be done.'"

Comrie appears to understand that the best of intentions can be undermined by lack of communication and resolve.

Council, we're not going to go there."

Comrie also believes a successful leader should have a vision that extends beyond the end of his or her particular term. To that end, he hopes to equip PEO with a means to meet short- and longer-term objectives seamlessly, without the interruptions and false starts that sometimes beset corporate maneuvering.

"I guess I'm more concerned about equipping the organization to do what it needs to do on an ongoing basis ... I'm looking for a longer-term payback than just my own term. I'll be around for another year at least, and I'll probably volunteer to help out after that, but in the long term, I'd like to make PEO more effective for the next 20 years, not just for 2004."



In his own words

Engineering Dimensions: Dr. Tom Brzustowski, P.Eng., head of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), recently told delegates at PEO's Annual General Meeting that professional engineers had no meaningful input in the development of Canada's innovation strategy. Based on his observations, would you agree that professional engineering in Canada has an image problem and that it is often taken for granted by policy makers?

George Comrie: Absolutely. I often think that engineers are their own worst enemies in this regard. We often prefer to stay in the background and make our contributions without fanfare or "hype," to which many engineers have an aversion. I suppose that comes from listening to politicians and journalists pontificating about technical matters they don't understand and advocating solutions that won't work. We don't want to be like them. But the truth is, our voice is seldom heard. And in this generation, you can't influence decision makers without being in their faces all the time.

ED: What might PEO do about the above?

GC: We need to be much more proactive about developing and promulgating positions on matters of public policy related to engineering and technology. I believe that is an essential part of our responsibility to regulate engineering in the public interest. I am hoping we can establish a joint working group with OSPE to identify such issues and strategize how best to address them.

ED: In your inaugural speech to Council you said, "... we risk the slow erosion and marginalizing of our great profession to the point of irrelevance ..." Were you hoping to use a bit of hyperbole to rally the forces into action, or is that an accurate description of the current situation with respect to professional engineering?

GC: As I said in my address, we're not in immediate danger. After all, we're really not on anyone's radar screen at the moment. But I do believe we are drifting into irrelevance with all

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of our key constituents, namely governments (who have forgotten how engineering is supposed to be regulated, and don't care if it is done by licensed professional engineers or not), employers (same comment), students (who don't see a compelling reason to become licensed and join the profession), and even some of our existing members.

ED: Would you agree that there is a sizeable constituency among P.Engs who might actually resent a more aggressive, proactive regulator?

GC: There are certainly some who will, but I believe the majority know and accept that we need to do something different. One definition of insanity is continuing to do the same thing you have always done and expecting a different result. Previous resistance to necessary changes has, I believe, been partly a reflection of mistrust of PEO's leadership, and a legitimate concern, which I share, about excessive bureaucracy. We will need to avoid imposing undue restrictions and compliance burdens on our members, and we will need to tighten our regulatory processes gradually and with full consultation.

ED: You mentioned in your inaugural speech to Council that "we need to make a distinction between our right to title and our right to practise engineering." You suggested that the former could be satisfied through an engineering education, adhering to a code of ethical conduct, and by supporting the work of PEO. The latter would require demonstration of ongoing competence in one or more scopes of practice. Wouldn't such changes to the "one size fits all" P.Eng. licence promote some resistance on the part of some members? If so, what can be done to bring them around?

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GC: Some two-thirds (my own personal, unsubstantiated estimate) of PEO members are actually retaining their membership to keep their "P.Eng." title and its associated prestige/status, not because they need a licence to practise engineering. I would not disenfranchise any of them. So long as someone (a) was at one time admis-

sible to the profession; (b) continues to pay the association's annual dues; and (c) continues to abide by the profession's Code of Ethics, he or she should be able to retain the professional title. But to actually practise engineering in any specific area, one must be able to demonstrate continuing competence to do so. I hate unnecessary bureaucracy as much as anyone, but how can I argue that I shouldn't have to do that, that I should just be trusted to confine my activities to those in which I am competent, without even having to declare what that is and what kind of work I am doing?

ED: Finally, would it be fair to say that your number one objective or priority as PEO President is to promote the whole "culture of execution"—going from reactive to proactive, and measuring the association's progress and success in meeting its objectives? Can you offer an opinion as to why this hasn't been tackled in the past?

GC: PEO has a track record of more talk than action, and of starting worthwhile things but not seeing them through to satisfactory completion. I'm not sure why that is, but I attribute that to (a) not defining clearly our desired outcomes; (b) not planning and managing in sufficient detail our operational processes to achieve them (a classical project management failure, really); (c) not measuring our progress against them; and (d) not holding ourselves accountable for achieving them. As I commented in the interview, the word "accountability" might be more acceptable to some than the word "execution," which I borrowed from Larry Bossidy's and Ram Charan's helpful book *Execution—the Discipline of Getting Things Done*, and which I intended in that context. ❏

