

Gordon Sterling, P.Eng., Re-igniting relevance

By Dwight Hamilton



22, developing an accurate profile of PEO's membership and publicly communicating this profile is necessary to realize the plan's goal of having "processes that identify to the public the competencies of licensees."

Aiming for relevance

Indeed, Sterling calls implementing the Strategic Plan the most important item on his agenda in the coming months, because it is "the touchstone against which PEO can assess its programs and activities and the guidepost for developing new programs and activities." To achieve its vision of PEO as an organization striving "to meet the needs of Ontario society by licensing and regulating the entire practice of professional engineering in an open, transparent and inclusive manner," the plan defines five areas in which it's imperative that PEO make progress.

The first of these imperatives is to explicitly redefine PEO's role as the sole regulatory body for engineering in Ontario—and only a regulatory body—and to increase stakeholder awareness and acceptance of this role. To make progress here, PEO must look at the regulatory mechanisms in the *Professional Engineers Act* and Regulation 941 to ensure that they still clearly and correctly address the public interest where engineering is concerned. This will involve at least reviewing, and perhaps changing, the Certificate of Authorization and Consulting Engineer designation programs, and studying the introduction of additional practice specialties. It will involve examining whether PEO should govern other applied science practitioners whose work overlaps with, or affects, engineering. It will even involve looking at whether the relevance of PEO and the P.Eng. would be enhanced if the P.Eng. title were separated from the licence to practise professional engineering.

Goals of this part of the plan also include actively involving PEO's chapters in generating its regulatory policies, and ensuring that everyone understands the very different mandates of PEO and the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE).

Already underway, the process of differentiating PEO and OSPE will involve divestiture of PEO's non-regulatory functions to OSPE over a three-year period during which PEO will continue to support the activities. On June 22, Council approved the list of the first programs to be transferred, effective July 1. They include the Employment Advisory Service, National Engineering Week, Engineers are Everyday Heroes and the Members Salary Survey. "It's a pivotal year for us," Sterling

notes. "PEO must turn its direction strictly to the regulatory aspects of the profession and increase our activities in this area."

Which makes a strong, high profile advocate for the "silent profession" all the more necessary, he adds. In addition to serving the economic self-interest of engineers, OSPE will be able to boost the profile of the profession with the public, government and business in a way that PEO cannot. But to fulfill its role, OSPE must be viable and vibrant, which can only come with the visible support of PEO members, he believes: "It's vital that our members join both organizations. For our profession to grow, we must support OSPE." It's also important, he says, that PEO and OSPE work in partnership whenever possible.

Creating value

The second of the Strategic Plan's five imperatives relates to ensuring that the need for licensure in engineering is understood and valued. Advancement in this area will involve widely communicating a defensible case for how the public interest is best served by restricting the right to apply science in certain areas to licensed professional engineers. It will require that PEO identify emerging disciplines of engineering early and define core bodies of knowledge and scopes of practice. And it will involve identifying the attributes of the P.Eng. that are valued, and ensuring that they are strengthened and promoted as the hallmarks of the profession.

"We have to make business and engineers aware of the value of the licence and the need for being a professional," Sterling says. "Corporations are held worldwide now and Canada is unique in that its licensing system applies equally to all engineers, including those working in industry. In most other countries, licensing or certification is required only for consulting engineers. So large industrial employers aren't necessarily well versed in the qualifications required for licensing in Ontario, and won't necessarily see how they can benefit from them—unless we bring it to their attention."

It is also a goal of the plan that engineering students should come to feel about acquiring their P.Eng. the same as they do about acquiring their Iron Rings: as a natural progression in their formation as professionals. PEO should be an active participant in each Iron Ring ceremony in Ontario, the President believes.

Strengthening standards

As well, the Strategic Plan sees having admission and practice standards that "promote

competent and ethical practice" as imperative. "Having strong and relevant standards will ensure that the credibility of the P.Eng. is maintained," Sterling says. Key here will be to ensure that academic requirements for admission are rigorous, current and do not impose artificial barriers, while having an Engineering Internship Training (EIT) program that fills the gap between knowledge acquired in engineering school and skills required for practice. Another goal is that the profession's code of ethics, definition of professional misconduct and minimum practice standards be contemporary, relevant, well understood and enforceable—and be seen to be so.

Improving governance

It's also imperative for a redirected organization to examine how it currently conducts its business, to ensure that its processes, procedures, practices and governance structures still enable it to do its new job. For this reason, the Strategic Plan includes initiatives aimed at ensuring that all the groups involved in PEO governance understand their roles and responsibilities, and that strategic research and knowledge management become embedded in PEO operations, which should be transparent, accountable, efficient, responsive and focused on results.

The Strategic Plan also calls for a review of the structure and procedures of PEO's Council, committees and chapter system, and active planning for succession and diversity on Council. As a multi-term East Central Region Councillor and over two-decade vet-

eran on the Executive of the Willowdale-Thornhill Chapter, Sterling sees a place for PEO's chapters to take the lead role in identifying and developing its future Councillors. On the goal of reviewing PEO's governance structure, he says: "We need to look at the roles of Council and of our staff to ensure that they are defined properly to get the job done. And we need to understand what is Council's work, what is staff's work, and what we should be working on as a team. It's not effective for Council to do staff's work, or the other way around. We also need to look at whether we still have the right mix of committees and whether they're doing the right things." Council has agreed to strike a Governance Task Force to undertake this review.

Going global

The Strategic Plan's fifth and final imperative foresees PEO assuring that Ontario's citizens are well served by global engineering. To this end, PEO must cooperate closely with the other provinces in playing an active role in the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers, the President says. This will help ensure an effective Ontario voice on issues of national and international concern to the profession. Given current global environmental issues and Canada's increasing role in the world economy, it's necessary that PEO do whatever it's able to protect the public interest in Ontario where engineering is concerned, Sterling says. ♦

Fresh from a cross-country tour of engineering associations, Gordon Sterling, P.Eng., doesn't have much down time these days, even though he's recently retired after 35 years at Bell Canada. So he's quick to list what he sees as the main challenges he and the association will face in the coming months. "The issues here are the same as across Canada," he says. "The public is looking for more of a guarantee that their safety will be protected."

In Ontario, this attitude is apparent in proposals being considered by the government that would require certification of professional engineers practising as design professionals in the building industry and as consultants in brownfields assessment and remediation. Government staff have also inquired of PEO about identifying specialists in design and inspection of water treatment and sewage facilities. During recent development of the *Condominium Act*, meanwhile, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing suggested that certification might be a requirement for

providing reserve fund studies for condominium projects. Recent changes to the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* also led to questions about special certification of professional engineers issuing hoist and conveyance certificates for mine shafts.

Right now, however, PEO doesn't license by specialty, or provide any certification beyond the P.Eng. Nor does it have a clear picture of the areas of practice and post-licensing qualifications of its licensed practitioners. This makes implementing the modified Professional Excellence Program (PEP), which Council approved last year, a priority for the new President. Sterling chaired the task group that reviewed the originally proposed, mandatory PEP and that recommended a modified, voluntary version that would ask professional engineers to provide PEO information on their job function, industry and specific areas of practice, as well as what they do to stay current. As noted in the PEO Strategic Plan, which Council endorsed at its most recent meeting on June

Biography at a glance

Education

- ◆ BSc in mechanical engineering, University of Toronto, 1959
- ◆ Graduate work, Iowa State University

PEO service

- ◆ East Central Region Councillor, 1983-1992, 1998-2000
- ◆ Member of Willowdale-Thornhill Chapter executive for 25 years and served as chapter chair
- ◆ Professional Excellence Program Review Task Force (chair)
- ◆ PEO Foundation for Education (president)
- ◆ Joint Advocacy Implementation Task Force
- ◆ President-elect, 2000-01
- ◆ Committees: Appeal Board, Executive, Environment, Discipline, Communications, Professional Development, Employment Practices, Finance, Professional Engineers Awards, Salary Advisory, Registration, Professional Practice and Advisory Committee on Committees.