

INVESTING IN OUR PROFESSION'S LEADERSHIP

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History has shown repeatedly that organizations that are not intentional about leadership succession and development suffer periods of weakness, ineffectiveness and strife—be they local governments, corporations, charities, trade unions, associations or political parties. I'm sure you can think of several examples of this phenomenon in various

sectors of public and corporate life.

It is now a generally accepted principle of good governance that organizations should have formal processes in place to ensure a continuous, uninterrupted supply of competent and responsible leaders at all levels, from their boards of directors to their middle management. PEO is no exception—especially given its heavy dependence on volunteers to assume leadership roles within its chapters, committees and task forces, and on its governing council.

As the embodiment of our self-regulating profession, PEO is committed to democratic principles of governance and election to office. That does not mean, however, that we should leave our leadership to chance, or that we should be dependent on whomever shows up and volunteers for election or appointment at any given point in time. There are things we can do proactively to increase the likelihood that those who seek leadership positions understand and are committed to the goals of the organization and are capable of exercising effective leadership.

LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

One such measure is to ensure a healthy turnover within our leadership positions. Recently, council mandated all PEO committees to address leadership succession in their human resources plans. By March 2017, every committee should have incorporated term limits into its terms of reference. That doesn't mean that every committee will have the same turnover policy. By the very nature of their composition and mandate, some committees will turn over more slowly than others. But the intent is to ensure that the membership of each committee is continually being renewed to achieve an appropriate diversity of new and experienced members and of different backgrounds and experiences.

PEO's chapters are also being encouraged to consider their turnover and leadership succession in like manner. I expect chapters will continue to be one of our main organizational vehicles for the recruitment and development of new volunteer leaders, so it is important that they are structured in such a way as to encourage entry-level volunteer participation and to provide leadership development opportunities. I am encouraged by the excellent job some of our chapters are already doing in this regard.

Finally, the task force charged with recommending term limits for councillors will be reporting its findings to council in a few months. Their recommendations will, no doubt, be widely (and perhaps hotly) debated, and any resulting policy changes will require amendments to regulations, which can sometimes be a lengthy process. But hopefully, with these efforts, we will succeed in incorporating a more deliberate approach to leadership succession into all aspects of PEO volunteer life.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

While I recognize that some individuals have a greater natural affinity for leadership than others, I believe leadership skills can be taught and learned, and that anyone who aspires to a leadership role can develop the necessary skills if he or she so chooses. I think it is a mistake to assume that leaders are born, not made, or to rely simply on "natural selection" for them.

I further believe volunteer organizations like PEO provide an ideal environment for the incubation of leadership. The first reason for this is that they are "safe" environments in which to practise and perfect new skills and try new initiatives—and perhaps even fail at them the first time—because other volunteer leaders with more skill and experience are generally available to act as coaches and mentors. The second reason is that positional authority is limited, which encourages the development of true leadership. In a volunteer organization, those who are following the leaders are doing so willingly because they share the vision of the organization and respect the leader(s), not because they can't afford to lose a paying position.

For PEO to invest in the development of its leaders seems to me to be a win-win-win proposition. It's a win for PEO if our volunteer leaders have a better understanding of the role and mandate of the organization, its governance and how it regulates the profession, and have had opportunities to develop their soft leadership skills. It's a win for our volunteers, who are acquiring leadership skills and experience they can use in their work and in other aspects of their daily lives. And it's a win for their employers or clients, and for any other organizations for which they may volunteer.

PEO's Human Resources Committee has been developing a framework for leadership development that provides content in two main areas. The first area is PEO-specific domain knowledge organized under the following five main headings:

- PEO's mandate, powers and responsibilities;
- How PEO regulates the profession;
- PEO's functions and organization;
- PEO's volunteer leadership; and
- PEO's governance.

This knowledge will, for the most part, be delivered through a series of online learning modules, each of which can be completed by a volunteer in approximately an hour and concludes with a short quiz on the material presented. The goal is to ensure that individuals assuming leadership roles in PEO have a common understanding of why PEO exists, what it does and how.

The second area of content is that of the softer leadership skills, such as:

- Emotional intelligence;
- Team leadership;
- Group facilitation and problem solving;
- Communication; and
- Mediation and conflict resolution.

This knowledge will be delivered through a combination of online learning modules and hands-on workshop sessions. We are already taking advantage of our three annual “workshop” days (the Committee Chairs Workshop in October, the Chapter Leaders Conference in November and the Volunteer Leaders Conference in April) to incorporate leadership development opportunities.

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VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

So how should PEO go about recruiting its volunteer leaders? I am a firm believer in active recruitment (i.e. leaders personally asking individuals to accept specific volunteer assignments). I became involved as a volunteer at PEO because, 40+ years ago, I was approached by a regional councillor and asked to undertake a specific task—involving educational outreach to GTA secondary schools—for which he believed I had specific knowledge and skills. Although I have always taken my responsibilities to my profession seriously (e.g. to vote in council elections), it’s not clear to me that I would have become involved as a volunteer without his specific ask.

In my experience, one of the best pools of new volunteer recruits PEO has is its engineering interns and new licence holders. A personal touch from a volunteer leader is often necessary to get them to take the first step. But I am encouraged by the number of interns and new licence holders who are participating on our chapter executives. Clearly, they are the future leadership of our profession.

The next question is: Who do we approach? In some cases, we may want to pre-identify individuals with specific domain knowledge relevant to a particular task. Some of PEO’s standing committees, such as the Experience Requirements Committee and the Professional Standards Committee, are constantly seeking licence holders with specific technical expertise and scopes of practice to sit on interview panels or to work on professional guidelines and standards.

In all cases, we are seeking individuals who care enough about their profession to volunteer some of their time to it, who are willing to work as part of a team, and who have a demonstrated track record of following through on their commitments. Anything else they need to be effective leaders they can learn “on the job” if we provide the right development opportunities for them.

At this point I would be remiss if I did not touch on the subject of diversity and inclusion. Let me start by saying I’m proud of PEO’s record of integrating engineers from all corners of the world into the profession. Today, roughly one-third of the licences we issue are to internationally educated professionals. And I am proud of the way they have embraced our Canadian model of professional self-regulation by assuming leadership positions in our chapters and committees and on council.

But after more than 40 years of promoting engineering as a suitable profession for young women, women continue to be significantly under-represented in our profession. To address this gender imbalance, both PEO and the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers have accepted the national challenge of 30 by 30—that is, having over 30 per cent of new licence holders be women by the year 2030. The 30 per cent figure represents a kind of critical mass or tipping point, above which it is believed young women will accept that engineering is an appropriate education and career choice for them without second thought. In my estimation, the women in our profession have contributed more than their fair share in terms of volunteer leadership. But I believe we need to be particularly proactive in recruiting even more of them into visible positions of leadership where they can serve as role models for young engineers.

Another demographic group that is seriously under-represented in engineering and in other science and technology based professions is Canada’s aboriginal peoples. One of our best hopes to improve the quality of life of our aboriginal communities is to assist their young people to prepare for careers that require grounding in science, technology, engineering and mathematics beginning in elementary school. And once again, we need to encourage the development of competent leaders and role models for them.

In conclusion, I want to encourage us to invest consciously and consistently in our leadership as a profession, and not to take it for granted. I am convinced that nothing else we can do will have as much positive impact on its strength, vitality, influence and relevance. **e**