

KEEN ON RETIREMENT



Anthony Fasano on the Skills That Helped Him Engineer a New Career Path

Welcome to Keen on Retirement
With Bill Keen and Steve Sanduski

Steve Sanduski: Hello everybody and welcome back to another episode of Keen On Retirement. I'm your cohost Steve Sanduski and joining me as always is Bill Keen. Hey, Bill.

Bill Keen: Hey, Steve.

Steve Sanduski: Well, hey, so we've got another great episode lined up here. We have a special guest. Bill, why don't you let us know who we have on the line with us here.

Bill Keen: We are honored to have Anthony Fasano in the studio with us today. And Anthony is the founder of the Engineering Management Institute, which really began with the creation of a website and a podcast, which is a resource that provides free and affordable career and personal development resources for developing engineers. After rapidly advancing at a reputable civil engineering firm at the age of 27, Anthony realized that his success was largely related to the development of his nontechnical skills. Now he's a very, very smart and educated guy, but he realized that the nontechnical skills were as important.

Since that time, Anthony decided to transition his career to inspiring engineers in their soft skill development through coaching, speaking, and training. And Steve, I have a bestselling book out that in the subtitle says Engineering the Second Half of your Life. Well, Anthony has a bestselling book entitled, Engineer Your Own Success, Seven Key Elements to Creating an Extraordinary Engineering Career; and also a top-rated engineering iTunes podcast and YouTube channel as well. Some of our listeners may remember, I was a guest on his program not long ago and had a wonderful time with him. His program has been cited as one of the 15 Most Inspiring Podcasts for Professionals by Forbes.

Just super excited that, Anthony, you agreed to come on our program today and give us a little insight about your history, your journey, what your focus is, what

your vision for the future is. And really we can relate these topics to how that works in to someone thinking about working toward a successful retirement, which is the focus of our program. Anthony, thank you so much. Welcome to our program.

Anthony Fasano: No, Steve, Bill, thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Steve Sanduski: Well, Bill and Anthony, so this will be another great show for us here today. And, Anthony, one of the things that I think is going to be excited about this is, obviously you're an engineer, you have been an engineer and now you work, you coach, you mentor engineers; and many of the folks that listen to this are also engineers or are retired engineers. And why don't we just start with getting a little bit about your background? How did you get interested in becoming an engineer?

Anthony Fasano: Yeah, sure. At some point in time in high school, I kind of had the conversation with my parents. What are you interested in? What you like? And for me, I really like math. I really like science. And I don't think that those are two things that have to happen for you to go into engineering per se, but when I told my parents that, they said, "Well you should really check out engineering."

And at the time, another kid in my school, his father owned a small civil engineering company. Of course, like all parents do, my mom called up his dad and said, "My son's interested in engineering. Do you have a summer job that he can work at?" And sure enough towards the end of one of my summers towards the end of high school, I was able to get on with that small company, maybe three or four people, and started learning about civil engineering and just kind of carried that into college, and kind of went from there. And actually, I worked for his company all through high school and college, and then it was acquired by the firm that I spent most of my time with as a civil engineer.

Steve Sanduski: And then at some point as you became a civil engineer, you ended up a little dejected and depressed. What happened at that point in your career?

Anthony Fasano: Well, civil engineering is a very, very large engineering industry, meaning that there's so many different disciplines in civil engineering, probably hundreds. Between soils engineering, you can go into structures, you can go into storm water, it can go on and on. In fact, my wife's a soils engineer, geotechnical engineer, a subset of civil.

When I got out there and I started working, you don't learn about all these different aspects of civil engineering in school. You only learn about maybe some of the key components or the big divisions. And so I was definitely overwhelmed by this. Just saying, "I don't know what direction to go. I can choose a a hundred different disciplines to go into and I'm just not sure what to do." And so that's why I was confused, I guess was a good word to use.

Steve Sanduski: And then what happened at that point? You eventually decided to leave engineering and move into this coaching business and public speaking and founding the Engineering Management Institute. Tell me about that transition.

Anthony Fasano: Right. What happened for me was actually early on in my career as a civil engineer, I did leave the company I was working forward to try something different. And after a couple months, I knew that it wasn't for me. They took me back in and I started working with them again. And what I did finally come to realize in my engineering career was that I wanted to be a leader in the field.

I eventually want it to be an owner in the engineering firm that I worked for, so I started looking at the different division managers, the department heads, the partners, the owners, the executives. And I noticed a really clear cut pattern, which was, yes, they had the technical knowledge and background; but, in addition to that, they had really good management skills. They could communicate effectively with others. They could network, build relationships and bring in new business. They could prioritize and delegate effectively.

And so I decided at that time that build all those skill sets. I put a lot of effort into them. I took courses on my own and it paid off. My engineering career really took off at the time. And one day, my boss approached me and said, "Anthony, we really love what you're doing. We'd like you to go around to the other offices and provide some coaching and training on these other skill sets to the other engineers here." And so of course my first response was, "I'm an engineer. I'm not a trainer. I don't, I don't think I can do that." But eventually over time, I kind of, I guess talked myself into it and took a piece of paper, sketched out a rough curriculum and ended up going around to the different offices and putting on this training.

And basically when I did that, two things happened. Number one, I totally just loved doing it. I just loved this idea of being able to help engineering professionals and technical professionals develop some of the skills that we didn't learn in school, but I knew it would be helpful to them in their careers. But secondly, and really most importantly at the time, the company started seeing results, better project performance, better team communication, better client communication and interaction.

And so at that time, I decided that I wanted to do this coaching and training on a more regular basis. I immediately enrolled in an evening executive coaching school that was very intensive. I joined Toastmasters to do some speaking. And I convinced the company to let me, along with our HR director, develop an internal management and training program. And we did that, and I did it for about a year, and it was very successful.

But what I realized, kind of the entrepreneur inside of me said, "If there's a hundred or so engineers in this mid-sized firm that are struggling with these skillsets, there has to be thousands of them out there." And so that was in 2009,

and I decided to leave the company and start the coaching and training firm that is the Engineering Management Institute today.

Bill Keen: Would you say that even if someone wants to remain a technical professional, really just working in the technical side of it, not get into managing people that they still need these skill sets that you teach, Anthony?

Anthony Fasano: Absolutely. Because the thing about engineering or a technical professional or anyone that works in any engineering field is as much as you may want to remain technical, and some people do that which is fine, you don't work like in a box. You need to interact with people. You need to take instructions from people. You might need to give instructions to people. You need to have a team if you're going to work on projects of any good size and that team interaction is there.

In my opinion, Bill, the people skills side of it, I think for any career line, whether engineering or not, but especially engineering because it's so team-oriented, I just think from all aspects it's important. That's why at EMI we really believe that every engineering company in some way, shape or form should provide these skills training to their team and their staff, their employees.

Bill Keen: You think about folks that want to move up the chain, if you will, into management and project leadership, that maybe that would only apply to them. But it makes total sense what you're saying here.

Anthony Fasano: Yeah, for sure. I see it every day. More and more companies are starting to finally realize that the people skills component of engineering is a component that is critically important, but can also give them an edge because not everybody focuses on it.

Steve Sanduski: One of the things I'm really curious about, Anthony, is if you look at the folks who are engineers that are retired and then you look at the new generation of engineers that let's say folks that are in their 20s maybe their early 30s, let's just call them the millennial generation. There's a lot of stereotypes and clichés about millennials. In your experience, do you see a difference between the generation of engineers who have retired here recently compared to the newest generation of engineers? Are there any generational differences that you're seeing either in attitudes or skills or expectations that they have for their career?

Anthony Fasano: I mean, I think there are and there aren't. I think what I find because at my age and because of what I do, I have the opportunity to speak with a lot of engineers at different experience levels, from senior executives that are about to retire to students. And what I think is the same is really the engineering mentality. I mean the curriculum in terms of what they teach has remained the same, most of it anyway. Maybe the way it's delivered is different. But the engineering mentality in terms of thinking analytically, thinking about how to

solve a problem or make things more efficient or optimize things, I see it to be relatively common throughout all experience levels.

What I see to be different really is just the technology side of things. The younger students, recent graduates, they're much more, technology literate in terms of, they have programs now that can do all kinds of engineering equations that weren't available for people that are executives. And it doesn't necessarily mean that one is a better engineer than the other, one group is better than the other, it just means there's different. I mean, there's new tools available and people that learn them can have advantages.

But where I think you have to be careful with that as you still need, in my opinion, to understand the fundamentals of engineering. You can't just expect to hit a button and design a project. Because if for some reason the program goes wrong, you're not going to catch that unless you really understand the fundamentals of engineering. I think there's a good balance between the two, the different multiple generations. But I do think at the core, they're both after the same thing. They just take sometimes different avenues to get there.

Bill Keen:

And in your book you talked about Seven Elements to Creating an Extraordinary Engineering Career and one of those seven elements that you mentioned was this idea of finding a mentor. I'm curious if you think that, sure, you can find a mentor who's currently working within the organization, some that might be a generational older, but what about this idea of a retired engineer who mentors younger engineers and maybe gives some of the wisdom that they've accumulated over their decades of experience as an engineer? Do you see any of that happening with retired engineers mentoring younger engineers?

Anthony Fasano:

I do. I have seen some of that. I've seen some of that where... How they really do that as they get involved more with the professional associations after they retire and they offer to give back in some way, shape or form. For example, I've been a longtime member of the American Society of Civil Engineers. It's a great organization that supports civil engineers around the world, and there are a lot of retired civil engineers that will come back and volunteer with programs or events or to do different things. I think that that's a great way to do that. And I do think that it's important because, obviously, since I talk about it in my book, I think mentoring is critical. If you are an engineer looking to advance, you should have at least one mentor.

However, the challenge to that and the kind of the kickback I get from younger engineers sometimes on that is it's not that easy to find one. If there are retired engineers out there and available, I think mentoring, whether it's something you do through your company, your employer that you worked for previously, or through an association like an ASCE or an NSPE or an ASME. There's a lot of different engineering associations out there. I think it'd be a great thing to do.

I think people need that guidance. I mean we just talked a little bit about the generational differences, which there are. But as I said, there's that fundamental core of optimizing and making projects and really the world as a whole more efficient. And so I think if anyone that's willing to mentor, it'd be a great thing.

Bill Keen:

Steve, I have a very personal experience with this in that my son, Devin, and I think I shared this with you too, Anthony, my son, Devin, attends the Missouri University of Science and Technology. That's down in Rolla, Missouri, and he's a mechanical engineering student. He's in his junior year there and he has been mentored by multiple senior level folks at a company here in Kansas City, over greater Kansas City area called Black & Veatch. And he's also been awarded the RMEL Scholarship three years in a row.

And he recently spoke at their annual convention here in Kansas City. It happened to be here and they ask him to speak on his experience as an intern at Black & Veatch. He was an intern there last summer and then his experience with the RMEL and the RMEL Foundation. And the core message in his talk that he gave, which is out there online... Of course, I posted it on Facebook, proud dad, with his permission of course. But the core theme to his message was the mentorship was so impactful to him and the experience that he's gotten by being an intern and being able to communicate and interact with these professionals that have been in the business for 30, 40 years, giving him some perspective.

And then on the other side of it, we deal with a lot of retirees and, Steve, we talk a lot in our program here about making sure that you have that psychological aspect and the emotional and social aspect to retirement thought through. What will you be doing with the time once you're unplugged from your career, which in a lot of cases was a lot of someone's identity. What will you do with your time? And mentoring continues to come up as one of the key things that we're seeing people doing in retirement that helps them still stay connected, but also feel like they're making a major difference in a major impact with all that knowledge that they have that is interesting to see it walk away from a career. It's nice for me to have a personal perspective on that.

Steve Sanduski:

And Anthony, when we talk about a mentorship relationship, can you put some meat around that? What does that mean? What are some expectations of the mentor as well as the mentee?

Anthony Fasano:

Yeah. It's a great question because I think it's something that is a lot of times unclear to people. It can be vague. I mean for me, when I think of mentoring relationship, and again, it can be formal or less formal; but, the best mentoring relationships that I've seen have some kind of consistent meeting between the mentor and the protégé. Maybe it's once a month, whether it's by phone or in person, maybe it's a couple times a month. It depends on the situation, but just

some kind of consistent check-in. How are things going? How can I help you? And I think that that's an important aspect of a mentoring relationship.

But on the flip side, you might have mentors that you kind of call them when you need them type of manager. That's really up to the the party. But for younger engineers trying to progress, I think having that consistent mentor because that really forces you to utilize them and bounce things off of them. I think that that is a good thing.

I also think that sometimes your supervisor isn't the best mentor. I think your supervisor can and should be a mentor figure in your career. But if you have some challenging situations going on within your office, on your team, you may not be comfortable speaking about it with someone else within your company. There's nothing wrong with having a mentor outside of your company. Maybe it's someone you find through one of these associations. Most of them have mentoring programs, and then also having your supervisor or someone in your firm serve as a mentor as well. I think having a good balance there can be important because you want to have someone that you trust and that you feel like you can tell them something and it's going to kind of stay between you, and you're going to be able to get help on things that you really need help on.

And also a lot of companies these days have formal mentoring programs. The company that I worked for had a formal mentoring program. And again, what's nice about the formal programs, going back to what I said earlier is they usually have a formal structure for meetings. My company, they basically said, "Get together once a month. Whether it's for lunch, it doesn't matter what two offices you're in, we'll support that time. You can take that time and do that because we think it's important." That's kind of, I think, kind of what a good framework could look like for a mentoring relationship, but it is important to understand that there can be different types of mentors depending on your needs.

Bill Keen: And is one of the potential roles of being a mentor, is that you help with career movement? Perhaps making introductions that might lead to career advancement or is that maybe a separate thing?

Anthony Fasano: No, I think that can be included. I mean, I think a good definition... My definition for a mentor that I give in my book is, I talk early on in my book about the importance of setting goals in your career. And I know, Bill, you're interested in goal setting in terms of finance and retirement goals. Goals are great.

And once you have your goals established in your career as an engineer, a mentor is someone that can help to guide you towards achieving those goals. If you have a goal of doing a certain kind of work in your career and you have a mentor that can help you to achieve that by introducing you to someone or a company, then that's great. I just kind of frame it as once you have these goals

and you're ready to start kind of chasing them and move after them, a mentor is someone who's going to help you get there.

Bill Keen: And as you work with engineers in the Engineering Management Institute or in other projects that you're involved in, did you ever touch on the idea of retirement and how engineers think about retirement and preparing them for retirement or life after their engineering career?

Anthony Fasano: It's funny because we've been doing our podcasts for many years for engineers and they've been very popular, but we never focused too much on finance really. We were focused on professional development and things of that nature. However, I don't know, maybe was a year ago, we wanted to kind of try something different and we did an episode or I tried to do a couple of episodes related to finance. One of them was just kind of, I had read the book Rich Dad, Poor Dad, and found it to be very helpful for myself in terms of personal finance and debt and things like that. I did an episode on it, just kind of a book summary episode and that episode took off, and so that was interesting.

And then the follow-up on that, I have a friend who's an engineer and he's into real estate investing, and so we did an episode on kind of real estate investing, something he did on the side as an engineer. And we kind of developed a little mini series and the feedback from that was really, really great.

I think the challenge would engineers in terms of finance from my interaction with engineers is, it's another thing that takes away from their projects, right? Engineers are very project driven, so they work hard, they work long weeks, which means there's not time for much else. Unfortunately sometimes what happens is, you kind of put all that career stuff ahead of some of your personal stuff, including your finance. And I think that's where engineers need to kind of catch themselves and say, "Listen, all this engineering work is great, but if I'm not, taking the money I'm earning from engineering and planning effectively and utilizing effectively, it's not going to help me in my own personal endeavors."

Bill Keen: And Anthony, that was really the theme of the podcasts and the program that you and I did together, wasn't it? I mean that was right down the alley of what we talk about at Keen Wealth, and I thought that was a maybe another example of you bringing some financial and retirement literacy onto your program there.

Anthony Fasano: Exactly. That's it. Every so often I try to bring these financial issues or topics into the content that we do. Because first of all, what we're focused on at EMI is helping people have kind of the best engineering career they can have. But that, to me, your personal life and your professional life are very intertwined. I mean, there's no way, you can't draw a line down between the two of them. You are who you are here and there. I think helping people all the way around in everything they do is important. And so that's, again, one of the reasons that we had Bill on and one of the reasons that we sprinkle these episodes in.

Bill Keen: I would echo to what Anthony said, we have some of the very smartest people on the planet doing things, amazing projects around the world, but they, in some cases, haven't taken the time to look at their own personal financial situations. And it's been just quite an honor to have evolved a firm and a process that speaks to the engineering community.

And it's kind of funny, I get a lot of people that ask me, or even colleagues in the industry that are surprised that we work with so many engineers in our firm. They expect them to be difficult or "too smart" or hard to deal with or too detail oriented, and we've found that to be quite the opposite. These folks are... They're project managers. They like to have goals in mind. They think about measurement. They want to have accountability, but they just need to be directed a little bit over into their own personal situations and given a platform to run on there. We really, really enjoy working with those folks. We have kind of a joke around the firm and around some of our colleagues that even with the engineers we do advise is that if we could work with them, then it makes it easy to work with the rest of the world. We just operate to the higher standards.

The thing that really gets me excited though, and it's wonderful working with those retirement-aged engineers and seeing them make the transition after a long career into a fulfilling retirement life. But also seeing that we could get out in front of some of the younger people and help them start thinking about these things early on, can make it just a massive impact in how their lives and careers play out, and some freedom and choice that they have later in their careers.

Anthony Fasano: Yeah, for sure. And I think, Bill, just from kind of reading your book and interviewing you, I would assume what engineers like working with you is that you have a real process, you have a stepped-out kind of process and that's what engineers like. I think that just in engineering in general because processes, systems and equations work so well in engineering, if engineers can apply them to other aspects of life, it's very helpful.

Bill Keen: That's right.

Steve Sanduski: Well as we get ready to start wrapping some things up here, Anthony, what else would you like to share with us that we haven't asked you about yet?

Anthony Fasano: Well, one of the things that we're interested in at the Engineering Management Institute that I'll mention real quickly is, we've been doing all this content for years now; all these podcast interviews and YouTube videos, and what we've really kind of understood quite a bit was what makes great engineering managers. And I was actually reading another book on finance not long ago, or actually it was not a book on finance but it's the book, Principles by Ray Dalio, who manages I guess one of the largest hedge funds in the world or created it and-

Bill Keen: Yeah, but I thought if you read mine, you would just be done then. You didn't need to read any other.

Anthony Fasano: Well, I found his first, so...

Bill Keen: Okay. All right. I'm just teasing.

Anthony Fasano: But still felt that I needed to read yours after.

Bill Keen: Oh, excellent. All right. That's even better.

Anthony Fasano: But what I took out of his that was interesting was what he said in the book was, "I'm not doing rocket science here. All of the information in the stock market was public and I simply looked over all the public information. I found some indicators that came about typically before an upswing and before a downswing in the market, and I basically built the model." And the models made a lot of people a lot of money, so when I read that, I kind of thought to myself, "Well, listen, we've got so much data on engineering managers and leaders, what if we were able to build something that would help engineers understand their capabilities and potential as a leader based on historically great engineering managers from the past?"

And so about three or four years ago, we embarked on that and we hired an outside analytics firm. We've surveyed thousands of engineers and we are creating what's called the Current Management Abilities Potential Diagnostic Tool. And what this tool does is it helps engineers and engineering firms to diagnose the engineering management potential of their company at the current moment. And what this basically entails is, how are their technical skills? Of course, they're always important in engineering, but then also your project management skills and your people management skills.

And so that's what we're focused on at EMI is, you're going to get a lot of your technical knowledge in school and the early part of your career and working on projects. Then you need to get the project management skills so you can handle the scope and the planning and the estimating on the projects and the business side of things in that regard. But then you also need the people skill side of it that we were talking about earlier so you can interact with people, you can communicate effectively, you can bring in new business for your company, you can delegate effectively.

And so we're working on the tool and we're excited. It's going to be ready soon. But in addition to that, we've had a program called The Engineering Management Accelerator, our people skills course for a few years now, and that continues to be very popular. And in 2020 Q1, we're launching our Project Management Accelerator, which is going to be the sister course that's going to focus on the project management skills.

And kind of getting back to what we talked about earlier, if you want to help someone, you've got to look at the whole picture and I believe that you need to help engineers be very well-rounded. And so we've been giving them people skills, and now we're also going to be able to give them the project management skills to really help them be well-rounded. That's something that I want to just kind of mention.

I mean, all of the content on the Engineering Management Institute website, all the podcasts and the YouTube videos we're talking about are there. They're on iTunes. They're free and available, and then we also have these training programs that can help you kind of take it to the next level.

Bill Keen: Steve, if we could link to all of Anthony's materials, I think that would just be very impactful for our listeners. And it's coming to me now that it's very specific for engineering, but the concepts and the key points that Anthony is making really applies to all careers and industries. But yeah, I think links would be really wonderful if we could do that in the show notes.

Steve Sanduski: Absolutely. We'll get those linked up and, Bill, we'll give you the last word here.

Bill Keen: Well, Anthony, I really appreciate you taking the time to come on our program today. I recently have been approached by engineers from all ages, so I've had some folks that are in their 20s come to me and say that they heard my program on your show. I also had someone who was a retired engineer from one of the local firms here in Kansas City approach me over the weekend and congratulate me for being on your program as well because he tunes in regularly to your program also. I think that you're reaching a lot of people. I think you know that. You've been very successful, and the work that you're doing is furthering folks' careers as they are today, but also providing some folks the glide path, if you will, for a very successful life throughout a career and over into retirement.

And Steve, you even asked, the new engineers coming online today, the younger generations, and I think the millennials do get a bad rap. We've talked about that on our show. Generally speaking, Anthony; Steve and I, we joke about it, we're in our 50s, and we say if somebody would have looked back at our generation, back when we were younger, they would've said that generation had issues as well, right? I think all generations probably do.

Steve Sanduski: And we turned out okay, Bill, didn't we?

Bill Keen: Yeah, I mean, it takes time. It takes time, right? But it worked out okay. But that's another issue I see coming when folks come in. I deal with it, like I said, a lot of engineers in their 60s and even 70s and some that are retired of course, and they're perplexed. They say, "The next generation of engineers coming online. They have different thoughts about how things should be done and about how we would interact with each other. We're having to come up with different ways to interact and to manage and to work and to provide

environments to thrive in. Although we can see that they're very smart and they're very capable we're just having to understand and shift a little bit how we run and manage our firms."

I think it's very impactful that this next generation is coming online because it's my opinion that engineer's are really what drive the productivity of the world. I mean, it's where everything's starts is with the engineering community. I'm honored to be involved in it, in the way that we are here at Keen Wealth and the firm. And when I came across you, Anthony, I was just honored to know you and I'm grateful for your time here today.

Anthony Fasano: No, well, thanks for having me. Like I said, I think the financial side of things is something that engineers could definitely use some help with. I think we're project focused, I think like a lot of people, and so we need to take time to step back and look at the big picture and I'm glad that you're helping them do that. And it was a pleasure for me to come on the show, so thanks for having me guys.

Bill Keen: You're welcome.

Steve Sanduski: All right. Well, we will wrap there. To learn more about Anthony and what he's working on, you can go to engineeringmanagementinstitute.org and we'll get all of this information in the show notes as well. And you can find those at keenonretirement.com.

Anthony, Bill, thanks guys for being on the show today and we'll look forward to the next episode of Keen On Retirement.

Anthony Fasano: Thanks, guys.

Bill Keen: All right. Thanks, Steve. Thanks, Anthony.

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