

A Year in the Life of Rakesh Rashan: Creating a Legacy

Monday, July 10

Associate Professor Rakesh Rashan sat in his office that was buried deep within the bowels of the Maxwell Engineering Building. He was in his 12th year as a faculty member, and with a new Dean that was focused on having faculty bringing in the research dollars, Rakesh wasn't quite sure where to start his week.

He reflected on the commitment he had made to science since he was a small child – all the nights and weekends he had spent trying to create the electronic version of his passion – playing the fiddle. It made no sense to his straight-laced father, but a pre-school Rakesh had spent many hours on the front porch of his neighbor, a local bluegrass fiddler, and the day the old man gave him a quarter-sized instrument of his own, he had become a devotee of the instrument that could both woo and howl.

However, Rakesh was a child of the rock and roll era, and as a teenager, he took his fiddle and began playing the music of his contemporaries. On Friday nights he played bluegrass fiddle at the local bar-b-que house, and on Saturdays, he provided twang to southern rock at a bar next to the local college. The biggest problem in his high school life was finding a pick-up that would give him the tone he heard when playing with his unwired friends and the volume he needed with his rocker friends. Thus began a career with its roots in making good music, but soon migrated into understanding the science of wood, strings, pitch, and turning those into sound.

Dr. Rashan had become a leading expert on the translation of stringed acoustic instruments into amplified sound. He had consulted with Yamaha on electric violins and Zeta on its full line of plugged-in symphony instruments. His office was lined with autographed photos of the likes of Mark O'Connor, Eileen Ivers, and Charlie Daniels – all with messages of gratitude for his ability to make their music shine when plugged in.

"What to do next?" Rakesh mumbled to himself. Here it was July, his summer break, and he was sitting at the University trying to figure out how to squeeze more research out of his passion in order to please the boss; how to get a few more publications and teaching awards to convince the tenure committee that he should be a full professor; and what to do about the perpetually low level of understanding that his undergrads seemed to get from their Fundamentals of Vibrations course. To add to his pile of problems that had no ready answer, he had moved into the Chair office of the ASME Vibration and Balancing Technical Division.

His ASME participation had become a problem during the past year. At one time, having a national presence in

your field of study was almost a requirement to eventually make it to professor. However, now those roles were seen as a drain on potential income for the college – why give away for free what you could sell to the National Science Foundation? He had to admit that his year as the Vice-Chair had pushed everyone around him to their limits when it came to cutting him some slack. As Vice-Chair, he had been the CEO of the Division's Annual Conference. Rakesh had used up his favors with his contacts in getting them to sponsor the conference. He had missed enough classes that his students didn't seem to connect with him, and his family seemed to have taken on a life of their own that he wasn't privy too.

But the good news was that his year in the barrel was over, the conference declared a resounding success, and he was on the downward slide of commitments to the Division. He resolved to tend to his job and personal life.

Tuesday, July 27

Rakesh looked up from his computer at the ringing phone to see *Unknown Caller* on the display. He regretted answering it as soon as he heard the voice on the other end.

"Rakesh, this is Jack Boyd from Westman Products. Those of us on the Executive Committee haven't heard from you since you moved into the Chair office and we'd like to schedule a phone meeting to get your thoughts on this year's agenda."

Rakesh hoped his moan didn't transmit over the phone. He smiled as he considered that his latest transducer microphones would have picked up the sound... Jack Boyd had an industry background and had been troublesome to him since their first official meeting. The worst part of it was that Jack was two slots ahead of him in the office progression so it seemed that Jack had always been around. Rakesh was sure that Jack was calling to pressure him about something to do with giving industry a greater voice in the Division.

Rakesh greeting Jack warmly and explained that he had been busy catching up with his chores, but was about to be ready to start some activity.

"Now, Dr. Rashan, we want you to know that you have a lot of experience right here in your Executive Committee. We'd like to have a say in where you decide to take things this year. How about we get something scheduled for later this week – say Thursday afternoon?"

Rakesh couldn't think of a good excuse to put off this meeting, so he agreed.

Wednesday, July 28

Rakesh met his colleague from across campus for lunch. He and Joan Poppin from the Business School had been friends since they had worked together as first year faculty in the University Honors program. Although their backgrounds were about as opposite as it gets, their different ways of thinking gave them a knack for helping each other turn problems inside out.

Rakesh: Joan, I have to tell you that I may finally be in over my head. I used up all my favors last year with the work it takes to pull off the national conference. And you remember how I've always felt pushed around by that fellow that believes all I want is a forum for academics to fill out their resumes. Well, he's called and demanded that I meet with him and the rest of the Executive Committee this week. I dread another argument. You know how I hate conflict.

Joan: Rakesh, I understood your job last year as V-Chair of your organization. You had the incredible task of pulling off that conference. What's really left for you to do? What do you think these guys want from you?

Rakesh: Well, I did the first part of the Chair's job when I made sure we had a unanimous pick for the incoming Executive Committee Member. It's important to get the right person started out in the progression, because eventually they will have the job of heading the national conference. It's tougher than you think to get people with the right motives. There are always folks that want the job so that they can add the title to their resume. They don't understand the time commitment it takes. It's a big job.

You know, I haven't really thought much about this coming year. I know that I'll need to pay attention to all parts of the Division to make sure that we end up with positive revenues, but the conference that will happen while I'm the Chair is already planned and the wheels are in motion.

I dread the argument about how we are neglecting the industry side of our division. Jack always stirs this pot. It always comes down to having too many academic papers and presentations. If the industry guys want to be published, all they have to do is submit their abstracts. The real issue is the lack of industry support for this type of activity.

Joan: With all the pressure on us academics to build our resumes, I'm guessing that Jack has a point. So, to move on to something productive and get away from the usual arguments, how can you take control

of this whole thing? After all, you are the Chair for the year.

As part of my work with the Business School, I coach executives. One of the things we push them to think about is "What is your Legacy?" Right now, people will remember that you pulled off the conference. I hate to tell you, but I suspect the conference gets handled one way or another every year. Five years from now, what contribution will people remember you made to your organization?

This whole conversation started Rakesh's thinking on how the division could be improved. He was in a unique position. He could see the current state of the division and in his classes, the future of the division. He wondered about how all those undergrads that couldn't even master the intro vibrations course would ever end up being active in their Division.

July 29 – Phone Conversation with the Executive Committee for the Division

Rakesh: Good afternoon... I want to thank you for already serving me well by jump-starting me. I have to admit that I was still recovering from last year! I'm not sure what your agenda was when you asked for this meeting, but I'd like to put an item at the head of the list. I'd like you're thinking on what I could push that would take our Division in the positive direction. What is one specific thing you think I could focus on?

Jack, I know you are always concerned about the mix of industry and academics in our division, and maybe that is something our goal takes into account. Can we start with this item?

After some deliberation, Rakesh got their attention. The Executive Committee had been expecting to push Rakesh. Here he was pushing them!

Rakesh facilitated a discussion of what each member of the executive committee believed to be the biggest and the smallest challenges facing them in the next ten years. Once they compiled the list, they agreed that Rakesh would make a real contribution if he could tackle their biggest challenge – finding and engaging the next generation of active and supporting members of their Technical Division.

August 4

Rakesh called ASME Headquarters to talk with his old friend Burt. Burt had seen a lot of programs come and go, and Rakesh wanted ideas about what seemed to be working.

Burt: We all are concerned about how to get the next generation engaged. In the Technical Divisions,

there's always hope that academics will need the credentials they can only get through our offices and publications. But you and I both know that success means that both the industry and academics are involved. The practicing engineers need tools that they can apply right now. Have you considered what you really have to offer the young engineer who is in the first years of their career? Why should they be interested?

Here's some things we know about practicing engineers. Engineers need continuing education credits for their jobs. Engineers need continuing educational credits to maintain their PE licenses. Young engineers are always on the lookout for a better job. It seems to me that you offer a perfect forum to engage engineers within driving distance to your Division conference. Maybe you could adapt the Early Career Forum to your conference or set up a day of training for the local sections. If you sponsor a joint luncheon, maybe you can find some folks that would be interested in one of the Technical Divisions. After the way you Professors flunk us all in vibrations, I know you won't find anyone interested in your division 😊, but hey, they may find a home somewhere that aligns with their technical interest and job.

Actually, I can make things easy for you. We are pushing the local sections to do a one day event – an Early Career Forum. This is usually about a half-day of technical topics and then a half day on interviewing/job hunting and networking. Most sections have trouble finding a location and getting some technical speakers. Maybe you could work out an ECF during your event. Even if all the attendees are in your technical specialty, you might get a few that either get interested or figure out how to come when you tack on the sessions that address more than technical topics. I'll send you the manual on what an ECF looks like.

Rakesh couldn't get Burt's suggestion out of his mind. How could their conference provide a service to the engineers within a 100-mile radius of the national meeting? If they could pull this off every year, Rakesh was certain that their division would find a core of members from this general group that would carry on in the future.

Part II Recruiting and Engaging more Members

Rakesh Rashan seemed to have things going his way. He had convinced the Vice-Chair of the Division that an ECF was a great thing to add to their conference. After a few phone calls to the local section chair of the conference-hosting city, he had managed to also convince the local

section to sponsor an ECF for area engineers. If this turned out to be a positive for the conference, he would have made a positive influence on the Division that was aimed directly at practicing engineers. That should get him some points with Jack.

Rakesh was meeting his friend Joan for lunch. She would never realize how her suggestions helped him think more about the big picture than getting the usual things done and checked off the list.

Rakesh: Joan – how are things in the world of the Bottom Line? 😊 I have to thank you for all the subtle advice you've given me over the last few months. I've been able to get some changes implemented.

Joan: Ah. I seem to remember that we talked about your Legacy. Does this mean that you've made your final arrangements? 😊

Rakesh: Well, not quite that. We've added an event to the conference that will help us get more practicing engineers active while getting the local section on board to help us out.

Joan: How did you manage that? It seems that you are solving more than one problem with a single event. Are you sure that you are actually going to accomplish any of your target goals? How does this reach your *target market*?

Rakesh thought about what Joan had asked him. He had the event scheduled...surely it would meet the goals!

They continued talking over lunch. Rakesh soon realized that he had accomplished only one goal with his upcoming ECF, and that was to satisfy the goal of adding an event to the national conference. When Joan started questioning, he couldn't answer about how the event would meet his target market. He hadn't even thought about his target – instead he presumed that if he provided the venue, they would come. He wasn't even sure what a target market was!

"So how do I make sure that this event meets a real need and will be successful?" asked Rakesh.

"Hey, you'll need an MBA on top of a PhD in Engineering to figure that out!" teased Joan. "Actually, I can help you understand a little more about your market and how to specifically identify and attack your needs. You're focused on your products and services. I can help you understand the strategic thinking about how to understand your market and then how your products and services serve that market. Once you understand those

concepts, then you can move on to how you compete and what you want to do to be a winner.”

Joan considered that she was taking on a consulting gig on a pro bono basis, but she and Rakesh had been colleagues for many years. With his ability to tease out details and think in a structured way, she decided that this might be one of her most fun projects ever.

Joan: We need to start three separate activities. The first one is easy and will also make a difference in your classroom. We’ve been teaching for a long time and both of us know our students have changed. The University provides a great seminar on how to teach the millennials. This is part of WHO you want to reach with your programs, so I want you to do some background research on the younger generation’s way of experiencing the world. They may not be your target market, but you’ll be better able to segment our your markets once you understand your customer and what they value.

Next, you and I will diagram out your industry. From that we’ll move on to understanding what you are selling, your target markets and the factors that influence them. Believe it or not, we are into formulas and structure in the Business School too!”

This is way more than a lunch time chat. How about we meet later in the week to get started?