

The ENGINEERING CAREER COACH PODCAST SESSION #58 Samurai or Firefighter – What Kind of Engineer Are You?

Show notes at: engineeringcareercoach.com/approach

Episode Intro: This is *The Engineering Career Coach Podcast*, the only podcast dedicated to helping engineers succeed in work and life. This show is hosted by engineering enthusiasts, Anthony Fasano and Chris Knutson. Both are professional engineers who found success early in their careers and now work together to help other engineers do the same. Now, it's show time!

Anthony: Hello! This is Anthony Fasano and this is the show for engineers who want to succeed in both work and life. I have with me today my co-host, Chris Knutson, and we have a pretty awesome episode for you today where we are going to discuss two different approaches to work as an engineer; the fire fighter approach or the samurai approach. We will get into exactly what that means but essentially, it's the idea of taking a reactive or a pro-active approach in the way you work. So, before we get here into the main segment of the show and into our discussion, let me just take a brief moment to recognize our sponsor for today's episode.

If you are thinking about taking the FE, PE or SC exam this year, I recommend that you check out PPI's review course. You can find out more about PPI at ppi2pass.com/coach. Again, that's ppi2pass.com/coach. I have more information about PPI and how they can help you, a little bit later on the show. Now, we are going to give you a quote to kind of get us started on today's topic of bringing us into the show. Hey Chris, you want to give our listeners the quote today and kind of bring us into this main segment so we can get fired up here on this discussion?

Chris: Here is the quote for the day: "Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused efforts," by Paul Meyer. Now we got to a good nice segwey into this whole firefighter and samurai discussion that we are going to have today.

Anthony: With that being said, let's jump right into the main segment.

Coaching Segment:

Anthony: Alright. Now it's time for our main segment and we are going to jump into this discussion. The show notes for today's show will be at engineeringcareercoach.com/approach. The show notes will contain the summary of the points that Chris and I discuss today, as well as any links to resources, websites, or books that we might mention during the show. And again, that can be found

at engineeringcareercoach.com/approach. And please, if you want to leave comments or feedback there, Chris and I check all the comments on the post and we will respond.

So, what we are going to do is get into this discussion here and I'll give you a little bit about the background on it. Chris and I read a blog over a website called Asian Efficiency, which is a pretty awesome blog and website. I met the guys that run it. It's all about being productive and being efficient in your work, and in really in life over all. And one of their emails recently talked about this idea of being a samurai versus a firefighter. Being someone that's, kinds of goes through your day doing what you want to do and kind of staying focused on it, or someone that's jumping around, responding to things, being really reactive.

And so Chris and I kind of went back and forth a bit on it and I kind of was leaning to samurai. He was kind of lean towards the firefighter. But I think, at the end of the day, you are going to have qualities of both. So, what we are going to do here is I am going to let Chris start off and talk a little bit about this idea of the firefighter approach and some of the benefits and some of the disadvantages of it and then we will jump into the samurai. Go ahead Chris.

Chris: Alright here Anthony. You know it's, I think you and I both got this email about the exact same time and almost responded to each other and probably about the same time as well after we read it. And I know what the intent was when most of us fear when we probably hear the word 'firefighter'. They think it's somebody who is, you know, running around, putting out fires, going from one problem to one popup issue to the next, and just constantly on running from one thing to the next thing.

I guess that would be a concept but if you offer me a note that I sent you, I took offense to that about a firefighter but, I've got a lot of firefighting experience in my background from being in the air force and I know what firefighters do. I know the amount of training they go through and really, have you been a firefighter as a mind set to approaching the work that we do in our life and in our career is not being necessarily a bad thing. So, here is, in my mind, some of the benefits of being a firefighter.

Firefighters, whether you know it or not, are pretty highly trained. I mean, these are guys and girls who go through a lot of training, not only physically but obviously, skill-wise. They got to know how to use equipment and they also go through a lot of mental training because think about it, if anyone has ever had the chance to go through a smoke house every once in a while, maybe volunteered fire departments will go out on, you know like, 4th of July, weekends, and put out the smoke house. If you ever get a chance to go through and do something like that, you find out that you have really got to be mentally in your game because, when you walk into a house like that, it's really, really easy to lose your head and get yourself into a of of trouble.

So, I'd really be a firefighter as this mind-set of someone who is trained, highly trained, poised, and ready to save the day when you're called on. And not just the day for themselves but for somebody else. So, in a day-to-day work that might be used in a lot of skill training, you know, you read a lot;

you're basically preparing yourself mentally so that, let's say, one of your colleagues has got some kind of a proposal presentation to give and you've been watching over their backs, what's going on and all of a sudden on Monday, the they are supposed to give, they don't show up. Something happens and your boss comes in and says, "We need you to take this presentation." You're trained, poised, and ready to save the day and go out and knock that proposal presentation over the park.

I also have already understand that I think a firefighter is somebody who is knowledgeable with skill. They put a lot of work into understanding the tools of their craft and know how to implement them. They are mainly bulletproof. What I mean by that is they are able to focus and work through adversity. And we are going to get in this call that will be something that we can do it; a future call about how you develop yourself to be this mentally bulletproof person. They go through a lot of training to understand how to control their mind and control their anxiety. And that's all part of their whole, how do you develop courage and the face their fear. And they are really exceptional planners and risk assessors. So they are really good at being able to develop plans and get others, the team, themselves, you know, out of crazy situations and medicate situations before they even occur. So, that's one of the benefits of being a firefighter.

So the disadvantages, firefighters have a lot of time 'off'. They have got like this periodic episodes of chaos. And obviously, the problem that I think that comes from that is, what happens when you have all this downtime. You're sort of like in an adrenaline or an action-junkie when you get a bunch of time, sitting around, waiting for something to happen. So, it can become really, really easy to get drilled and 'off' your game because you are waiting for the next crisis to come up. I think that firefighters, they are always thinking, they are planning, they are assessing the dangers that lie all around them. And I kind of feel bad, maybe as disadvantage because you've got their your engaged on looking at all the downsides of issues around you that, you might not be able to see the positives and some of the upsides of different opportunities that might be laying out there.

Anthony: I tend to agree with a lot of this stuff. I mean, when I initially thought about this whole discussion and this whole theme of samurai verse firefighter, I was definitely kind of saying to myself you know, I'd rather be a samurai. It seems to be less stressful. I'll get into the samurai next but I do agree that a lot of the stuff that you went through, from the firefighter mentality, if you look at in the realm of engineering, it can be extremely positive. Like the fact that they are trained and ready to save the day. I mean, how many engineers listening to this podcast have had to put out a fire in their career? Probably 99.999% of them had to get a call from the client, had to run out to a project site, had to save a budget. So that's obviously critical. The ability to focus, like you talked about Chris, is obviously critical when you're designing project plans and you're talking about you know, looking at something that's really technical. You have to be able to focus on it and do that right. So I think that's really important.

I do agree though, also that some of the disadvantages can be harmful in the engineering world, like where you do have these periods of chaos, where you do have clients, and say, you're serving clients

and going to project sites. When you don't have that or when things get slow, it can be very difficult to handle and it can be difficult to be productive. And as far as your last point, with thinking, planning and assessing the dangers that lie all around, I think that's a major problem when you're a firefighter. I think that, that's where you get into this whole thing with email, can overtake you when you're checking your emails every few minutes, making sure that there is nothing going on with your projects and walking around, finding out what's going on with everyone.

So, I do think that, when I think back on some of the successful engineering managers that I had, there is no doubt that they had this firefighting abilities. There is no doubt that they had the ability to take a call from the client and solve the problem or calm that client down in a matter of minutes and to me, that's where the firefighting skills are critical as an engineer. But let's transition now into the idea of being a samurai.

Being a samurai is, essentially meaning someone who is you know, further more calm about themselves. Let me jump right in and give you some benefits here that I see as to working, taking on that approach as samurai, whether it's work or in your personal life. You probably have more of a sense of calm right than a firefighter. Things seem to be more calm and you don't probably don't get riled up as quickly. You work on your own schedule, which I think is a big one. I don't think this is necessarily always realistic. I think let's just say, everyone's going to have periods of samurai and firefighter, that no one's going to be one or another. But, if there is periods of the day where you can work on your own schedule, work on what you want to work without distraction, I think that's invaluable.

And I know Chris and I are both huge fans of the book, *The One Thing* and we will post that in the show notes and link to that book by Gary Keller. I believe Jay Papasan is the other author's name. We will get all that stuff in the show notes. It's an awesome book and it talks about carving out niches in your day where you do what you want to do. You just shut off your distractions and email your phone, whatever the case may be. So I think that's definitely a characteristic of a samurai that's positive.

You are proactive. One of the things for me in my daily work that I try do, it definitely doesn't always happen and I am sure Chris will tell you the same thing, is I try to be proactive. So I try to look ahead. I try to prepare topics and things that I want to work on in future. I try to look at what some of the big things are coming down the pipeline or big things that I could create. I try not to just react to what people are telling me, react to emails I am getting. But obviously, there is some reaction that's required. But I think if you can have some sense of being proactive, that's very positive. Also I think that, as a samurai, if you can remain calm and take this proactive approach, you could be very creative and very innovative.

When you are responding or reacting in the moment, you are kind of limited to what you can respond with right, because you only have some period of time and you are kind of acting off the cuff. And

when I say that, for example, if you have a project deadline that's on a Friday and you start working on it on Wednesday or Thursday, obviously there is so much effort and creativity you could put into it. That would be more like a firefighter approach to responding to a deadline because maybe you are working on other stuff. If you start working on three or four weeks ahead of time, then maybe you have the ability to be more creative and look at some different alternatives that could really make the project unique and stand out. So, those are the benefits I see.

The disadvantages of being a samurai, one big one is that, you don't always respond well to pressure or think on your toes. And that's critical as I see it, especially in the engineering world. You have to be able to respond to pressure. If you can't, you're dead in your career in my opinion. I think you can be too calm and not aggressive enough. That's another disadvantage. If you want to climb on corporate ladder or get to a certain position in your engineering company, you're probably got to have some kind of aggressive mentality at parts of your career to be able to do that, and a samurai I can see is being very calm, maybe sometimes too calm.

And I think that the other disadvantage that I picked out here is, you can miss opportunities. If you're too laid back and you're kind of aloof to certain things, opportunities can just literally flow by you. And I think that, that's kind of problematic. Chris and I always talk about the idea of seizing opportunities in your career and creating them if you don't see one. But I think you have to have that vision to be able to see one. I think listen, to some of us being calm can maybe open you up to opportunities. But other times, you can let them fly by. So, that would be a disadvantage. So those are kind of my benefits and disadvantages. Chris, what do you think?

Chris: Yeah, I agree. I think the main take-away from all this through other people is you got to be able to be samurai-firefighter.

Anthony: Yeah. That's right.

Chris: Yeah, look at the benefits. We are going to be throwing this at the show notes for the episode. You know, look at the benefits that listed and go, "Hey, how do I rack up against these benefits of either mind-set?" Because I can look through this and go, you know in a firefighter, because I've been in these situations where there were responses under way to an emergency and to watch the fire chiefs and even myself, and other people, how we react under the pressure of what was going on.

And there was this calm, which I talked about that mental bulletproof that I talked about, but there was this calm that was in place. It's almost like, I'm trying to pronounce this guy's name, he was the author of the book *Flow*. We will put that in the show notes. But he kind of talks through that, when we get into that state of flow, you just have this natural calm because your mind is 100% focused on whatever the issue is, the task that is running. So, I don't think, you know there's really what you're trying to do is want to go up yourself as samurai-firefighter. Plus they both kind of wear the same hats

right?

Anthony: I agree with you. I think those top professionals or top engineers are going to have characteristics both of samurai and a firefighter. It's essentially, to kind of sum it up, I think I'd say it's the ability to react to things, successfully deal with adversity and react to problems and be able to handle them, but then also, have the ability to create the space for you to be creative. Create the space to be productive. And you have to be able to do both of those things and balance them, I think, to be successful engineers.

So with that, we will wrap up the main segment here. We are going to come back in a minute in the Take Action Today segment. We are going to give you some actionable advices you can do to move towards being a samurai-firefighter. Remember, the show notes for this show will be located at engineeringcareercoach.com/approach. Chris and I want you to come, come and tell us about a supervisor that you have that is a samurai or is a firefighter that you have seen to be very successful, or challenges that you feel with implementing some of the things that we have talked about today. Let's do it.

Take Action Today Segment:

Anthony: Now, it's time for our Take Action Today segment of the show and what we are going to do today is, Chris is going to give you one actionable piece of advice that you can use to implement some of the firefighter characteristics that we talked about in the main segment. And I'm going to do the same for samurai. However, before I do, I want to just mention our sponsor.

Our listeners often ask me what review course they should take for preparing for their FE, PE or SC exam. Hands down, I recommend PPI. Many of you may have heard of Michael Lindeburg, the author of such books in civil engineering reference manual. Well, Michael is the founder and CEO of PPI. So you could be assured that PPI review courses provide the same high quality content and instructional design as the books. PPI is currently offering early bird discounts at all FE, PE and SC review courses packages if you enrol by June 10th. For many courses, early bird savings are over \$500. Definitely check out the courses before June 10th if you are planning on taking your exam this year.

PPI's review course also comes with a passing guarantee. If you take a review course and meet the requirements, then PPI guarantees your past year exam or you can repeat the course for free. Our recent review course student said that because of this PPI review course, the exam ended up being a lot easier than he thought it would be. To learn more about how PPI can prepare for you, for your exams, head on over to ppi2pass.com/coach. That's ppi2pass.com/coach.

And I just want to say, Chris and I, if we do have sponsors on the show which are helpful with funding the show since this is a free show, we definitely look into the information that they are providing to

make sure that it's something that we think the listeners would appreciate. And I did actually recently go through the PPI course online before we decided to take on PPI's sponsor. I got to tell you it's phenomenal, the way that they set it up. I used Michael Lindeburg's books myself to pass the PE exam. So I just wanted to let our listeners know that, when we take a sponsor on, we really do to build diligence and we are excited to have PPI kind of come and be a part of the show.

So with that, let's jump in! Chris, can you give our listeners maybe one thing just to make it simple and let them walk away with something today that they can do to get a little bit better as a firefighter?

Chris: Here is your one take action idea to get you into the minds of being a firefighter. So I talked earlier about the firefighter's ability, to be able to be a really good risk assessor. So, take a project that you're working on right now today to be a professional project, one that you're working on at your firm or it can be a personal project. And then look at that project and answer the question: what are the three things that can go wrong and why.

So identify three different risks to that project being accomplished successfully. It could be something related to the scope, the timing, the causes, whatever it is, unforeseen sight conditions, whatever it might be. And then identify what you or your team might be able to do to make it so that risk never occurs. Medicate the risk. Or what you and your team would do if that risk occurred, how would you react? So, sit down and answer the question at how would I respond to this risk if it actually occurred. That is your take action for the firefighter mind-set.

Anthony: And I will give you one for this samurai mind-set. And my take action tip for you is going to be, one hour a day, I want you to just block off one hour a day on your calendar. Ideally between the hours of 9 and 12 am, where you say, I'm going to work for this for an hour and all distractions are going to be blocked out. It could be a report you're working on. Could be a design you're working on, calculations you're working on, whatever the case may be.

I want you to try that for an hour, every day for a week and see how that affects the quality of that work that you're working on in that focused hour. And I'd love for you to report back on both of these tips if you tried to implement them, again at engineeringcareercoach.com/approach. Leave your comments and we will check it out. Chris, anything else before we close off for this one?

Chris: Yeah, I just, I want to encourage everybody to check out the PPI materials if you're in that position of needing to get themselves prepped up for one of the exams. And go on *iTunes* and provide us some feedback. We really would enjoy it. And do what you can today to make yourself into that firefighting samurai.

Anthony: Alright, everyone. Till next time, please continue to engineer your own success.

The **ENGINEERING CAREER COACH**

HELPING ENGINEERS SUCCEED
IN WORK AND LIFE

Thank you for listening to **The Engineering Career Coach Podcast**. Be sure to visit engineeringcareercoach.com, where you can find all past episodes and also download a free 3-part video series created specifically for engineers to help you best utilize LinkedIn for networking, improve your communication and speaking skills, and also to help develop your leadership abilities. Now is the time to engineer your own success.