

# Managing

## Today's Workforce

Paul Silvis of Restek Corporation discusses university-business partnerships



Fred Weber—Campus Photography

**Head Coach Paul Silvis has created a company where his "players" enjoy coming to work.**

Like all coaches, Paul Silvis tries to put the right players in the right positions and provide them with the training, tools and opportunities to excel. He encourages an atmosphere of support and honesty and helps define his team's strategy for winning. The only difference between Silvis and other coaches is that he's managing a team of scientists and professionals striving to be No. 1 in the chromatography laboratory supply industry (see box). The Bellefonte, Pa.-based Restek Corporation, which Silvis founded, has annual sales of more than \$36 million and for two years in a row was ranked one of the 50 Best Places to Work in Pennsylvania. Silvis talked with Penn State Outreach magazine about the importance of learning in the workplace and how universities like Penn State can help.

**Q. You call yourself head coach. How has your management style evolved?**

**Silvis:** It comes from being a young scientist just out of college and feeling I knew how the workplace should be. I had found a workplace where employees were spending a lot of nonproductive time. I thought: If only I could create a company where people would enjoy coming to work as much as going home; where there is a high level of trust, and employees can speak their minds, have fun and feel the company cares about them. When I founded Restek, I was just a young geek. I didn't know a lot about business. At first, I wasn't doing a good job of coaching people, so I wrote down my vision for the company. I read it everyday, and I changed my behavior. I still have a lot to learn.

**Q. How should workforce training today reflect this type of thinking?**

**Silvis:** Professors and teachers are disconnected from the workforce, so what's really important is developing content that addresses the issues companies are facing. As universities partner with companies, they are doing more pull-through learning: getting people thinking, doing, analyzing, discussing and figuring things out for themselves, so they feel empowered to make decisions. We had a [Penn State] Management Development program for all levels of employees on building leadership skills that used this learning approach. Joe Walk [instructor in Management Development who designed the program and delivered the six modules in the spring] asked for feedback throughout the program and adjusted his teaching style accordingly, so we were all learning together. That's how universities should participate with companies.

**Q. What kinds of workforce training are available to your employees?**

**Silvis:** We use a lot of different training avenues, including Gazelles [an executive development program] and Jim Collins [author of "Good to Great"]. We also use central Pennsylvania's Industrial Modernization Center's Six Sigma training and a variety of Penn State training programs. Each year, we set themes for the things we want to learn. For the last several years, we have focused on "execution" in our training programs. Execution is part of our Plus One Customer Service Training, or PIE, as we call it, where PIE stands for Plus One customer service, Innovation in all we do and Execution (do what you say you are going to do when you say you will do it).

**Q. You recently served as the E. V. Bishoff Engineering Entrepreneur in Residence, a Penn State program that brings successful engineering entrepreneurs to the University for extended interactions with faculty and students. What advice did you give College of Engineering students?**

**Silvis:** I told them about some of the challenges I've faced, where I failed and what I learned from my failures. I also told them my philosophy for success: You have to embrace problems and overcome insurmountable obstacles. Envision "problems" like a track and field event. It's not the number or magnitude of the problems you have, but how fast you can jump over them and embrace the next one that wins the race. I also talked about our focus on the customer. ... It's the key to our success.

**Q. You participate in different Penn State programs. Why is this important?**

**Silvis:** I'm a member of the Penn State Outreach Advisory Board [the body that provides to the Outreach organization advice on major outreach education issues, challenges and prospects]. It's a teaching and learning opportunity and an enriching experience for me. I have a chance to share my opinions to help Outreach make its programs more successful. I'm also currently enrolled in Penn State's Executive MBA [a Smeal College of Business program for working professionals held on weekends], because I want to continue learning and growing. ♥

## What Is Chromatography?

Known as "separation science," chromatography is a process for separating complex liquid and gas mixtures into their individual components. The process is used by pharmaceutical, petroleum and food industries in product production, by forensic laboratories for criminal investigations and by other companies for testing water and air quality. Chromatography is also used in space: Restek Corporation's chromatography equipment is on board NASA's Cassini mission, which currently is exploring Saturn and its moons. ♥