

Back to Business

AIST's Leadership Conference in Full Swing

by Amanda L. Blyth

“It’s been a long time coming.”

This sentiment, offered up by AIST executive director Ron Ashburn, was shared by many within AIST’s leadership as he kicked off the AIST Leadership Conference on 17–19 November in Fernandina Beach, Fla., USA.

Indeed, it has been a long time since AIST’s Member Chapter and Technology Committee officers, Board of Directors members, and AIST Foundation Board of Trustees members have gotten together in person as a group. The last Leadership Conference was held in 2019 in Memphis, Tenn., USA.

Ashburn thanked all of the attendees for coming together to “get AIST through the pandemic.”

He then gave an overview of the state of the global steel industry. He noted general optimism in most steel-producing countries in the world, except China, where there has been a recent drop in production.

For the U.S., capacity utilization has been above 80% for the last six months. This figure speaks to the health of the industry, which is “very strong” right now, Ashburn said.

“With the signing of the [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act],” he said, “there is a ton of optimism” for the domestic steel industry. It is expected that there will be demand for approximately 15 million tons of steel in the wake of the bill.

“The planets seem to be aligning for the steel industry,” he quipped.

Ashburn continued with a deep dive into specific markets and noted how supply chain issues are disrupting the non-residential and automotive markets. However, for the automotive market, production is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2022 to an anticipated 17 million vehicles.

The focus then shifted to decarbonization.



“If you’re not currently involved in the decarbonization of the steel industry, you need to be,” Ashburn said. “You need to start tomorrow.”

He highlighted many of the major steelmakers who have recently published corporate sustainability reports and who have committed to various decarbonization goals — all targeting a minimum of 20% reduction of CO₂ emissions.

Ashburn noted the “incredible advantage” the U.S. steel industry has, in that it has the cleanest steel production in the world — however, that advantage is not promoted.

After this discussion, Ashburn gave an update on the state of the association. Following the high-water mark at the end of 2019, AIST’s membership currently stands at 15,300 members. Like many associations, AIST experienced a significant drop in membership as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, to the tune of 20%.

Also due to the pandemic, a few of AIST’s programs and initiatives have been put on hold, such as the Road Shows and international Study Tours. However, Technology Training Conferences and committee and chapter meetings quickly went virtual to continue to deliver content to AIST members.

Citing the infrastructure bill, Ashburn noted the “generational opportunity” that could arise through the impending steel demand that will come from the bill.

“The last time we had this kind of opportunity was during the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s,” he said. The association saw a steep increase in membership during that time.

The agenda switched gears to focus on emotional intelligence. Brent Darnell of Brent Darnell International led the group through a series of examples and demonstrations geared to helping them understand and manage their own emotional states



The AIST Board of Directors met during the 2021 Leadership Conference.





and those of others. He had the attendees take an emotional intelligence quiz and explained a few emotional intelligence profiles.

Following Darnell's segment, AIST staff presented several strategic initiatives and program updates.

Anna Voss, manager — technology programs, provided an update on AIST's Digital Transformation (DT) Strategic Plan. The plan was first conceived in 2018 to provide a home within AIST for DT; disseminate DT knowledge; create DT incentives for industry and academics; and position the steel industry as a DT leader.

She highlighted future plans for enhancing DT offerings, such as animating the Digital Transformation Steel Wheel.

The audience then heard from Brian Bliss, general manager — programs and publications. Bliss discussed the Technology Road Map for Iron and Steel Production: Revolutionizing U.S. Global Leadership for a Sustainable Industrial Supply Chain. The U.S. Department of Commerce, through the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), is seeking submissions to develop technology road maps to address high-priority research challenges and grow advanced manufacturing in the U.S.

Bliss gave an overview of the official Notice of Funding Opportunity from NIST and identified the core team members working on this initiative through AIST.

Ron Ashburn followed with a similar discussion on a Manufacturing Institute for Industrial Decarbonization through the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Advanced Manufacturing Office. Currently there are six "Clean Energy" Manufacturing Institutes, with a seventh one to be established to prioritize industrial carbonization strategies.

The program on day one concluded with a rapid-fire "air-it-out" discussion and plan prioritization.



Group discussion focused on engaging students, the DOE Manufacturing Institute, improving the perception of the steel industry, workforce development, bringing more value to members and enhancing AIST's Technology Training programs. Attendees had the opportunity to throw their support to various initiatives before the day adjourned.

The second day began with a presentation from longtime Leadership Conference speaker, Chris Kuehl of Armada Corporate Intelligence. Kuehl talked at length about the then-newly approved Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. He noted that with automation and robotics, infrastructure bills aren't necessarily the "job engines" that they once were, although steel demand is bound to benefit.

He also forecast that the spending from this bill won't come until later this year.

He spent some time talking about inflation, maintaining that the U.S. is not really facing "hyperinflation" or "stagflation."

"But we are facing transitory inflation, which is natural for commodities," he said.

"The key is knowing WHEN they'll go up and down. Steel has always been dependent on auto, construction and oil and gas, so the health of our industry depends on the health of those industries."

He gave detailed overviews of several markets and noted that the steel sector is "dealing with a lot of demand."

Kuehl wrapped up his presentation with some good news: reshoring trends indicate production is being brought back to the U.S., and the current supply chain issues should fade early this year.

Then, representatives from AIST's Executive Committee, Technology Committees and Member Chapters met separately.

The Technology Committee members had a roundtable discussion in which they had the opportunity to



AIST executive director Ron Ashburn (left) presented a framed copy of the cover of the July 2021 issue of *Iron & Steel Technology* to 2021–2022 AIST president Steve Henderson (right).

talk about what their respective committees are focusing on and challenges they're experiencing.

David Marshall of Performance Improvement Inc. gave the group an overview of how the decarbonization efforts started developing within AIST. Jim Hendrickson of Cleveland-Cliffs Burns Harbor spoke broadly about Digitalization Applications Technology Committee (DATC) and asked the group if their committees were in need of programming on digitalization topics. He also highlighted the DATC's inaugural Digitalization Fundamentals training course. Brian Smith of ANDRITZ Metals USA Inc. talked about the path of the Sensor Systems Subcommittee of the DATC. Several committee members hailed the idea of "technical TED Talks" to give both members and non-members access to technical content.

At the Member Chapters workshop, AIST's Stacy Varnecky, general manager — sales and marketing, and Jill Liberto, member chapter advisor, led the discussion with 13 Member Chapters represented. The officers were provided an update on chapter membership and activities, as well as resources available.

Each chapter then provided a synopsis of their annual chapter offerings including programs, student and Young Professional activities, membership, scholarships, and chapter leadership.

The sharing of information amongst the chapters yielded a healthy discussion as the officers had the opportunity to review success and challenges, exchange ideas and ask questions of one another. The makeup of each chapter is unique, which produces a variety of programming options for AIST members. The workshop also provided AIST a chance to learn more about the challenges and opportunities for each chapter, which will guide AIST's work for the coming year.

The conference concluded as usual with a spirited game of AIST *Jeopardy!* and a wrap-up of the ideas and initiatives discussed over the course of the two days.



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