

2023 **AIST** LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE RECAP

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by Amanda Woods

“It’s a great time in the industry.”

AIST’s president, Barry Schneider of Steel Dynamics Inc., shared this observation at the 2023 AIST Leadership Conference in November.

Schneider made this statement in reference to the current gap in talent that exists in the steel industry. Throngs of steelmakers are retiring, while the industry is trying to attract new, younger talent — and entice them to stay.

He encouraged attendees to bring someone who’s not involved with AIST to a meeting to introduce them to all that AIST has to offer.

The AIST Leadership Conference brings together representatives from the association’s 29 Technology Committees, 22 local Member Chapters, the AIST Foundation and the AIST Board of Directors. Held in Orlando, Fla., USA, on 15–17 November, the event was sponsored by premier sponsor TMEIC Corp. Americas, and event sponsors Berry Metal Co., Baltimore Aircoil Co. and SuperBooth.

AIST executive director Ron Ashburn opened the event with a snapshot of the changing landscape of North American steel producers.

“We’re in the middle of a multi-generational renaissance,” Ashburn said, noting the potential sale of United States Steel Corporation to underscore the significance of the current era.

He gave an analysis of the integrated process versus the mini-mill process and how the proportions of each have shifted over time. He noted that the electric arc furnace production route has given the North American steel industry a distinct advantage in the production of clean steel, which he said “the rest of the world is looking to emulate.”

“To satisfy global demand, we need both routes to exist, but we must advance technology faster to reduce the intensive CO₂ emissions from the blast furnace,” he added.

AIST’s general manager — sales and marketing Stacy Varmecky followed with an update on AIST’s Strategic Plan. She discussed recent successes and high-priority items for the next six to eight months. Varmecky happily reported the success of the inaugural Women in Steel Conference, which garnered 87 new AIST members. She then highlighted recent Young Professional events, Technology Training Conferences, study tours, student programs and scholarships.

Brian Bliss, AIST’s general manager — programs and publications, gave an update on the National Institute of Standards and Technology grant that AIST has received to road-map challenges for the steel industry over the next 30 years. He spoke on the different working groups involved that engage AIST members and reviewed the timeline for the road-mapping efforts.

The morning session concluded with a rapid-fire “Air It Out” session in which attendees were able to suggest ways AIST can boost membership, enhance



Ron Ashburn (right) presented 2023–2024 AIST president Barry Schneider (left) with a framed copy of the cover of the June 2023 issue of *Iron & Steel Technology*.



membership engagement and attract the next generation of steelworkers.

Jamie Notter, co-founder and growth strategist of PROPEL, gave an interactive presentation entitled “Building a Culture That Drives Organizational Results.” Notter explained that culture drives behavior and is rooted in what’s valued at an organization. Culture, he said, must be conveyed from the management level — and the same goes for collaboration and work/life balance.

Following Notter’s presentation, the attendees participated in a new activity this year: a round of Steel Pursuit. This AIST trivia game was played on attendees’ phones, which tracked and updated their scores in real time via an app.

The final presentation of the day was from longtime AIST conference presenter Chris Kuehl of Armada Corporate Intelligence. Kuehl’s presentation, “Economic

Perspectives for the Manufacturing Economy,” covered many different facets of the economy and various factors that apply to manufacturing. He talked about populations shifts in the post-COVID area, wherein urban areas have lost residents in the wake of remote work.

He noted that construction is still surging and analyzed the locations of new steel mills that are being built across the U.S. Mills are “going up in rural areas, where people want jobs,” he quipped.

The day closed out with a networking reception.

The second day of the conference began with a Leadership Perspectives discussion with Dave Stickler, chief executive officer of Hybar LLC. This question-and-answer session was led by Ron Ashburn, who asked Stickler about his career and leadership philosophies.



Representatives from the AIST Executive Committee judged pitches from teams during a new activity called “The Furnace.”

David Stickler of Hybar LLC was the Leadership Perspectives featured speaker.



The winning team of The Furnace (left to right): Nate Berry, James Hoffman, Ashraf Hanna, Sunday Abraham (kneeling), David Marshall, Chris Lyons, Josh Davich (kneeling) and Brian Hilk.

Jamie Notter gave a presentation on culture in the workplace.

Stickler shared the milestones in his career, starting with his first paying job as a garbage man when he was a child. Born and raised near Cleveland, Ohio, USA, he went to Bowling Green State University and majored in accounting. He then got his M.B.A. at Northwestern University. After graduation, he worked for the Reagan administration as a White House intern.

After his stint in Washington, Stickler went to work on Wall Street, where he was introduced to the steel industry by way of one of his first clients – United States Steel Corporation. He then detailed the progression of his career in steel with U. S. Steel, SeverCorr and Big River Steel.

Stickler said, “I’m so, so thankful for a string of good fortune to have worked with these people. Then, down the road, to work side by side with John Correnti for a number of years.”

Ashburn asked Stickler what advice did he wish someone had given him early in his career.

“If you trust your employees, push decision-making down and treat them with respect, magical things can happen,” Stickler replied. “Treat all your employees as if they’re owners.”

Following the Leadership Perspectives session, the conference shifted into a new team activity called “The Furnace.” Attendees were split into eight groups and given an objective: Brainstorm a feasible plan that AIST can put into action within the next year in one of three areas — engaging trade schools; evolving diversity, equity and inclusion; and rebranding the perception of the steel industry — with a budget of US\$100,000.

The teams brainstormed ideas and presented them to all of the attendees. Using the same app that was utilized for Steel Pursuit, the attendees voted on their phones for their favorite pitch. The three highest-scoring teams then went on to present their ideas in front of representatives from AIST’s Executive Committee, who would decide the winner.

The winning team, whose pitch involved rebranding the perception of the steel industry, included Nate Berry, James Hoffman, Ashraf Hanna, Sunday Abraham, David Marshall, Chris Lyons, Brian Hilk and Josh Davich.

AIST appreciates the significant contributions of our member leaders throughout the year and for their efforts to ensure the association remains focused on key initiatives to advance iron and steel. ♦

Thank you to all of the sponsors of the 2023 AIST Leadership Conference.

