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SRNS Early-Career Professionals Learn How to Face the Future Together

Leaders share career advice with early-career professionals from the Savannah River Site

AIKEN, S.C. (Jan. 9, 2018) – From the recent graduate who just started working last week to the president and CEO, everyone is faced with career-altering decisions. How to recognize and confront these opportunities head-on was one of the many topics discussed at the 2017 LEAP (Leaders Emerging Among Professionals) Conference.

More than 150 Savannah River Nuclear Solutions (SRNS) employees gathered for the half-day conference, themed “Facing the Future Together,” in Aiken, S.C. The event kicked off with an introduction by Stuart MacVean, SRNS President and CEO and LEAP Executive Sponsor, who reflected on the importance of LEAP members’ contributions to the workforce.

“Every single one of you no matter where you are in your position makes a difference,” said MacVean. “The work you do matters, whether it’s in engineering, operations, construction, IT, accounting or communications. My advice is to first do the best you can at the job you’re doing today – don’t worry about what’s next. The second piece of advice is to try a lot of different things. Move into areas within the company that are outside of your comfort zone because then you can gain a broader perspective about how the business works.”



Michael Lempke, President of Huntington Ingalls Industries Technical Solutions’ Nuclear & Environmental group, addresses members of Savannah River Nuclear Solutions LEAP (Leaders Emerging Among Professionals) at a recent early-career conference in Aiken, S.C.

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Following an interactive networking activity was the keynote address by Michael Lempke, President of Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII) Technical Solutions' Nuclear & Environmental group.

During his address, Lempke shared his philosophy on making hard decisions, knowing personal limitations and focusing on what's mission-critical at a specific time. He drew on many examples from his personal life and his career in the U.S. Navy's Naval Reactors Program, National Nuclear Security Administration and HII.

First, Lempke reflected on experiences from growing up in the rural town of Bullhead City, Ariz., and then incorporated other personal elements into his talk, which centered around photos of iconic Western actors in his office and what they represent to him. The first photo is of John Wayne, representing Lempke's favorite quote by the actor which states, "Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway."

"When I look back over the decisions I've made, I've somehow been able to take a deep breath and step forward despite being scared of the decision before me," recalled Lempke. "Almost everything of significance in my life has resulted from a decision that has made me nervous."

Lempke described how his decisions have built on each other. If he had never enlisted in the Navy, he wouldn't have gone to officer candidate school. If it wasn't for that experience, he wouldn't have gone to work at Naval Reactors where he met his wife. He credits that the experience gained at Naval Reactors prepared him for his work with the National Nuclear Security Administration and in his current role at HII.

"It's not about the saga of jobs and career moves. It's what you've been able to learn in each of those positions," Lempke added. "The experiences that stressed, pressed and expanded my body of knowledge have helped prepare me for the challenges that I face today. I encourage you to train yourself and really think about how you recognize those key decisions because the easiest road is rarely the most rewarding."

The second photo Lempke keeps in his office is of Clint Eastwood who is famous for saying "a man's got to know his limitations."

"We all have limitations without a doubt, so own them. Build teams to purposefully compensate for them, and always remember you didn't get here by yourself, and you're not going to get much further alone. Credit for our accomplishments has to be shared with those who helped us along the way, and it creates a debt that can only be satisfied by helping others along their path," Lempke said.

Lastly, the third photo of Ronald Reagan emphasizes the importance of narrowing your focus, that great energy focused too broadly has little effect, but great energy focused properly has a tremendous impact.

"I believe that we can be more, achieve more and go farther than we think we can. To quote Reagan: 'There are no great limits to growth because there are no limits of human intelligence, imagination and wonder.' Keep that in mind as you're facing the future together. What you do at this site has a tremendous impact not just for national security but for global stability and will echo for generations to come," Lempke concluded.

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Following the keynote address was a panel discussion with managers from different areas at SRNS. The five panelists included Jim Barry, SRNS Senior Vice President and CFO; Dr. Brenda Garcia-Diaz, Savannah River National Laboratory Energy Materials Group Manager; Cynthia Boler-Melton, Enterprise System Solutions Director; Rick Burns, H Canyon Facility Manager; and Rod Rabon, Chief Engineer, Site Infrastructure Engineering.

“The panel discussion brought out some good points to ponder,” said Todd Woodsmall, Tritium Reservoir Systems Engineering Manager. “I appreciated Rick telling the story of saying ‘no’ to a potential job assignment because of his family situation, even when he received negative responses from his superiors. While it’s important to be flexible and open to trying new assignments, you can’t separate developing professionally from your personal life.”

LEAP is a developmental program for professionals in the early stages of their careers. With a focus of business awareness specific to SRNS, LEAP provides early-career professionals with networking, professional development and community outreach events, as well as increased visibility with management. The organization is peer-led by a steering committee that coordinates monthly events for its 600 members.

“The LEAP conference was a great opportunity to get a variety of people together to network, share career advice and talk about issues affecting early-career employees,” said Drew Payton, LEAP member of the Savannah River National Laboratory’s Weapons Technology Group. “It bridged the gap between seasoned employees who are very experienced at what they do and those of us who are younger and embarking on our careers after recently graduating from college. It was affirming to hear how the speakers were intimidated by situations within their jobs and that we’re all learning as we go along.”

Savannah River Nuclear Solutions is a Fluor-led company whose members are Fluor Federal Services, Newport News Nuclear and Honeywell, responsible for the management and operations of the Department of Energy’s Savannah River Site, including the Savannah River National Laboratory, located near Aiken, South Carolina.

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