

2024 AIST Leadership Conference Recap

By Emily Williams

“The steel industry is experiencing a multigenerational technological renaissance. Let us be the early adopters that drive innovation.”

AIST’s executive director Ron Ashburn shared this sentiment when opening the 2024 AIST Leadership Conference. He observed how being at the forefront of new technologies and innovations will help the steel industry continue to grow and adapt to the ever-changing times we live in.

The conference brings together leaders from the association’s 29 Technology Committees, 22 local Member Chapters, the AIST Foundation Trustees and the AIST Board of Directors. The event held on 18–20 November in San Antonio, Texas, USA, was supported by premier sponsor TMEIC Corp. Americas, and event sponsors Berry Metal Co., SuperBooth and Baltimore Aircoil Co.

After his welcoming remarks and introductions, Ashburn began the event with an overview of North American steel producers and the global steel industry as a whole. He discussed the current

industry baseline with respect to steel production capacity and demand, and the challenges associated with global steel trade.

The challenges for steel are many, especially with respect to global overcapacity, increasing Chinese exports and decreased global profitability. The silver lining, according to Ashburn, is that technological innovation is the key strategy to enhance global competitiveness and to insulate against unfair trade distortions. Technology will create a more sustainable future for the industry.

“In order to build a green energy economy, we need lots of steel,” Ashburn said. “If there’s one thing you can take away from this presentation it’s this: Green energy needs green steel, and green steel needs green energy.”

The next presentation was given by Brian Bliss, general manager — programs and publications, who gave an update on AIST’s Strategic Plan. He discussed recent growth within the organization, various conferences and meetings held within the last year, upcoming conferences in 2025, and how AIST is working to attract the next generation into the workforce. Since 2020, there has been a 140% growth in the number of women who are members of AIST and Young Professional membership has grown 36% since 2021.

Additionally, two new committees have been approved by the AIST Board of Directors: the Young Professional Standing Committee and the Women in Steel Standing Committee. Both are aimed at growing their respective communities within the steel industry.

Bliss also shared that the roadmap for iron and steel manufacturing report — funded by the grant received from the National Institute of Standards and Technology — was submitted in September. The executive summary is available on page 8 and a public version of the roadmap will be available within the first quarter of 2025 at AIST.org.

Lloyd Corder of CorCom Inc. then presented his findings while doing his market research for a project discussed during last year's conference. Titled "Should AIST Lead a Campaign to Improve Public Perceptions of the Steel Industry?" attendees learned about the research he conducted over the last year and what the perception of the industry is from outside of it, and also from within, and what AIST can do about it.

The goal of the research is to find out how to shift the long withstanding stereotype of the steel industry from old, dirty and unsafe to new, innovative and clean. One of the insights he shared was that only 45% of steel companies are marketing to consumers; most of the efforts are focused on other companies, or business to business (B2B) marketing.

He closed his presentation with the timeline and the next steps AIST is planning to take to move this initiative forward, including presenting the findings to AIST's Executive Committee and the final step of submitting a proposal to the AIST Board of Directors at AISTech in Nashville in May 2025.

Next, AIST's Stacy Varnecky, general manager — sales and marketing, provided a progress report on the winning idea from "The Furnace" from last year's Leadership Conference.

The winning idea was centered on strengthening partnerships between the trade schools and community colleges to develop the next generation of steelmakers. The trades overall are down 35%, but demand is expected to be up within the next 10 years due to infrastructure growth and global supply chain needs.

If approved by the Board, this plan will be executed in three phases: the first phase will be focused on redirecting trade schools to the steel industry, from there the second phase is aimed at growing the trade schools so that they can be focused on the steel industry, and the third and final phase is to grow vocational classes to include steel trades.

She reiterated that this proposal is still in development and encouraged attendees to provide feedback.

The afternoon continued with an interactive presentation by Betsy Allen-Manning, owner and chief executive officer of Destination Workplace™, entitled "Impact Leadership: Develop Talent, Create a Sense of Purpose & Build a Destination Workplace™ Culture."

She discussed the importance of being an effective, high-impact leader and creating a positive workplace culture for employees. Allen-Manning shared her own growth into the leader she needed to be with the audience and encouraged them to lead with purpose.

"Leadership is not a position or title, it's a responsibility," she said.

Next was an "Air It Out" session in which attendees were able to suggest ways AIST can boost membership, enhance membership engagement,



attract the next generation of steelworkers and effectively take the “Perception of the Steel Industry” initiative head-on.

Day one closed with an economics presentation from Keith Prather, managing director of Armada Corporate Intelligence. He covered many facets of the economy, including the effect the presidential election may have and what the coming 100 days may look like, especially regarding impending tariffs for the steel industry.

The second and last day of the conference started with a Leadership Perspectives talk with Charles Schmitt, executive vice president and president of SSAB Americas. This question-and-answer session was led by Ron Ashburn, who talked with Schmitt about his career and leadership within the industry.

Schmitt grew up in a steel town in Midland, Pa., USA, and is a fourth-generation steelmaker. He started his career with United States Steel Corporation, as he was selected for their management program. Five years later he moved to IPSCO, which was acquired by SSAB, and he’s been there ever since.

Ashburn asked Schmitt what he would say to a young person who is just entering the steel industry.

“You can build something in this world. You can create wealth, or you can transfer it,” Schmitt said. “If you fundamentally want to work with the earth, take minerals and build and really create wealth, then come work with us. In this industry we can do a lot with our material; it’s the best on earth to do it with.”

Representatives from AIST’s Executive Committee, Technology Committees and Member Chapters all met separately for the remainder of the afternoon.

The conference concluded with a game of Steel Pursuit and a wrap-up of the topics, initiatives and ideas discussed over the past two days.

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

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In addition to bragging rights, the top 10 winners of this year’s Steel Pursuit won Amazon gift cards for achieving high scores in the trivia game that included a variety of AIST- and industry-related questions.

