**Emerging Leaders Program: A New Leadership Development Model for a New Age in Nuclear**

*Abstract: Two key challenges in the nuclear industry are knowledge transfer and leadership development, both impacted by the influx of millennials to the industry. Traditional leadership development programs are typically crafted by the Human Resources (HR) organization using a diagnostic model, where needs are identified and a resulting program is created and applied to meet those needs. In this model, HR serves as the driver of the program, and the participants are more passive. This article describes a millennial-driven leadership development program, where the program elements are crafted and driven directly by the program participants. HR serves more as a support tool of the program to ensure the workforce is empowered to implement the program to address the needs that the participants identify.*

*A paradigm shift in leadership development programs is required to address the aging workforce, to meet the millennial workforce needs, and to eliminate the pitfalls of HR-driven, lecture-based training. A significant portion of the industry workforce is nearing retirement, taking with them a broad industry knowledge base. The millennial workforce is seeking opportunities for career progression, methods to exert values they deem essential to company culture, and processes for personal and career development.*

*The ENERCON Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) addresses these challenges faced in the current state of the nuclear industry and has demonstrated positive benefits in both retention and promotion of millennial participants. This article illustrates a new model for leadership development that empowers the workforce to directly contribute to the program content, cultivates a culture of innovation, and enables participants to put their solutions into practice.*

*The Challenge*

The nuclear industry currently faces important challenges in the areas of knowledge transfer and leadership development due to an aging and diminishing workforce. The technical expertise gained in the development and construction of nuclear power plants in the 1970s and 1980s, along with the leadership experience gained through industry defining moments, is walking out the door. A freeze in hiring between the initial age of construction and the mid-2000s makes it crucial to hire new employees and retain the existing workforce. The Center for Energy Workforce Development (CEWD) estimates that the industry will replace 38 percent of its workforce between 2015 and 2019 due to attrition and retirement[[1]](#footnote-1). With an aging workforce leaving the industry, it is critical that both technical and leadership experience is transferred to younger staff. In the midst of these challenges, the Delivering the Nuclear Promise® (DNP) initiatives endorsed by the industry aim to reduce costs in the competitive energy sector. The DNP effort explores creative alternatives, such as the new Standard Design Process (SDP), to streamline workflow and processes across the industry.

As a result, a key question should be asked: How does the industry plan to balance cost and quality while losing significant expertise due to retirements and voluntary departures?

ENERCON has engineered a solution to identify high potential/performing employees, and develop their skillsets through an intensive and interactive leadership development program. The Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) was developed by engineering staff, with support from HR and senior management. The program cultivates the next generation of leadership through experiential learning and fosters a culture of creative and practical problem solving. The two-year program requires participants to invest a minimum of three hours each month towards their personal and professional development. This time involves monthly leadership presentations from company executives, clients, and experts outside of the company. In addition, the program places participants into teams tasked with defining real-life company challenges, proposing practical solutions, and implementing those solutions with senior management endorsement. The ELP serves the complex needs of this new age in nuclear by empowering individuals with the knowledge and opportunity to practice their leadership and enact solutions in a real-time scenario.

*ENERCON Leadership Development Program Purpose and Components*

Traditional leadership development programs tend to focus more on instilling best practices through training. As leadership consultant Mike Myatt points out in his article, “[The #1 Reason Leadership Development Fails](https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemyatt/2012/12/19/the-1-reason-leadership-development-fails/#11f6883e6522),” this training approach assumes a one-size-fits-all strategy, and focuses on the participants as passive learners. This overreliance on training tends to make it difficult for participants to apply the curriculum. More effective leadership development programs aimed at emerging leaders focus on experiential, real-world learning.

An effective leadership development program is a key aspect of recruiting, hiring and retaining millennial employees. As demographics continue to shift toward millennials making up a majority of the workforce, it is crucial that leadership development programs appeal to the values of this young generation. A Gallup poll[[2]](#footnote-2) reported that 87% of millennials find personal and professional development to be important in a job. This fact alone should encourage organizations in every industry to focus on employee training and career development. A separate survey by Gallup[[3]](#footnote-3) indicated that millennials are three times as likely as other generations to have changed jobs in the past year. Corporate recruiters who cannot pitch their company’s leadership development program may be at a disadvantage when prospecting top millennial talent, and companies that cannot deliver on the promise of development may see increased turnover. The program content for the ELP was designed in alignment with the NEI Leadership Competencies and catered to the needs of the participants. Program topics include career development, personal branding, time management/prioritization, project management, people management, presentation skills, knowledge transfer, and making a career transition. The ELP serves to provide younger employees with a chance for professional development at an individual level, but also though collaborative efforts via small group teamwork and problem solving.

A study conducted by Intelligence Group[[4]](#footnote-4) reported that 88% of millennials prefer a collaborative work culture to a competitive one. Collaboration can manifest itself in many ways as a part of career development. Typical practices like 360-degree reviews, individual development plans, and regular mentoring involve coworkers and management in feedback and goal-setting to improve employee performance. These specific practices are incorporated as the first step of the ELP, but the program goes much further in making collaboration an integral piece of the development puzzle. In fact, collaboration is the central focus of the ELP, with opportunities for cross-departmental partnership to develop the program curriculum, small group problem solving around corporate challenges, regular interaction with high-level managers serving as small group leaders, and face-to-face feedback from C-level leaders on program challenge solutions. The ELP encourages young employees to pursue their values of collaboration through interaction up and down the corporate ladder, and across the organization to drive company improvement, all while learning leadership strategies through an employee-developed curriculum.

The chart below describes the benefits the participants and the organization gain through the ELP:

*ELP Conferences*

As part of the ELP, participants attend presentations focused on personal and professional development. Each presentation focuses on a particular competency, and is delivered to the participants as a case study experienced by senior management, both internal and external to ENERCON. With several presenters for each topic, the participants are able to see how particular skills are applied by industry veterans in a variety of roles and career paths, both technical and supervisory.

*Personal Development Tools*

In addition to conference attendance, each participant receives a 360-degree evaluation. In this approach, feedback is obtained from the employee, peers, and management, with the results consolidated into a 360-degree report. Each participant uses the 360-degree report to develop personal and professional goals, which form the basis of an individual development plan (IDP). The 360-degree report and IDP are discussed between the participant and their supervisor at both the beginning and the end of the program.

*Knowledge Transfer*

With priceless knowledge leaving the industry every day, one of the biggest issues in today’s nuclear industry is ensuring that there is a seamless transition of knowledge between retiring veterans and new, young talent. The ELP approaches this issue by ensuring that knowledge transfer techniques are presented during the program cycle. Industry leaders are asked to share their knowledge transfer success stories and lessons learned with the ELP class. Progress has already been seen in this area, as one group’s program challenge resulted in the creation of a subject matter expert (SME) skills database that identifies individuals with unique skillsets across the entire company.

*Program Challenge*

The ELP offers a unique opportunity to springboard process changes through its program challenge. The program challenge allows participants to practice leadership skills through experiential learning. Small groups select a real-life ENERCON challenge, and propose solutions that include a cost/benefit analysis and implementation schedule. Small groups propose their solutions via presentations to senior leadership, where they are graded on presentation skills, ease of implementation, feasibility, and concept development. Recent program challenges tackled issues like enhancing communication and collaboration between work groups and diversifying ENERCON product offerings. Of 11 recent projects presented to ENERCON senior leaders, eight are being pursued for implementation or further investigation. Furthermore, of those eight projects, one has already resulted in the expansion of ENERCON’s cyber security product line to include software maintenance. The increased use of intra-office video conferencing is another ELP initiative that is providing an estimated savings of over $200,000 per year in travel expenses during the initial pilot program. Another innovative project addressed knowledge transfer and collaboration with the development of an employee resource database featuring a unique interface that allows employees to easily search for certifications, skillsets, subject-matter expertise, and project lessons learned.

*Developers Committee*

A unique component to the ELP is the developers committee, comprised of former ELP members. Following each rotation, standout program participants are recruited to help develop the program for future rotations. Committee members develop content, revise structure, and evaluate program involvement to ensure success. Company executives view the ELP and the developers committee as integral pieces for leadership development programs. As a result, they have endorsed a new leadership development program aimed at senior leadership positions, using the ELP as a program model.

*Success Factors*

The ENERCON ELP has positively benefited ENERCON in terms of retention. Program components, coupled with the prolonged exposure to upper management, have shown a positive trend for retention within the company. Company HR data shows that employee attrition for program participants is less than half the rate for the company overall. In addition, nearly one-third of program participants have grown to a new role or position within a two-and-a-half-year period after participating in the program. As indicated through post-program evaluations, most participants have found the program very valuable to their career development, and they would recommend it to other high potential employees. In addition to the positive impacts to employees, the program has also benefited the company through the implementation of program challenges.

*Lessons Learned*

Since program inception, the ENERCON ELP developers committee has taken a “kaizen[[5]](#footnote-5)” approach to each ELP rotation. Each year, a program evaluation has been issued, collecting valuable data on which components were seen as most interactive, enjoyable and valuable to career development. In addition, feedback from management has been solicited and incorporated into future classes. Several lessons learned have been obtained thus far.

One lesson learned has been the natural tendency for management to view the ELP as a people-management funnel, and to look narrowly to include only those expected to grow into supervisors. The ELP developers committee has redirected management to ensure that ELP rotations include not only future people-managers, but also those that are expected to grow into project managers, sales/marketing staff, and technical leaders. The biggest struggle is identifying future technical leaders, as they tend to be less noticeable in the eyes of management. More aggressive solicitation of skilled technical professionals from the engineering supervisors is needed to identify this group.

Another lesson learned has been sensitivity to the scale of the program matching the scale at which the organization is looking to promote individuals. Any program similar to the ELP needs to be seen as an exclusive opportunity available only to high performing/potential employees. By including 10-20% of the staff population each year, the program loses this level of exclusivity, as nearly every employee would have passed through the program in a five- to 10-year span. Rather than focusing on a flat percentage of staff to include each year, it is strongly recommended that programs focus on the succession planning needs of the organization in all career paths. If the organization is projecting to need 10 new supervisors in the next two years, then the program may include 20 prospective candidates to help fill those roles when available. It is very important to not sell the program to staff as a vehicle for instant promotion, but rather as a development tool.

A final lesson learned has been the importance of being strategic in following up with participants after their program participation. In the first rotation of the ENERCON ELP, the participants did not receive formal follow-up. Though some participants grew in their position or role, others felt neglected after participation, and yearned for an understanding of “what’s next” for their development. The program developers committee built into the second rotation a more formal follow-up approach with the group after their participation, including working with a management sponsor to help further investigate and/or implement concepts from their program challenge presentations, and more follow-up from supervisors around the participants’ IDP goals. This has led to more engagement and better end impressions from participants.

*Conclusions*

The ELP addresses real needs in the nuclear industry by enriching knowledge transfer, developing millennial employees, and adding experiential learning to leadership development. The program content outline and structure are developed by staff because front-line employees are the best candidates to identify needs to tackle and values to exert. Leadership development is continuously fostered through program presentations from executives, small group collaboration, and experiential learning via program challenge presentations and solutions. Although the ELP has had challenges since its inception, it is continuously improving as we incorporate lessons learned. In the future, the ELP hopes to have a more direct funnel to company challenges, with the program helping to create a culture of innovation throughout the company. In addition, the developers committee seeks to create more alignment between program participants and succession plans. The ELP will continue to find ways to empower employees to develop themselves into tomorrow’s leaders and to enact value-driven change throughout the company.

*Written by: Arihant Jain, Joesf Barick, Kaleb Drew, Kyle Freedman*

1. Center for Energy Workforce Development (CEWD), “Gaps in the Energy Workforce Pipeline, 2015 CEWD Survey Results,” accessed August 31, 2017, http://www.cewd.org/surveyreport/CEWD2015SurveySummary.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gallup, “What Millennials Want From Work and Life,” accessed July 11, 2017, http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/191435/millennials-work-life.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gallup, “Millennials: The Job-Hopping Generation,” accessed July 11, 2017, http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/191459/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Forbes, “What Millennials Want In The Workplace (And Why You Should Start Giving It To Them),” accessed July 11, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/robasghar/2014/01/13/what-millennials-want-in-the-workplace-and-why-you-should-start-giving-it-to-them/#33770f54c404 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. kai·zen: a Japanese business philosophy of continuous improvement of working practices, personal efficiency, etc [↑](#footnote-ref-5)