Growing the Next Generation

Steve Janke, Chair, MPMA Board of Directors

When I was first invited to join what would become the Strategic Networking Leadership Forum (SNL)—then in its earliest meetings as the Future Leaders Council—I wasn't sure exactly what to expect. I was a relatively new face in the association, still finding my footing in a room full of other young owners and executives, eager to learn from each other. But I showed up, and that decision changed the trajectory of my involvement with this organization in ways I couldn't have anticipated.

I joined what I recall was the second or third meeting of the group, as the founders were still working to get it off the ground. From the beginning, the energy was different. This wasn't a committee focused on policy or procedure. It was a group of next-generation leaders—gear shop owners, executives, rising managers—who genuinely wanted to learn from one another and invest in the future of the industry. I was immediately drawn in.

What stood out most to me, and what I still think about today, were the facility tours. There is something uniquely valuable about walking the floor of a peer's operation. You see how they've solved problems you're wrestling with. You notice equipment choices, workflow decisions, quality processes—things you'd never learn from a trade publication or a conference panel. Those tours sparked some of the most honest and productive conversations I've had in my career. They created a level of trust among participants that is rare in any industry, let alone one as specialized and competitive as ours.

The relationships I built through the SNL were equally formative. Getting to know other gear shop owners and CEOs on a personal level—understanding their challenges, their philosophies, their ambitions—gave me a broader perspective on our industry that I carry with me to this day. It also gave me the confidence to take on greater responsibility within the association. My involvement with the SNL eventually led me to chair the Trade Show Committee, and that experience set me on the path to where I stand today.

The Future Leaders Council and the SNL produced four Chairmen of this association. I am the last of them. That fact fills me with both pride and a sense of urgency, because we need to refill that pipeline. My business would not be where it is today if I hadn't gotten involved with this alliance.

As I step into the role of Chairman of the Board for the Motion Power Manufacturers Alliance, one of my primary commitments is to help identify and develop the next generation of leaders for this organization. We need to find those people now, bring them into the work of the association, give them real responsibility, and invest in their growth. That doesn't happen by accident. It has to be intentional.

The other challenge I intend to take head-on is helping our membership navigate the rise of artificial intelligence. Larger companies have resources dedicated to this already. But I believe the greatest opportunity belongs to our smaller members—the agile, entrepreneurial shops that can adopt new tools quickly and use them to compete in ways that simply weren't possible a few years ago. The MPMA should be a resource and a catalyst for that conversation.

This industry has given me a great deal. The Future Leaders Council gave me a community when I was new, and a foundation when I was ready to lead. My goal as Chairman is to make sure the next generation has the same opportunity.

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