

# Leadership and Engagement Are Needed for Industry Sustainability

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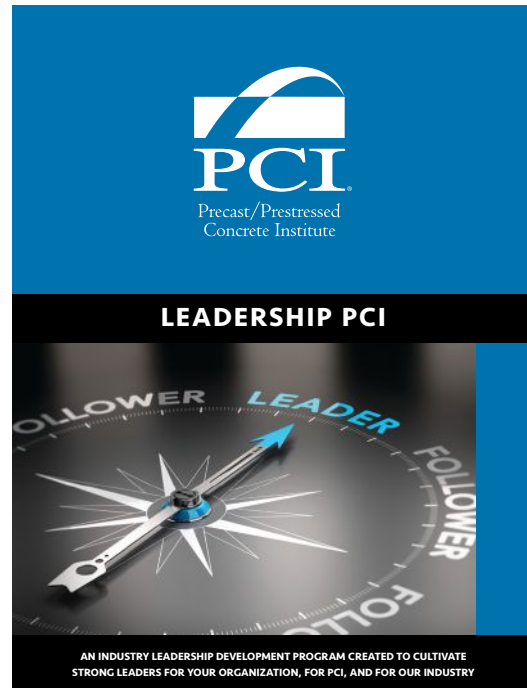
If PCI's word of the year for 2023 was "EPD" (environmental product declaration), then 2024's will likely be "sustainability." Last year, one could not avoid the acronyms, webinars, educational sessions, and publications aimed at advancing the Body of Knowledge around our industry's EPDs and their looming impact. Competing industries are jumping on board the campaign that claims concrete is the absolute worst construction material ever conceived. (See the editorial in the Spring 2023 issue of *ASPIRE*® for more about this perception.) Promoting precast concrete's sustainability is an industry-wide challenge, and cradle-to-gate data are not particularly helpful. As a result, PCI recently developed a Sustainability Plan to unify the strategic direction of the institute by urging all PCI councils and committees toward sustainable practices, initiatives, and principles.

When I was preparing to attend the first Sustainability Initiative meeting this past November as chair of PCI's Membership Council, I was at a complete loss as to what we could offer the industry. The council's committees are all nontechnical, providing membership benefits to the industry. There is not much that the council could deliver to affect an EPD or life-cycle assessment. Good attendance at the aforementioned webinars had my mind so focused on the environmental

arena of sustainability that I had lost perspective on an alternative view of sustainability: that our processes and our people must also be sustainable.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenging time for all industries worldwide. It is now accepted that many aspects of most work can be done from home. Precast and prestressed concrete products, however, cannot be made that way. Throughout the pandemic, we innovated as an industry. We spread out tasks, craved socialization, and endeavored to have interaction. I was delighted that many virtual-meeting attendees had a positive outlook and were eager to volunteer for tasks and take on new challenges.

Post-pandemic, with the resumption of in-person meetings and in-office work requirements, hybrid work environments, and a return to normal, nonsocially distanced life outside of work, I wonder if the old bad habits are returning. Recent committee meetings have had fewer volunteers, more awkward silences following a call for the formation of a task group, and more laptops on tables with keystrokes sounding the passing of time. With each PCI gathering, the pool of volunteers grows smaller, with the usual individuals eventually, reluctantly, taking on the work of the committee. With all the effort to market and advance the



Leadership PCI is an industry leadership development program created to cultivate strong leaders for PCI and for organizations in the industry. Figure: PCI.

wonderful material that is concrete, I wonder if the effort to maintain energy and life in our industry is sustainable.

The professional pool will soon incorporate a generation of youth who might have experienced their high school or college years socially distant from their peers or entirely at home. Most members of the graduating class of 2023 started school in 2019 and were affected by social distancing and virtual learning requirements before the publication of their school yearbooks. We all digest new knowledge daily via various educational and social media platforms, and in-home education is not a new or failed concept. However, there will soon be a flood of people who expect shorter work weeks, hybrid environments, soft deadlines, and relaxed requirements—all with sound environmental practices and stewardship—entering the world as young professionals. Are our production facilities, committee meetings, and industry processes ready for these individuals?

While commuting to work, frantic as to what to offer the Sustainability Initiative meeting, it hit me that the

Membership Council's contribution to industry sustainability is not in any way associated with the raw environmental data. Instead, the Membership Council has to double down on providing resources focused on the incorporation of people, cultures, perspectives, ideas, and leaders into the industry.

Currently, the Membership Council's most readily available contribution to the precast concrete industry is the Leadership PCI (LPCI) program. Recently resuscitated following pandemic impacts and the retirement of its long-standing facilitator, LPCI is now flourishing with many applicants, a new facilitator, and an updated curriculum. Participants are reporting positive results and experiences while establishing industry connections within the cohort. The program runs annually and lasts a full calendar year, starting at the annual PCI Convention and ending at the following convention.

Any PCI member can apply for this merit-based program. If an individual is selected, the return on the investment for the employer is instantaneous. Leadership training programs are everywhere. What sets LPCI apart is its direct connection to our industry. Envisioned by PCI Titans (individuals who have provided exceptional contributions and outstanding leadership and service in advancing the precast, prestressed concrete industry), LPCI is celebrating its 20th year. It is contained within our industry and steered by an LPCI alumni-member committee. There simply isn't a better avenue to build a precast concrete industry professional's career foundation. LPCI has an impressive industry retention rate, and many who participated in the first class of LPCI now run member companies, chair committees and councils, and serve on the PCI Board of Directors and Executive Committee.


A second contribution to professional improvement for PCI members is currently being developed by the LPCI Committee. Leadership, like any other skill, requires constant adaptation and development. For some time, the LPCI committee recognized an industry need for a second-tier program. Whereas the existing program turns young employees

into managers, a second-tier program will turn managers into executives. Currently, the program facilitator is developing content and a curriculum that, if approved for implementation by the LPCI Committee, could become available in 2025.

For 70 years, PCI has flourished on the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and experiences. With the data-based challenges our industry faces with the implementation of EPDs and environmental sustainability requirements, it is the people in our industry who will set us apart from the other building-product industries. However, those people must come from somewhere, and they will crave a nurturing environment for their professional development. They must all see a path toward professional growth, accomplishment, and advancement that includes environmental stewardship. Without such embedded opportunity, the goal of sustaining our life force of industry-committed people who will join task groups and advance our committee

agendas and therefore our Body of Knowledge would be unattainable.

## We must never overlook the development of our future leaders.

From a broad, diverse pool of people will emerge those willing and skilled to lead. Not everyone is destined to be a leader. But a good leader can come from anywhere and be anyone. As much as we crunch the EPD numbers and innovate safer and more eco-friendly materials for our production needs, we must also never overlook the development of our future leaders. Our eyes must always be open to identify people who show flashes of leadership and initiative, however brief or seemingly inconsequential, and we must mark those individuals for leadership growth, mentorship, and development. They are as much a part of our Sustainability Initiative as our raw materials. 



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