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INTRODUCING

BELOW THE LINE

A NEW Q+A COLUMN WITH USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR

BENNIE L. HARRIS, Ph.D.



Don Bent (left) and Dr. Bennie Harris / Photo Provided

Welcome to Below the Line, a monthly question-and-answer column in which Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D., of the University of South Carolina Upstate will interview leaders about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Dr. Harris spoke with Don Bent, who was Chief Operating Officer at Oshkosh Defense for more than 13 years.

"I've always loved seeing leaders develop," Bent told Harris. "So, when I have an opportunity to coach and mentor leaders, watching them develop over time — that is so rewarding. I've always been passionate about helping other people develop so they can become the best form of themselves."

To that end, Bent joined USC Upstate as an Executive in Residence and Distinguished Professor of Practice on March 1.

The following conversation was edited for content, length, and clarity.

Harris: So, what drew you into the automotive and defense industry more than 30 years ago?

Bent: What really drew me in was the technology that you see in the automotive industry. You know, the first time I walked into an automotive plant, I just felt like it was alive. I fell in love with the manufacturing floor, and I've been in manufacturing ever since.

Harris: What about before that? Can you tell me a little bit about your background?

Bent: My educational background is actually in mechanical engineering, but I've always worked in manufacturing. I spent about 12 years with General Motors and then worked

in a couple of other companies, including Borg Warner and then Amcor Packaging Distribution. I've now been with Oshkosh Defense for the last 13½ years.

Harris: Can you tell me about the manufacturing facility you secured in Spartanburg for Oshkosh Defense's Next-Generation Delivery Vehicles for the U.S. Postal Service?

Bent: We knew we needed close to 900,000 square feet. So that's over 20 acres under one roof for one manufacturing plant. We found that in Spartanburg. So, it was an existing facility, and we fell in love with the region — the whole area, the rich automotive history that's here, the workforce that's here, educational institutions like USC Upstate that are here. It was just really the perfect environment for us. And so, we converted that factory over the next couple of years. And now we are actually in production on the first Next-Generation Delivery Vehicles for the U.S. Postal Service.

Harris: That's exciting.

Bent: Yes, we'll be touching virtually every address in America within the next few years as those vehicles roll.

Harris: What about the postal trucks we're used to seeing. How old are they?

Bent: They're, on average, close to 30 years old.

Harris: I don't think I've ever had a vehicle that lasted 30 years.

Bent: They were great vehicles at the time, but now it's time to bring new technologies into postal delivery.

Harris: Can you tell me a little bit about that technology?

Bent: The NGDV is really a state-of-the-art vehicle. It comes in actually two powertrain options, meaning you can build on the same production line a full-battery electric vehicle or a fuel-efficient internal-combustion engine vehicle.

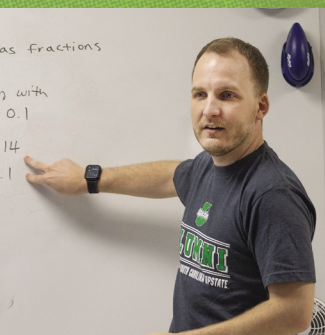
There are all kinds of additional safety protections in that vehicle as well. There are 360-degree camera systems, automatic braking systems. It's really designed to protect the postal delivery carrier as well as the public around them.

Initially the Postal Service said they wanted 10 percent of the vehicles to be electric; now they're saying as much as 70 percent. We knew that technology would change over time, and demands would change. We can build whatever mix they need in that facility.

Harris: OK, let's talk about that. When you design the plant, you design it for the future, not just for the vehicle you are building today.

Bent: A key in any manufacturing environment is to understand your market. We have the luxury of knowing that we'll be building there for 10 years, but you also want to consider what could change in the future. So, you try to build in flexibility. As we laid out the plant, we actually went through over a dozen different full simulations and over 200 different layouts to try to come up with what is efficient in the short term and gives us flexibility moving forward.

Harris: At USC Upstate, we also work to be flexible with an eye on the future. Lately we've been looking at artificial intelligence,



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and how we can use it to improve learning outcomes. What role do you see AI playing in the automotive industry?

Bent: It's impacting automotive right now. It's part of what we're doing today. It's something that people have to embrace, and I don't think it's something to be feared. In the facility today, for example, we use machine learning, which is a complex algorithm that analyzes data quickly, learns the trends in the data, then gives you feedback so you can adjust. So, let's say a truck comes down the line and there is a problem as they're building it. They send a signal up, and you can respond to that immediately without having a delay. There's a feedback loop, so the analysis tool evolves. It's a learning program.

Harris: Machines are teaching machines. Have they ever gotten it wrong?

Bent: Yes, absolutely. I think that's demonstrated in society, where ChatGPT gets things wrong, just like people can get things wrong. But I think that as time goes on and AI develops and you learn to trust it more, that model can get smarter.

Harris: Technology is also impacting things from a workforce perspective. Obviously you need people with skills in high-end technology.

Bent: Well, I think in the Upstate we're really encouraged by what we see. We see a really strong workforce. But what you're touching on is important — that people today have to have much stronger computer skills than they did 30 years ago when I started. When we talk about some of the things like automation and some of that, the AI and machine-learning models, we need a stronger technical knowledge. So, I think on all levels of the organization we have a need for improved and increased technical knowledge across the board.

Harris: When we hosted the Upstate Talent Forum here at USC Upstate last year, I heard employers say they weren't looking so much for book skills, but critical thinking, communication, and technology.

Bent: Yes, we are looking for people to be able to problem-solve. We hope in the future to see more problem-solving skills taught in college. The other thing that I think needs to be understood, across the board, is finance. An engineer might say, "Hey, I have this great project." But if it doesn't have a good business impact, it might get rejected or delayed to the following year because of the financial situation. It's important to understand why these kinds of decisions are made in business.

Harris: When you're not focused on business, you're often involved in volunteer work related to hunger.

Bent: Yes, I'm really proud of the work that

Oshkosh Defense has done. We are coming up on our eighth year of what we call the Hunger Games, where our departments compete against each other to raise money and collect food. All of money we raise and food we collect stays in the communities where we are.

In Spartanburg this past year, we had less than 50 people involved, and we raised over \$8,000. That stayed right here in the Spartanburg region. The reason that's so important to us is, if you take a look at who receives food benefit, 90 percent of all households that receive a food benefit have either children or the elderly or both. So, the people who can help themselves the least today are the ones who benefit the most from food charities. To me it's just a great way to take care of the communities that we work in.



Harris: Is there a misunderstanding about food insecurity and hunger in the U.S.?

Bent: I think what people don't realize is that the people most impacted are the ones who can't help themselves. We've all gone to the grocery store and seen how expensive food has become in the last few years. You think about our elderly. People in our community who live on a fixed income — that fixed income hasn't changed dramatically but food prices have gone way up. And we can help.

Harris: Let's talk a little bit about mentorship, how important is mentorship? In your life personally, how important was it in your career?

Bent: I think mentorship is really critical because it allows you to think and talk with an independent voice who then can give you some feedback. It gives you another voice instead of just listening to the voice in your head. It allows you to avoid mistakes. It allows the mentor to learn too. It's a win-win. Harris: I've heard of situations where someone who is a veteran in an industry actually takes on a younger mentor, to help navigate technology and keep things fresh. What are your thoughts on that?

Bent: I hadn't thought of it specifically that way, but I think it's great. I think it's important for leaders to listen to people across the

generations. So, for example, we heard that people at Oshkosh wanted more flexibility in the workplace. So, we looked at it and said, "If it doesn't hurt the company, we can provide flexibility." That's not how I grew up. But you see the value.

Harris: I'd next like to talk about Leading Below the Line. What I mean by that is that oftentimes we don't know what's going on beneath the surface — for leaders and for their teams — and we have to dive in and find out exactly what's at play in order to make a project or a plan successful.

Bent: I think you do see that a lot as a leader. You have to stay in touch with your team, but you realize you can't know everything that's going on. So, what you're now looking for are indicators. When you're interacting with people, are they not smiling? Do they seem worried? Is your whole group that way? Are they very quiet? Are they free to ask questions or are they not asking questions? These things can give you some insight into something that's going on in your organization that you're not aware of.

The best way to handle that is to make sure you have a good relationship with the people that they feel comfortable with. You, as Chancellor, might have some students who don't know if they can feel comfortable with you. But maybe there are others they talk to, people who are taking the pulse, and you can communicate with them.

It's also important to be relatable. At Oshkosh, we at times do what we call skip-level meetings, where we meet with people at all different levels of the organization. For me, that's as simple as walking out on the production floor and just talking to people. Once they realize that you're just a person, they start to open up a little bit more and then you can start to get a feel for what's really going on.

Harris: OK, let me ask you a final question. Do you have a hero?

Bent: I do. One of my historical heroes is Benjamin Franklin. One of the main reasons is because he was a scientist. He was in manufacturing. He had a printing business. He also tried to give back to his country. But if I take a look at the modern day, who are my heroes? I'd have to say my wife is my hero. She was a teacher and then chose to stay home and raise our children. She now runs a horse farm and does that very well.

Our children are such a joy. Three daughters. That's led me to be passionate about women in manufacturing. I think you're seeing more and more successful female leaders and I think that's really important to support, to support people that are underrepresented. I think it's really important to have an environment that's inclusive and diverse, giving you lots of different perspectives. That leads to better decisions.