BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR BENNIE L. HARRIS SPEAKS WITH AVI LAWRENCE, PRESIDENT OF CONTEC INC.

Avi Lawrence, President of Contec Inc. with Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D. Photo by Terry E. Manning, USC Upstate

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 interviews a leader about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Dr. Harris spoke with Avi Lawrence, President of Contec, Inc., the Spartanburg-based manufacturer of contamination control products used in mission-critical cleaning environments around the world. (This interview has been edited for clarity, content, and length.)

Harris: Tell me a little about your upbringing and how it shaped who you are and your career path.

Lawrence: Both of my parents were in academics. My father was a physics professor, and my mother taught humanities before becoming a high school principal. Education was very important to my father. He was one of five children and the first to go to college, so he made sure my sister and I understood the value of learning.

When I was younger, I didn't always focus on school — I preferred sports — but one day my dad said something that stuck with me: "The best thing I can give you is an education." He also said it didn't matter what I did, as long as I worked hard at it. That lesson, and seeing how hard he worked, stayed with me.

Harris: And that led you to Northeastern University?

Lawrence: In part. My father worked with a colleague from Northeastern who came to dinner one night and told me about their co-op program. That conversation hooked me. I had done a short work-experience program in high school and liked the idea of combining learning with real-world experience. The co-op program also helped pay for school, which made it my first choice.

Harris: What did you major in?

Lawrence: I started in finance and did my first co-op with a mutual fund company. It was interesting, but not quite right for me. My second co-op was at the Gillette Company, which was publicly traded at the time. I worked with very smart people and realized many of them were CPAs. That sparked my interest in accounting.

I was halfway through my degree, so switching meant taking three accounting classes every semester to finish on time. I mapped out my schedule and made it happen. I graduated with a double major in accounting and finance.

Harris: That takes discipline. I was also a co-op student at Mississippi State, and it really prepared me for the workforce.

Lawrence: Absolutely. It was one of the best decisions I made. Northeastern took the co-op program seriously. We had classes on interviewing and professionalism, even videotaped mock interviews. By graduation, I had real-world experience and a sense of what it meant to be a professional. I had multiple job offers before graduation.

Harris: When did you begin to think about business and leadership?

Lawrence: I've always been interested in economics. The ideas of capitalism and the free market fascinated me. That curiosity led me into business.

Accounting gave me the "language" of business, so I became a CPA and joined one of the large firms. That experience was phenomenal. I worked with CFOs and CEOs, and later spent two years on a rota-

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tional assignment in Australia. It broadened my global perspective and gave me exposure to mergers and acquisitions work. I was involved in cross-border deals in Thailand and projects for Qantas.

When I returned to Boston, I helped build an M&A advisory group that grew from eight to 32 people.

Harris: What did you learn from that experience?

Lawrence: I met so many entrepreneurs and heard their stories — how they started, the challenges they faced, and how they knew it was time to sell or move on. It taught me that success looks different for everyone. That work also made me reflect on my own path. I could stay and make partner, or I could move into an operating role and actually run a business.

I realized I wanted to build something, not just advise others on how to do it.

Harris: How do entrepreneurs know when it's time to sell their business?

Lawrence: It's personal. Some are simply ready to retire or don't have a next generation to take over. Others see opportunities for growth but lack the capital to get there. Each story is different, but it's always a deeply personal decision.

Harris: You joined Contec in 2006. What assumptions did you bring, and how have they evolved?

Lawrence: Funny story: I wasn't looking for a new job. A recruiter I hadn't spoken to in two years called about a position in Spartanburg. I told her I wasn't moving to South Carolina. About 20 years later, here I am.

When I visited Contec, I saw something special. The culture impressed me. There were more double-digit anniversaries than single-digit ones on the employee board. That told me it was a place where people stayed and cared.

I joined as CFO. The company was small, all in one building. I believed I could learn a lot from (founder) Jack McBride, and I have. He's a brilliant entrepreneur. I also saw enormous potential for international growth, which excited me.

Harris: You were relatively young at the time. Did you experience imposter syndrome?

Lawrence: Sure. But starting as CFO helped. I could say, "Forgive me if this is a dumb question," and people were happy to explain. Those three years gave me a foundation: implementing an ERP system, building a budgeting process, expanding internationally, completing acquisitions. When I stepped into the president's role, I was nervous, but the team's support made all the difference.

I still feel a little imposter syndrome sometimes, but I've learned that's normal. It keeps you grounded and learning.

Harris: Was there a turning point at Contec when you felt the company had to transform or risk becoming irrelevant?

Lawrence: Yes. We always saw ourselves as underdogs, but we were growing fast. The big shift came when we decided to diversify both geographically and by market segment. That led us into disinfectants. We noticed customers using our mops and wipes but someone else's disinfectant, so we thought — why not us? We acquired a disinfectant company. At first, we thought it would revolutionize our market. We were wrong about a lot of things, but it taught us invaluable lessons about integration and innovation.

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Harris: What was most challenging about acquisitions?

Lawrence: Integration. We once bought a company very similar to ours, and merging operations was extremely difficult. Customers wanted to ensure identical results before we could consolidate. For a year, we had to run two facilities side by side, all while demand was increasing. It was one of the most challenging and expensive periods we've had.

Harris: You've said corporate social responsibility is not a side project but a mindset. How do you keep that priority during financial pressures?

Lawrence: We define CSR through three lenses: our people, our company, and our community. Because we're privately owned, we can take a long-term view. Culture comes first. Doing right by our employees and community is non-negotiable. Profitability matters, but it's not the only measure of success.

Harris: Have you ever championed a small idea that grew into something big?

Lawrence: When we were integrating that acquisition, we struggled to predict customer ordering patterns. It created production spikes and lulls. I encouraged the team to adopt lean manufacturing principles. They took ownership and ran with it. I was more a sponsor and learner alongside them.

To this day, we operate under those lean principles, and it has transformed how we work.

Harris: How do you manage your time as president?

Lawrence: It's not easy. Early in my career, I couldn't say no to anyone. I was constantly in meetings. Lately, I've learned to block time for thinking and planning. I come in early when it's quiet, get critical work done, and protect that reflection time.

Harris: That's vital. I do the same, blocking time for strategy so the day doesn't overtake you. Given everything you've experienced, what question do you wish someone had asked you early in your career?

Lawrence: I wish someone had asked me: '"What kind of leader do you want to be?" Early on, I thought leadership meant emulating others, and being charismatic or decisive like people I admired. Over time, I learned that the most important thing is to be your authentic self.

Transparency builds trust. Listening matters. You don't need all the answers. Authenticity is the foundation of real leadership. Don't try to be someone you're not. People can tell when you're not authentic.

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.

Lawrence: I stay hands-on, not to micromanage, but to listen and serve as a sounding board. Trust is everything. I try to push decision-making as far down the organization as possible. When people own their decisions, they take responsibility and grow. I tell them, "There's no mistake you can make that will break us. We'll learn from it." That mindset makes us stronger.

Harris: Do you have a personal hero or a quote that guides you?

Lawrence: My hero is my dad. He's a man of faith and integrity. I've seen him lead, care for my mother through illness, and live with grace. I want to be like him.

As for a quote, I often tell my team: "Let's be learning people, not knowing people." If someone thinks they already know everything, they stop growing. I also remind myself, "Pride comes before the fall, but with humility comes wisdom." Those two ideas keep me grounded.