

## KEN RUETER ASSP's Public Director

**Ken Rueter was recently appointed to the ASSP Board of Directors, becoming the third person to serve as public director since the position was created in 2015. As the president and CEO at UCOR, Rueter has spent much of his career ensuring that workers leave work as safely as they arrived.**



### Kenneth J. Rueter

**Kenneth J. Rueter, UCOR president and CEO and ASSP Public Director, is an industry leader in executing large nuclear environmental cleanup projects. He has more than 30 years' experience across the U.S. Department of Energy complex, including as president of Savannah River Remediation LLC and chief operating officer for the Hanford (WA) Tank Operations Contract. In 2019, Rueter was named a CEO Who "Gets It" by National Safety Council. Under Rueter's leadership, UCOR has received several distinguished safety awards. He holds a B.S. in Chemical Engineering from Cleveland State University and is a member of ASSP's East Tennessee Chapter.**

**PSJ: You experienced an industrial incident in the workplace years ago. Can you talk about your motivation behind advocating for workplace safety?**

**Ken:** I was a chemical operator and I had to do rounds within a chemical processing facility. One day, an overhead caustic line had ruptured and doused me in a caustic solution. In that instant, your life changes. This incident made workplace safety a part of my DNA.

When I talk about it with others, I say that safety is a prerequisite to every single thing we do. It's more than a requirement or criteria. It's one thing to study and learn it—it's another to experience it.

The personal commitment we have to our team members to send them home the same way they come to work every day was no more vivid to me than from that experience. I was 19 years old when it happened. The safety and health culture of the company was there, and I say that because I was no more than 50 feet from a safety shower, and I had been trained to know what to do if there was an industrial incident as part of my chemical operator training.

This experience gave me a vivid perspective on the important role that management or leadership plays to ensure those safety features and training are there, not just written in a manual or in the employee safety handbook.

What really imprinted on me from the incident was that the biggest concern was my eyesight. As my mother was speaking with the doctor, I heard the doctor say, "Over the next two or so weeks, we'll see if he ever sees again." To this day, I can close my eyes and hear the gasping sound my mother made. I didn't know where things would go in my career at that point, but I knew that I would do everything in my power to make sure no one else's mother, partner, or family member would ever be subjected to what my mom experienced that day.

We refer to our safety commitment as the culture of caring, with the principal focus that everybody goes home the same way they came in, because that's the commitment we made.

**PSJ: What do you hope to accomplish in your time as ASSP's public director?**

**Ken:** I hope to be an advocate for governance change, and I think I bring a unique perspective since I have gone through the successful implementation of a shared governance approach.

We're transforming the governance of ASSP to be more nimble and responsive, and to pivot and adapt to the marketplace and marketplace pressures. But what I find most valuable about where the governance is going is the breadth and the broader inclusion through this advisory group concept across all of ASSP. I refer to that as "shared governance," meaning that we all have a seat at the table.

If you're part of a large organization, there's nothing more important than everybody having a seat at the table because we want to hear what everybody has to say. Isn't that the essence of inclusion? That's the value of diversity because all those perspectives then come together to drive ownership.

We are on year 11 of having implemented a shared governance model. It's at the center of what we've been able to accomplish regarding environmental stewardship and bringing 2,000 people together to deliver that. I look forward to bringing my experience garnered from our experience and successes.

Next, I hope to fulfill that public connectivity role. I look to be a conduit to the non-safety-and-health side of industry and broadening their awareness and understanding of the value of being connected with ASSP. I'm not a safety and health practitioner, but look at the value I get out of things such as *PSJ* or collaborative webinars from a leadership standpoint.

I have a similar role with CPWR—The Center for Construction Research and Training—I'm its industrial board member (similar to a public director), which I've done for 5 years. It's been fulfilling to bring connectivity to the broader industry, not just construction. On the board, we have discussed things like the opioid crisis, and CPWR taking up the cause within the workplace. I never would have been able to connect that to our general industry if I wasn't part of that, so I'm looking to be that conduit.

I've also been invited by the Department of Energy to participate in their safety culture improvement panel. I usually speak once a year with them to specifically talk about how they can have better connectivity within the general Department of Energy industry workplace safety critical focus areas and everything ASSP has to offer. I'm very honored to be able to be that kind of conduit and do that outreach. I think

that's the value of a public director or an industry director because it's coming through that lens of connectivity.

**PSJ: Based on your background in site cleanup and risk management, what do you bring to the table as ASSP's public director?**

**Ken:** I really think it's the application of the integrated safety management model, worker involvement techniques, and shared governance or the organizational culture to ultimately mitigate workplace hazards and workplace risks. It's those core principles that are important—understanding the scope, identifying the associated hazards and putting the control set in place.

Ultimately, what I've learned from doing high-hazard work, both physically executing it and leading it, is that a culture of excellence and a culture of caring is fundamental to mitigating those hazards and meeting the commitment that we all go home the same way we came to work. I think I can bring an industry voice and correlate some of those experiences to the offerings that ASSP has as well as the partnerships that it forms across the broader industry. Within a board forum, I look forward to sharing those experiences as we frame where ASSP is going in the future.

**PSJ: You've worked on different site cleanups and remediation companies in the past and you currently lead UCOR, the DOE cleanup contractor for the Oak Ridge Reservation in Tennessee. Based on these experiences, what does safety mean to you and what should its role be in the workplace?**

**Ken:** When I look at and use phrases like "culture of excellence," that's an integration of partnership as it relates to safe, efficient and effective operations. It's the realization that profitability will suffer at the expense of a loss of safety or a reduced safety posture and a realization of that correlation.

I realize that the level of impact is industry specific. So, in the case of Department of Energy work or federal contract work, nothing will get you disbarred quicker than workplace safety issues or an inability to mitigate and manage hazards. But I think you can say it applies in oil and gas and other industries as well. It's critically important that there is a connectivity between safety excellence and operational excellence.

It is important to stress empowerment through shared governance within the work environment. It is important to me to be an approachable executive who has presence in the workplace, is transparent and serves as an advocate.

For example, I sponsor a monthly accident prevention council. I don't relegate that duty

to somebody else—I lead that council. We support and financially invest in safety stewards and advocates as a classification within the craft. It really comes down to a fundamental judgment filter that I've built over nearly 40 years, which is to never make profit or gain at the expense of the workforce, the environment or the client. This principle quite consistently ensures we are meeting the commitment to ourselves to go home the same way we came to work every day.

**PSJ: You helped to implement a worker well-being program called Mission Ready. What's your motivation behind starting the program and how have its results impacted the workplace?**

**Ken:** There are two motivations. First of all, because construction is a demanding field, we must ensure that all workers are able to perform safely in challenging environments, such as dealing with high-temperature situations or avoiding slips, trips and falls where walking environments vary. More than 6 years ago, we really started looking at the demographics of our company. Review of this data led us to be more observant and better align these higher risk types of work activities to the workers who were better prepared to do those activities.

The other piece was that we saw an escalation in positive drug screenings, predominantly meth and opioids, associated with mental health or behavioral health issues that had escalated in workers' personal lives. But the other side of it was, in the case of the opioids, not that people were addicted drug users, but that they were using the drugs to manage their pain, even though the prescriptions they used weren't theirs, which is typically where it at all starts.

When we were starting to explore the total worker health concept, we determined that we needed to lay out a program, which we ultimately coined Mission Ready. This program focuses on elements and subsets of tools that can help workers consciously determine if they are "mission ready" for the day and, if they aren't, how to engage with the company to ensure, within reason, that they are accommodated so they can be mission ready. It took the stigma out of workers not feeling ready to take their tools and go to work for whatever reasons.

For instance, I may have been working in the yard on Sunday and overdid it, and now I'm not acclimated and ready for high-heat work in building construction. So, we built a set of 10 elements all focused on asking the workers if they are emotionally, mentally and physically ready for work that day and, if not, how they can engage to get ready so they aren't worried about being shown the door, which is typically the concern about transparency on readiness.

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We’ve seen a significant reduction in those classic areas.

For example, through most of 2020, even amid the pandemic and in the hot season, we had no heat stress incidents for only the second time in the company’s history. We also saw a 400% reduction on slips, trips and falls in the field. We saw Mission Ready become an integral, foundational part of the culture of caring because it comes from the lens of caring, not from the lens of accountability.

The other thing that we’re seeing is a more than 50% reduction in positive drug screenings, especially when the opioid crisis is still out of control throughout the country. We’re seeing few positive drug screens attributed to marijuana use. This doesn’t mean we don’t have them, but compared to industry norms, it’s very low and we think this is because Mission Ready has educated our workers. It was grassroots. The workforce came up with it through our local safety improvement teams. That’s the shared governance piece and I think that ownership has carried the test of time.

**PSJ: What is your advice on how OSH professionals can best engage their corporate leaders in supporting worker safety?**

**Ken:** Find a seat at the table. I realize that every company has a different governance structure, so they may not be as open to a shared governance approach; they may have more of a structural or hierarchical approach. But find that seat and demonstrate and educate on the connection between safety, effective operations, profitability and notable outcomes. Show how that individual not only is the authority having jurisdiction or subject matter expert, but on the front line with the crafts in partnership every day or with the field operations folks in partnership every day to deliver that mission safely.

It is by no means easy to do. I have worked at different companies that could make it exhaustively hard. But if it’s that bad, make a choice to go make that difference somewhere else because there may be institutions that are impenetrable to change and may have a culture of “as long as we can do the bare minimum to satisfy OSHA, then that’s all I’m going to do,” which is not a healthy home for a true OSH professional. Go find your place.

Based on my personal experiences of how disastrous and how life changing an industrial incident could be, that’s the difference an OSH professional can make. In my case, what if there was no safety person at my company or no safety shower or the OSH professional had supported the idea that there had to be only one safe zone in the building? When I speak with OSH professionals, I remind them that

they are the advocate for ALARA—as low as reasonably achievable. The law tells us what the minimums are, but our culture implements a best practice approach because we know that a safer place is a more productive place, which is more profitable place.

**PSJ: You were recognized by NSC as a CEO who “gets it,” which recognizes leaders who go above and beyond to help protect employees. What advice would you give to other safety leaders who are looking to go above and beyond for their workers both on and off the job?**

**Ken:** I will first go back to my judgment filter to never make gains at the expense of the workforce, the environment or the client. It just doesn’t have a good outcome.

The next is to demonstrate being your brother’s keeper, that culture of caring and to demonstrate that across the breadth of the company, not just something you direct as a practice within the safety and health ranks. Be engaged, be present. Seek that shared governance. Seek that engagement. Seek that feedback frequently.

Ultimately, walk the talk. If your culture is that everybody has the right to pause work wherever you are on the leadership ranks, be honest with yourself and ask yourself if you need to take a breath. This milestone is important, but maybe it’s not as important as somebody’s well-being. So stop to reflect, rethink and regroup. We call it a safety-conscious work environment.

**PSJ: You were interviewed for an article about top cycling destinations in Oak Ridge. What advice do you have for those looking to find work-life balance?**

**Ken:** Let’s start with a very valuable lesson that took a long time for me to learn, which is to have a work-life balance. Our Mission Ready program has five elements in the mental health section—being focused, managing stress, being mindful, ensuring you are trained and being well rested—that show that your behavioral and emotional well-being is directly tied to you to your work-life balance. They are not only a necessity, they are actually mitigators to anxieties that may even be outside the workplace.

Second, employ and engage your work-life balance. It’s critically important to be mission ready. I always tell people to find something they enjoy that’s relevant to the area that they know and to the job location they’ve been assigned, and take advantage of that. I often tell people that I am a converted workaholic, so I’ve found my balance. I’ve been a cyclist a long time, but it’s more integral now and part of that balance. Use that balance as a means of being more mission ready. **PSJ**