

RILBMDA Lumber Person of the Year: Matt Semonik, Arnold Lumber

“Once a Marine, always a Marine,” as the saying goes.

Matt Semonik lives that credo every day as a former Marine Corps platoon leader now making his career in the lumber industry. Though he may no longer wear the uniform, the lessons have stayed with him.

“Throughout my time in the Marine Corps I was guided by the 11 Marine Corps Leadership Principles,” he explains. “They continue to guide me today. Replace ‘Marine’ with ‘staff’ or ‘employee’ and you can easily see how they apply. I think of each of these as I go through my day.”

Some examples that might apply to his role as chief operating officer at Arnold Lumber include “Ensure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished” (#6), “Know your Marines [staff] and look out for their welfare” (#3) and “Make sound and timely decisions” (#8).

Semonik has sought to apply these principles in service of the Arnold Lumber legacy and the vision of its current leadership. A family-owned business with history going back to 1911, Arnold is now on its fourth generation of ownership, with a fifth on the way. Matt believes in both the family and company and is happy to serve as a trusted and effective lieutenant.

“They had a vision of the culture that they wanted to continue to grow. Over the past eight years, we have developed employee engagement activities and embraced technology to build a culture of teamwork,” he says. “Attracting talent and developing existing talent are the two most important things that we can do and I feel I have embraced those concepts to help get us to this point.”

Matt came to Arnold in search of a career change after working in the restoration and mitigation industry, joining the company as a general manager in 2015. Since then, he’s ascended through the ranks, rising to vice president of sales and operations, and taking on his current role in September of this year.

He’s found not just job satisfaction, but a sense of purpose on the lumber yard. (Make that *yards*: Arnold actually has six locations, including four lumber yards, masonry and landscape divisions, multiple showrooms and a kitchen design center.)

“The people in the industry are incredible,” he enthuses. “Although I came from outside, I was embraced. We help build things. We help make lives better. We help make a difference in people’s lives.”

Just as Matt once served his country, he now serves his industry, holding board or committee seats on the RILBMDA, where he is the current president, as well as the NRLA, American Building Material Alliance and Rhode Island Builders association. He holds a B.S. in Business Management from Kaplan University and a 6 Sigma Black Belt Certification.

A Pennsylvania native who grew up outside Pittsburgh, Matt now lives in North Kingstown with his wife of more than 25 years, Hülya. They have two sons, one of whom followed his father’s footsteps into the military and another studying to be a doctor. In addition to traveling and fishing, Matt added long distance running to his hobbies in 2020, when he ran his first marathon. He now runs 20 to 30 miles per week.

Ever the Marine, Matt continues to challenge himself to grow as a leader, measuring his success not according to his own achievements, but those of his team. “Empower your people, guide them, trust them, and let them own their roles,” he advises. “Ensure that they are part of the solution. Yes, they will make mistakes, but in most cases they will learn from them and excel beyond belief.”