Senior leaders from NAVAIR and NAVSEA, including Tom Rudowsky, Steffanie Easter, Leslie Taylor, Jimmy Smith and Gary Kurtz, advised employees to be ready and prepare themselves for career development opportunities at the NAVAIR career progression brown bag session Feb. 22. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. — Prepare yourself for career opportunities, because you never know when they’ll come knocking.

That was the message four NAVAIR and NAVSEA senior leaders delivered to 350 NAVAIR employees at the career progression brown bag session held here Feb. 22.

“The future is ahead of you — what are you doing about it?” asked Tom Rudowsky, director of NAVAIR’s Air Vehicle Engineering Department.

Panelists Rudowsky, Assistant Deputy Chief of Naval Operations Manpower, Personnel, Training and Education Steffanie Easter, NAVSEA Director Above Water Sensors Program Executive Office, Integrated Warfare Systems Jimmy Smith and Director of Flight Test Engineering Leslie Taylor discussed the benefits of participating in formal leadership programs, having and becoming a mentor, writing an individual development plan (IDP), networking and job
shadowing.

One theme remained clear: You are responsible and accountable for your own career development, but there is a lot of help available along the way.

“Seize the opportunity. Have a plan and make the most out of it,” Smith said.

Below are some of the actions you can take to enhance your career.

**Develop a Plan**

The first step is creating a career plan. NAVAIR offers an online IDP form for its employees to jumpstart the process.

“IDPs start with you. You’re the one who is the most interested in your career,” said Diane Wallace, Career Development Office Director. “Write down your goals to bring clarity and focus to them so others can help you reach your goals.”

Rudowsky reiterated that the IDP is a living document used to have conversations with your supervisor and mentors about your career path.

“If it’s not changing, you are not using it to its fullest extent,” he said. “Your view of what you want to be will change over time.”

**Participate in Formal Development Programs**

Another tool in the career growth toolbox is participating in a formal development program. NAVAIR offers two: the Journey Leadership Development Program (JLDP) and the NAVAIR Leadership Development Program (NLDP).

“Leadership programs capture the elements that are instrumental to success,” said JLDP and NLDP Program Manager Stephanie Peppler, including understanding your strengths and weaknesses and seeing the big picture.

“With JLDP, you can understand NAVAIR as a whole and not just your piece of the world,” Vicki Leonard, a NAVAIR business financial manager and recent JLDP graduate, said.

Roland Thorpe, a NAVAIR program manager and current NDLP participant, said the program affords “tremendous opportunities” to gain exposure to senior NAVAIR leaders and see the Command’s inner workings.
“It’s an exciting and dynamic leadership development experience to enhance you professionally and personally,” he said.

Find and Become a Mentor

No matter your age or where you are in your career, mentors — and the network they offer — are crucial.

“I wouldn’t be sitting here today without all the mentors I’ve had throughout my career,” Easter said.

Smith has developed an acronym, TALK, to describe the four tenets of a successful mentoring relationship: trust, access, mutual liking, and knowing each other (“If I don’t know you, I can’t help you,” he quipped).

To be a good protégé, you must be ready for your mentor, Easter said, and have an idea of your strengths and weaknesses. You must accept critical feedback and establish a level of trust.

“This person is there to lift you up and encourage you, not tear you down,” she said.

Jon Johnson, Director of Operations and Maintenance Comptroller for NAVAIR, agreed. “The best advice I’ve been given has been the most candid, and that’s come from mentors,” he said.

NAVAIR employees can use the online iMentor tool to match mentors with protégés, giving the Command the opportunity to share and spread acquired knowledge and learning.

“We all benefit just from talking to other people who have been there and done that,” Easter said. “It’s about each one teaching one and carrying them along the way.”

Identify Rotational Assignments and Shadowing Opportunities

Whether you spend a day shadowing or weeks or months on a developmental assignment, you can renew your perspective by walking in another person’s shoes.

NAVAIR’s Career Development Office maintains an online Developmental Assignment Registry, where employees can post their resumes and search and apply for rotational assignments.

For employees interested in shadowing someone, there is shadowing etiquette guidance available online. Shadowing is a great way to network while learning and experiencing new competencies, Wallace said.
Taylor recommends working with your network and mentors to determine what you want to get out of a job shadowing or rotational assignment, where you can gain vital hands-on experience.

“Get out of your comfort zone,” she said. “You just have to do it and take a leap of faith sometimes.”

Build Diverse Teams

Panelists reiterated the need for diversity in the workplace.

“We need huge diversity of thought,” Taylor said, quoting Gen. George S. Patton: “If everyone is thinking alike, then somebody isn’t thinking.”

Smith agreed. “If you think you can go to one place all the time to get the best, you’re wrong. Go where the talent is,” he said, with regard to recruiting, hiring and retaining a high quality workforce.

Hone Your Leadership Skills

NAVAIR’s myriad resources not only help develop careers but also help shape employees into future leaders.

Easter cited several skill sets that will help people grow into leaders: critical thinking, knowing your strengths, the ability to influence others, confidence and collaboration.

Strong leadership requires a vision, Easter said, and to be a strong leader, “you need the ability to convince people your vision is worth following.”

Growing and finding good leaders will help shape the future of the Command.

“In the environment we’re in right now in the Navy, a fiscally constrained environment, it’s crucial to do more with less,” Easter said. “We need creative leaders all throughout the Navy. Any investment in the people we can make in the people coming up, who will lead the Navy, is a great investment.”

Thorpe agreed. “The capabilities and different products we work on at NAVAIR are very important to the mission of the Navy and Marines,” he said. “To make sure their mission is met, we need good leaders.”

Sponsored by NAVAIR’s Career Development Office and the National Society of Black Engineers, Patuxent River Alumni Extension Chapter, the event was held at the Frank Knox Building and broadcast nationally via video teleconference.
Tanaya Bondon, far right, president of the Patuxent River Alumni Extension Chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers, described the society’s mission to mentor, tutor and volunteer. The society co-sponsored a NAVAIR career progression brown bag session Feb. 22, featuring panelists and senior leaders Tom Rudowsky, Steffanie Easter, Leslie Taylor and Jimmy Smith. (U.S. Navy photo)