ENTREPRENEUR IN THE FUTURE

STEVEN BEES CAME TO CAL POLY to learn how to bring everything together and think of things at a higher level," Beeks said. "Dr. Don Morgan, who was head of the department when I was there, instilled in me a very important value: Education is not just about finding the answer. It’s about understanding the process that gets you to the answer.

"It’s about going beyond the obvious. Dr. Morgan told me to think beyond the particulars of engineering and to manage processes. I still practice that in the way I approach management today.”

Beeks began his career in manufacturing as a supervisor with fiberglass manufacturer Owens Corning. Within weeks of his starting, the manufacturers at the plant went on strike, and Beeks and other managers were left to pick up the slack. The experience allowed him to develop his ability to think on the fly and be productive – skills he said he first developed in his Cal Poly years.

After three years, he left to earn a master’s in Business Administration from Harvard Business School. He then turned his attention to the entertainment industry, with firms such as Hallmark Home Video, The Paragon Group and Artisan Entertainment.

Lionsgate acquired Artisan in 2003, and Beeks was named Lionsgate’s president in early 2004. His title was expanded in 2007 to include the role of co-chief operating officer.

His broad vision has helped him lead Lionsgate over the last seven years from a $350 million independent movie studio once known primarily for horror films and an extensive home video library to North America’s most successful independent film studio in terms of market share.

"Building a company like Lionsgate is like building any other successful company," Beeks said, invoking his Learn by Doing experience. "It’s about the process, not just the end result.”

For Lionsgate, that has meant building a solid foundation on its home video library as a basis to create more high-risk, high-reward projects – big blockbusters such as “The Expendables” and high-dollar TV shows such as Emmy-winner “Mad Men” and Showtime staple “Weeds.”

Beeks sees his role as thinking ahead to keep Lionsgate poised for further success in the rapidly changing entertainment industry.

“You deal with trends. Things change overnight,” Beeks said. "Though we are the largest independent film and television distribution company, we operate in a land of giants. If you don’t constantly improve, you will fail.”

That means expanding the company’s digital online offerings and working to reach viewers through their tablets, smartphones and other handheld devices.

“Everyone is battling for the small screen in someone’s hand,” Beeks said. Lionsgate also must work through social media to connect with its customers, Beeks said. "We have to be in a position to listen;” he said. “We have to get closer to, and grow with, the consumer.”

And, of course, there are the blockbuster movies.

A sequel to “The Expendables” is due in summer 2012. And with the retirement of the “Saw” movies after last year’s 3D finale, Beeks and Lionsgate have their eyes on the film adaptations of “The Hunger Games Trilogy,” a bestselling young-adult sci-fi/adventure book series, as the company’s next major product. The first film, “The Hunger Games,” is set to debut in March.

As always, Beeks has his eyes on bigger pictures.