



# NAC Executive Insights

## *“Get the kNACk” Podcast Series: Summary*

### Leadership and Career Choices Lessons Learned in Construction – ‘Golden Nuggets’

#### Key Points

- Be the best servant leader you can be – genuinely care about your people.
- Mistakes are stepping stones for success: Leaders must look at mistakes as a teaching moment and professionals must look at them as learning opportunities.
- The ability to collaborate and build consensus is critical to create positive relationships. Our responsibility as leaders is to be a catalyst and a molder of consensus.
- Safety is the highest priority of the construction industry.
- Your degree does not need to dictate your career choices – it is up to each of us to prepare ourselves for success.

#### Introduction

This Executive Insight summarizes “Golden Nuggets” from NAC “Get The kNACk” podcasts with 2024 NACTed C. Kennedy and Richard L. Tucker Award recipients. The Kennedy Award honors outstanding career achievement that immeasurably improves the design and construction industry. The Richard L. Tucker Outstanding Service Award honors dedicated, continuous service and support to NAC over a sustained period. The insights offered here come from podcast interviews with NAC members:

- Michael Loose (2024 Ted C. Kennedy Award)
- Lillian Borrone (2024 Richard L. Tucker Award)

Mike and Lillian have had very different career paths in the construction industry, which illustrates that our industry is open to different degrees and backgrounds. Both embraced their dreams and took advantage of opportunities that came their way to achieve their career success.

- Lillian earned a degree in political science and began her career as a transportation tech. With her passion for transportation, she realized to grow career wise she needed a degree in engineering or planning and took advantage of the tuition reimbursement program to earn her

masters in civil engineering. This path led to her becoming the Port Director for the NYNJ Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ).

- Mike has both a bachelors and masters degree in civil engineering. His path led to a distinguished career in the Navy, serving as Vice Admiral in the Navy Civil Engineer Corps before joining Parsons Corporation. With Parsons he oversaw global infrastructure and environmental services for federal government clients before serving as the Corporate Operations Officer.

Links to the podcasts with each of these outstanding leaders, which were hosted by the authors of this Executive Insight, are listed in the For Further Information section. Readers are encouraged to listen to the complete podcasts.

## **Essential Leadership Qualities in the Construction Industry**

Taking care of your people is the key to successful organizational leadership. Leadership qualities must focus on people, trust and relationships. What leaders do:

- Build mutual trust in the organization.
- Have high strength of character, integrity and ethics.
- Look at challenges as opportunities.
- Create a positive environment to build a team.
- Build open and honest communications.
- Empower their people ... this also means to hold them accountable for what they do.
- Collaborate and build consensus to create positive relationships.
- Are change agents and champion innovation.
- Learn to make decisions with speed and confidence.
- Are not afraid to be a risk taker.
- Have good communications skills and are good listeners. Learn by listening, not by talking.
- Look at mistakes as teaching and learning moments.
- Display personal energy and enthusiasm that is infectious with their people.

---

*Leaders exercises good judgment and common sense. It is about active involvement.*

---

## **Career Choices - Lessons Learned Along the Way**

As you embark on your career it is up to each of you to prepare yourself for success, to find your purpose and pursue your dream. Several lessons learned along the way:

- Contribute your time and talent for volunteer work. This learning opportunity can be very helpful with career growth and allow you to explore and develop new talents.
- Build knowledge and your network -- as you develop your knowledge, also use this effort to build your network. Build and use your connections effectively.

- Make each job you have the best job that you can make it, until you move into your next job. Learn each job and the organization. Find out what the needs are in your organization.
- Learn and understand how to best communicate with your organization. Learn how to frame conversations. Remember the better you listen, the more you learn.
- Leverage engagements with outside organizations and mentors to learn. This can be valuable in career building and may enable you to bring new ideas back to your organization.
- Accept challenges and take risks when you need to. Calculated risk taking is important as you grow in your organization and industry.

---

*Control your own destiny or someone  
else will*

---

## **Safety and Mental Health Awareness in the Construction Industry**

Safety is the industry's highest priority. Over the past 30 years, the construction industry has grown from rules and compliance to a Safety Culture, where we genuinely care about our people and their families. However, even with that focus on safety culture, the fatality rate for the industry has remained at about 1,000 fatalities per year since 2007. To emphasize this unacceptable number, 1,000 fatalities per year is roughly 3 fatalities each day. To continue to improve as an industry we must be open to sharing the best practices, and to share our 'secret sauce'. Consider this analogy: The construction industry is like a swimming pool. Everyone in the swimming pool is a lifeguard and is in charge of everyone's safety. The construction industry is the same, where we need to create the mindset that everyone in the industry is in charge of each other's safety. The construction industry has the ethical responsibility to invest in the long term good, to manage workforce safety for zero injuries.

For mental health awareness the industry needs to remove the mental health stigma. Recent data indicates that the construction industry has 5,000 suicide fatalities a year -- that says the industry has five times the number of workers die by suicide than die from industry accidents every year. The industry needs to make access to assistance easy for our workers and make it acceptable to talk about these issues.

In addition, NAC is an advocate to make safety culture a priority at the university level and provide safety training as part of undergraduate degrees.

Bottom line: Safety is all about leadership, to care about the people you work with. Create your safety culture with focus on the people and the way you take care of them.

---

*Build a Safety Culture of Compassion ... Where everyone takes ownership of Safety, from top to bottom.*

---

## **Advice for Young Professionals Entering the Construction Industry**

It is up to each of us to prepare ourselves for success. Who you are as a person will lead and drive your success. Figure out what your passion is and exploit it. A self-assessment of what you are interested in and what you are skilled at will help you understand what you may be looking for in a career. This may also highlight some skill areas that you may not currently have and need to develop. Find an employer that will challenge you to do more than you think you can do. Know where the future is going and how you fit into the big picture.

Work hard and enjoy every job. Make every job the best job that you can make it. Every job is a learning experience. Do the right thing, even if it is hard. Show you have character, integrity and ethics, along with your personal and mental toughness.

Look at career opportunities with a positive mindset; have a positive outlook. Look for and create opportunities. Take advantage of internal opportunities: greener pastures may not always be somewhere else. Learn from your mistakes -- what did we do wrong and what can we learn from it. Success is driven by the effort you put in, and success is often how you can deal with failure.

---

*The formula for Success is Ability +  
Hard Work + Opportunity.*

---

## **Collaboration**

Collaboration is the key to team success and the construction industry is the ultimate team sport. Effective collaboration creates positive business relationships and every collaboration should be looked at as a learning opportunity and knowledge sharing. Collaboration allows industry members to connect, serve and inspire each other. Collaboration helps to drive and build consensus, which is critical in the construction industry. It is our responsibility as industry members to be actively engaged, to be a catalyst and a molder of consensus. Effective collaboration is critically important for the industry.

---

*Collaboration – Be a Force Multiplier*

---

## Challenges in the Construction Industry

New challenges face the construction industry every day. As leaders, we must embrace challenges as opportunities. Safety has already been emphasized as priority one. Four others to highlight include:

1. Aging US Infrastructure: The ASCE Report Card on our U.S. infrastructure is not good. How we correct this remains a challenge and is a catch-22. The country needs capital to improve our infrastructure, but dollars are not enough. The industry also needs more qualified people to execute and build the work, including infrastructure, manufacturing facilities, new technology, energy projects, residential and everything else in the built environment. The result is competition for resources, which turns into a higher cost for the work.
2. Workforce Development: The industry needs to make construction exciting to attract new talent. So, the question is: how do we make the job more effective, more efficient and more exciting. Master labor skills are leaving/retiring from the industry, so we need new teachers and mentors for the industry. NAC is a strong advocate for the industry: it is a great place to work, where you get to design and build dreams.
3. Innovation and Technology: Change is never easy, but today the pace of change in the industry is faster than it has ever been. The engineering and construction industry is at a pivotal stage where the successful adoption of technology can significantly enhance efficiency, innovation and safety. Moving ahead, it is important for industry stakeholders to embrace new technology to shape the future of the industry for the next generation.
4. Uncertainty: The sources and causes of uncertainty, which arise from a lack of knowledge, have always been part of the construction industry. As an example, the industry is currently experiencing uncertainty during 2025 with the new Administration. This Administration change may occur as often as every four years. A second example of this uncertainty is the impact that tariffs may have.

---

*Embracing change and innovation is not a nice to have option ... it is crucial to the future of the industry .*

---

## Conclusion

The construction industry is a people business. It is extremely important to develop your 'power' skills: communication skills, listening skills, team-building skills and thinking skills. Big picture thinking and strategic planning are both critical. The industry is so busy doing, there is often not dedicated time to think. Creativity in thinking and the ability to focus are both vital today. Our ability to think and understand how we each fit into the big picture is important for both company success and personal success. Both Mike and Lillian understood that building a people-first organization is a key driver for success. The organizations that we work for and each of us have the responsibility to continue to build our community and region.

## For Further Information

Readers are encouraged to listen to the complete podcasts listed below.

### “Get The kNACK” Podcasts:

- Leadership in Construction – A Fireside Chat with Ted C. Kennedy Award Winner Michael Loose  
<https://www.naocon.org/knack-episode/s5e7-leadership-in-construction-a-fireside-chat-with-ted-c-kennedy-award-winner-michael-loose/>
- Career Choices and Lessons Learned Along the Way  
<https://www.naocon.org/knack-episode/s5e6-career-choices-and-lessons-learned-along-the-way-with-lillian-borrone/>

### About the Authors

Jerry Eyink was elected to NAC in 2011. He spent his working career with Anheuser-Busch Inc., retiring as the Group Director—Project Management and Planning for the Engineering Group. He received his engineering degree from Purdue University and his MBA from Saint Louis University. The Academy honored him with its Richard L. Tucker Outstanding Service Award in 2022 for his continuous support to NAC.

Sue Steele was elected to NAC in 2021. She is the founder of Steele & Partners, focused on executive coaching and cultural transformation. Sue previously served as CEO of JMJ Associates, a world class safety and human performance consultancy. She also served at Jacobs as senior vice president of global supply chain management and as VP Industrial Services for BE&K. Sue previously served on the board of directors for the Wood Group, which is based in Aberdeen, Scotland. She holds a bachelor’s degree from Auburn University and an MBA from the University of Miami.

*Although the authors and NAC have made every effort to ensure accuracy and completeness of the advice or information presented within, NAC and the authors assume no responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies, omissions or inconsistencies it may contain, or for any results obtained from the use of this information. The information is provided on an “as is” basis with no guarantees of completeness, accuracy, usefulness or timeliness, and without any warranties of any kind whatsoever, express or implied. Reliance on any information provided by NAC or the authors is solely at your own risk.*