



# NAC Executive Insights

## Leadership – Challenge, Opportunity, Imperative

### Key Points

- Leadership remains a growing challenge for engineering and construction.
- A core aspect of our role as leaders is to nurture and groom the next generation of leaders.
- Precepts of leadership are outlined.
- Areas where our leadership can make a difference are suggested.

Leadership is one of the greatest challenges and opportunities facing engineering and construction managers. It is an industry challenge but equally a challenge for each of us and our firms. Its time is now, as we face growing challenges of complexity and scale as well as an uncertain external environment. Productivity remains lackluster; this is not the hallmark of a leader.

### What is Leadership?

Leadership is about organizing a group of people to achieve a common goal. Topping the list of reasons as to why projects, including mega-projects, underperform is a lack of clearly articulated and well communicated objectives. This is a leadership failure since the responsibility of clear goal-setting and communication must begin with company and project leadership. This is fundamental and as a profession we need to reduce the fumbling of such fundamentals.

As engineering and construction managers, our leadership roles do not stop with assuring top-level objectives are clearly defined and communicated. We must assure they cascade down through the organization, are linked to each task our teams undertake, and that good alignment exists at all levels.

### Next Generation of Leaders

Another core aspect of our role as leaders is to nurture and groom the next generation of leaders. Here we must provide more than just opportunity and mentoring. We must help instill the personal traits and contexts which foster strong leadership. We must share the precepts of leadership:

- **Trust is earned slowly, but lost quickly.**

Trust is absolutely essential for a leader. It is the basis for all meaningful relationships and is necessary to develop the industry, client, and internal team relationships that are a mark of

leadership. In its simplest form it is about keeping your word and honoring commitments you make no matter how painful it is to do so. It is about dealing fairly and never operating unilaterally.

- **Communication must be continuous and honest and complete.**  
Leaders communicate, especially when it's hard. They communicate continuously: up, down, and sideways.
- **Dignity is a human requirement.**  
If you start from the perspective of seeing the best in people, you will.
- **Always lend a hand.**  
The offer to help, especially when the situation is bad, is a high-risk personal decision. But the reward, which is trust earned, is worth it. Your kindergarten teacher's admonishment to "hold hands when crossing the street" is still valid today.
- **Deal with the hard stuff.**  
Don't ignore the hard-to-do pile of tasks or avoid the difficult or unpleasant decisions. *Denial* is not a strategy.
- **Do.**  
Be a contributor. Truly own that opinion. Step forward. Make the unpleasant observation, but offer a constructive alternative. Take personal risks. Remember, you are responsible for your own success.  
Remember the laws of inertia and momentum. A body at rest tends to stay at rest and a body in motion tends to stay in motion. Be a mover and a doer.  
Contribute professionally and personally. View ethical behavior as your only alternative. Build the knowledge of our industry, your firm, your project, your peers and, most importantly, yourself to contribute to continued leadership and development of your own leadership abilities.
- **Be a leader.**  
You learn by doing. The talent and ability is already within each of us. Follow the precepts above, develop them in those around you and you will truly become a leader.

## Leaders Look to the Future

There are many areas in which we can choose to lead, but let me suggest just a few where I believe we can make a difference:

- **Corruption** – This continues to be a debilitating factor in our industry. It is not just a question of law or moral imperative. It is just not good business. It adds to costs, distorts outcomes, and increases the risks our profession that we take every day.
- **Planning fallacy** –People and organizations tend to underestimate how long they will need to complete a task, even when they have experience of similar tasks over-running. Often we allow project schedules and budgets to be “framed” in such a way that expectations are unrealistic and our opportunity for success nonexistent. We need to push for more realistic expectations through use of techniques such as reference class forecasting and the growing capabilities of artificial intelligence.
- **Management systems, processes, techniques, and tools** – This is what we do every day; we need better ways to achieve those objectives we set out to accomplish. This is not about building information management (BIM) or the latest and greatest spreadsheet or dashboard. It is about new approaches and new metrics that focus on precursors, not history.
- **Innovation** – We must innovate, not only more but also differently. An architect retains the intellectual property (IP) rights to his/her design while an engineer does not. Why not? And what about the program or construction manager, who owns the IP on the improved work process? As an industry and profession, we would benefit from more “open innovation,” but how do we create the standard contractual framework that is required so that not every instance is bespoke (made from scratch)?

| <b>Precepts of Leadership</b>                               |
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| • Trust is earned slowly, but lost quickly.                 |
| • Communication must be continuous and honest and complete. |
| • Dignity is a human requirement.                           |
| • Always lend a hand.                                       |
| • Deal with the hard stuff.                                 |
| • Do.   |
| • Be a leader.  |
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## **About the Author**

Bob Prieto was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2011. He is a senior executive who is effective in shaping and executing business strategy and a recognized leader within the infrastructure, engineering, and construction industries.

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