



NAC Executive Insights

Recipe for Leadership Success

Key Points

- See and solve problems.
- Lead with integrity.
- Continuous and lifelong learning is a requirement.
- View challenges as learning opportunities.
- Use your emotional intelligence and be your authentic self.
- Find a mentor or emulate successful leadership behaviors.
- Always put forth your best effort and work hard.
- Choice, not chance, should determine your destiny.

Introduction

Putting together the various ingredients or tips according to a recipe can yield a delicious meal. Likewise, putting together a variety of skills can lead individuals to leadership success. Based on our many decades of experience in industry, government, and academia, we believe that successful leaders see problems and yearn to solve them. They always lead with integrity—they do the right thing. Doing so yields the best results.

Leaders understand the rate of technology change and the unfolding of world events require that they embark on continuous and lifelong learning. A successful leader ensures they develop and enhance their “emotional intelligence” and always show up as their authentic self. Because leaders understand that they don’t know everything, they seek out mentors and emulate the behaviors of other people whom they view as successful leaders. They understand that, as the baseline, they must work hard and always put forth their best effort. Leaders also understand their circumstances or physical appearance shouldn’t matter. Instead, their destiny is determined by the choices they make.

Tip One—See and Solve Problems

Successful leaders are committed to solving the problems they see. They have a vision of how the problems can be solved and the backbone and desire to “take the bull by the horns.” When the problems are large or multi-faceted and they can’t solve the problems themselves, they enlist the assistance of others to solve those problems. They attack the problems with conviction and are fearless in searching for solutions and in applying their knowledge, ability, and skills. They are persistent. A common trait: they rarely stop before the problems are resolved.

Tip Two—Lead With Integrity

Successful leaders have the courage and the moral compass to do the right thing. They are highly self-aware of behaviors and results. They know that—as leaders—they set the tone. They lead with integrity. If something is not right, they know and they step in to make sure that it is right.

Early in Jamey’s career, she became aware of a design flaw evidenced in a fabrication drawing in one of the components that was part of the bridge she was managing during construction. She approached the engineer who had originally designed the component and indicated there was a problem. He was reluctant to do anything about it. She went to a leader of the company, who agreed to give her permission to tell the client and then do the right thing to fix the error, even if the client wasn’t willing to pay for it. The client was so shocked by her honesty that her firm was never penalized and continued to enjoy a decade-long relationship with them. Jamey fixed it—and the contractor on the job even helped by ensuring the fix would not be too costly. It took courage to admit the corporate error, but it was absolutely the right thing to do.

Always lead with integrity.

Tip Three—Continuous and Lifelong Learning is a Requirement

The pace of change of technology and the unfolding of world events are so rapid that one must be a continuous and lifelong learner. It isn’t an option. Jill loves to show an IBM punch card to her audiences. She learned to program in college using punch cards. One line of computer code was keypunched into each card. Heaven forbid that you dropped your cards, especially if you hadn’t numbered them, because then it was like putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. No smart phones back then. So, we all had better keep current, read industry publications, understand what is going on in the world, be comfortable asking questions, attend conferences, have subject matter experts you can consult with whom you trust, and stay current both in your field of expertise and with technology. Otherwise, each of us could become obsolete long before our retirement date. Continuous and lifelong learning may be a challenge, but we really have no choice.

Tip Four—View Challenges as Learning Opportunities

Each of us will make mistakes—in our lives and in our careers. Choose to view those mistakes as opportunities for learning. They also are opportunities for growth. No one is singled out for challenges in their lives. Everyone faces obstacles. It is part of being human. As one of Jill’s friends says, “Never waste a good crisis.”

Make sure that you and your colleagues are not caught up in the “ladder of inference.” Get the facts before you jump to conclusions. Don’t make rash judgements. Wait until you have the facts. Don’t be one of those who refuses to learn from their mistakes or from situations. To paraphrase the famous line by philosopher George Santayana, those who fail to learn from their mistakes are doomed to repeat them.

Tip Five—Use Your Emotional Intelligence and Be Your Authentic Self

“Emotional intelligence” is the ability to handle one’s own emotions and relate to others appropriately and with empathy. The four categories of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. A leader ensures their emotional intelligence continues to develop. They are not only aware of themselves and their emotions but handle themselves well in social settings and with others. Emotional intelligence is particularly important in our work, where we almost always work together in teams. High levels of emotional intelligence will enable a leader to listen, watch, understand, and interpret behaviors.

Jill tells the story of a meeting in January 1991. She and two colleagues were negotiating a deal for a large power plant and were in the offices of a New York law firm. It was late in the evening. Someone called into the conference room and told the people there to turn on the radio (there were no televisions in conference rooms in those days). The Gulf War had started. Jill was watching the banker—he had a different colored pen for each type of item he needed to keep track of. She turned to her colleagues and said, “This meeting is over.” Her colleagues asked her how she knew. “The banker is putting the caps on his pens. He’s finished for the evening.” She was right: the meeting was over.

One of our friends likes to say she isn’t smart enough to keep “two sets of books.” She means she simply always tells the truth—that way, she doesn’t have to remember if she has told any lies or stories or to whom she may have told them. The truth is just one set of books. Always show up as your authentic self. Then you don’t have to remember who you were the last time you were with any specific set of people. Being your authentic self is also more comfortable. You don’t have to expend any energy trying to be someone you aren’t.

“To know thyself is the beginning of wisdom.”

— Socrates

Tip Six—Find a Mentor or Emulate Successful Leadership Behaviors

You may want to seek out a mentor: someone whose behaviors you admire, someone who can help develop your leadership skills. If that person isn’t available, look around. You will see leadership behaviors that you will want to emulate. Think about what those leaders did and how they did it and adopt those behaviors as part of your leadership style. Many good books have been written on leadership. As you read them, you’ll find tips on how to enhance your own leadership skills.

Tip Seven—Always Put Forward Your Best Effort and Work Hard

Always, always, always do your very best work and work hard at everything you do. There is no substitute. This is a baseline, a foundational requirement. This is the way you will always behave, whether anyone is looking or not. The way you can be most satisfied with your own character is to always put forth your best effort and always work hard. Diligence and determination are keys to success.

“The true test of a man’s character is what he does when no one is watching.”

— John Wooden

Tip Eight—Choice, Not Chance, Should Determine Your Destiny

Dream big and don’t be afraid. You can make the choices that are right for you in your life and career. Don’t let chance determine your destiny. Trust yourself. Plan well. Work hard (see Tip Seven). And, please make sure you have fun. Be confident, well-skilled, and passionate about your work. Make sure you have the social connections you need to support and sustain yourself. You can make the choice to be a leader. Remember: leadership is not just about yourself—it is about nurturing those skills in others as well.

Summary/Conclusion

The recipe for leadership success involves working hard, solving problems, viewing your mistakes as learning opportunities, leading with integrity, constantly learning, applying emotional intelligence, showing up as your authentic self, finding a mentor or adopting successful leadership behaviors—and always, always—ensuring that choice, not chance, determines your destiny.

About the Authors

Jill Tietjen was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2022. An author, international speaker, and electrical engineer, she is a recognized advocate for women in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields and has spent more than 45 years in the electric utility industry.

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