



NAC Executive Insights

Leading People: Essentials for Small Businesses to Thrive and Grow

Key Points

- Continuous growth, mentorship and sharing knowledge is essential for small businesses.
- The ability to adapt to changing technologies and social values is critical for growth in small businesses.
- Effective leadership can lead to substantial positive change for small businesses.
- Leadership is the ability to take practical knowledge and apply to differing business conditions.
- Leaders must create the environment and culture where employees feel valued and heard.
- Learning from the experience of others can help avoid common pitfalls in leadership.
- Leaders must embrace feedback, understand its implications, and act on it to improve their leadership skills.
- Successful leadership is rooted in understanding and connecting with people.

Introduction

The National Academy of Construction (NAC) sponsored a panel entitled “Leading People: Essentials for Small Businesses to Thrive and Grow” at the Society of American Military Engineers (SAME) Small Business Conference (SBC) held in New Orleans. This panel, included 4 NAC members; Lloyd Caldwell, Mark Handley, Dave Nash, and Bob Prieto.

People are widely recognized to be the most important asset of any business. Good leadership is a hallmark of successful organizations, and successful companies give attention to leadership development. Yet leadership development...may be missing in the strategic outlook for some small businesses.

The session provided a rich discussion on leadership, particularly within the construction industry, featuring insights that emphasized the importance of continuous growth, mentorship, and the sharing of knowledge. The speakers shared personal stories and practical advice aimed at fostering effective leadership in organizations, especially small businesses.

Panel Discussion Summary

One of the central themes discussed is the necessity for leaders to focus on both capacity and capability. The panel articulated that growth in organizations is not solely measured by the number of employees or revenue but also by the ability to adapt to changing technologies and social values. They shared a compelling story about mentoring a new CEO (Chief Executive Officer) in a family-owned business. This transition posed significant challenges, but through effective mentorship, the new CEO was able to develop a strong leadership team and address existing organizational issues. Eighteen months later, the company was thriving, illustrating how effective leadership can lead to substantial positive change .

The panel also emphasized the importance of practical experience in leadership development. They encouraged attendees to actively seek out leadership roles, such as running committees or projects, as a means to gain valuable experience. They referenced foundational leadership literature, particularly Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People," highlighting its relevance in teaching essential interpersonal skills. This advice underscores the idea that leadership is not just about theoretical knowledge but also about applying learned principles in real-world situations. It is important to understand the strategic relationship of leadership development and building teams to a thriving business.

Engagement with employees was another critical point raised during the discussion. A speaker shared their management philosophy, which involved spending over 50% of their time outside the home office to connect directly with employees at various levels. They would hold separate meetings with managers, general staff, and young professionals to foster open communication and gather feedback. This approach not only helped the speaker understand the organization better but also built trust and rapport with the team. By being present and approachable, leaders can create an environment where employees feel valued and heard, which is essential for effective leadership .

The importance of sharing knowledge and experiences was a recurring theme throughout the session. The speakers collectively expressed a commitment to sharing their mistakes and lessons learned throughout their careers. They highlighted the role of organizations like the National Academy of Construction (NAC), which provides resources and insights on leadership and management. By encouraging attendees to use these resources, the speakers reinforced the idea that learning from others' experiences can help avoid common pitfalls in leadership.

Moreover, the speakers discussed the significance of self-reflection and seeking feedback. One speaker suggested that even CEOs should undergo 360-degree reviews to gain insights into their leadership effectiveness. They shared their own experience of receiving feedback through such reviews, emphasizing that while it can be challenging to hear criticism, it is crucial for personal and professional growth. Leaders must embrace feedback, understand its implications, and act on it to improve their leadership skills.

In addition to these practical insights, the speakers also touched on the foundational qualities of effective leadership, such as trust, communication, and genuine care for team members. They reminded the audience that the basic nature of humanity has not changed over time; people still desire to be engaged and cared for. This timeless advice serves as a reminder that successful leadership is rooted in understanding and connecting with people on a personal level.

Concluding Thoughts

The panel's discussions provided a wealth of leadership advice grounded in real-world experiences. The emphasis on continuous growth, practical experience, employee engagement, knowledge sharing, and self-reflection offers a comprehensive framework for developing effective leadership skills. By applying these principles and learning from the stories shared by seasoned professionals, emerging leaders can navigate the complexities of their roles and foster a culture of growth and collaboration within their organizations. The insights shared serve as a valuable resource for anyone looking to enhance their leadership capabilities and make a meaningful impact in their field.

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.

About the Panelists

Lloyd Caldwell was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2018. He is the retired Director of Military Programs for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). As Director of Military Programs, Lloyd led the worldwide design and construction of a \$35 billion portfolio.

Mark Handley was elected to the National Academy of Construction 2020. He is a senior vice president at AECOM and had a distinguished 32-year career in the Navy, retiring as a Rear Admiral in the Navy Civil Engineer Corps.

Dave Nash was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2003. He is senior vice president of MELE Associates, Inc. and a retired admiral of the U.S. Navy after a distinguished 33-year career in the Navy.

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