

**EPISODE 5****[INTRODUCTION]**

**[00:00:07] TF:** Welcome to Episode 5 of Job Search Strategies with Tiffany Franklin. Today, I'm going to talk about leveling up in your career and how to go after and succeed in securing those promotions. I am so excited to welcome Zachery Jones, who is an attorney and also a client of mine; I have been working with for the past 10 years. Zachery is the Vice President of Labor Relations for United. Zachery has had more than 30 years of experience in leading labor organizations.

Prior to joining United, he served as Vice President of Labor Relations at CSX. Prior to CSX, Zachery worked as Senior Mediator at the National Mediation Board. He received a bachelor's degree from Howard University, a juris doctorate from the University of Minnesota, and an MBA from Loyola University in Chicago. Before we begin, I always like to start with a quick tip. Today, it's to advance in your career, you want to actively seek out professional development opportunities, just don't wait for them to come to you. A popular quote is, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." When you think about what are you looking for in the future, look at jobs that you think you want someday. Maybe those are in your organization, a few levels above your own, or maybe it's even in another industry, or just at another company. It's really, the sky is the limit.

As you look at what those future prospects are for you, look at the skills needed for that job description. Where are your skills now and what skills do you need for that job? Do you need any additional education to qualify? Then seek out ways, maybe it's through your company, professional development sessions. Or if they don't have that, don't wait for it. Start taking a class, or maybe through your company. If you need to build up leadership, perhaps there's a leadership development program, or some courses you can take to start positioning yourself and showing the value you can deliver for your company and make yourself more competitive for future promotional opportunities.

If you would like a career strategy session, or you're need help with career exploration, or your resume, go to [tjfcareercoach.com](http://tjfcareercoach.com), where you can book an appointment with me. Or you can find additional episodes of this podcast to help you in your search.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:02:31] TF:** Today, I am here with Mr. Zachery Jones. I am so excited, because Zachery and I go back about 10 years. When I first went into working with executive clients, we connected through Elance. He was one of the first ones to take a chance on me. I am just so grateful. As I just mentioned in his bio, he's so accomplished and just really, has become a friend too. Thank you, Zachery, for being here today.

**[00:02:57] ZJ:** Thank you. I'm happy to be here. Of course, I would be remiss if I did not express my deep gratitude to you for everything you have done for me, through 10 years, really. I recall the weekend that I went through the process and it came down to you and a young lady out of Houston. You were at Nashville at the time, at Vanderbilt. I ended up selecting you. What a great choice I made, not only for me, but for other friends who are executives and for the family members who were looking for support in their career. Thank you for all you have done, for me and family and friends.

**[00:03:35] TF:** Thanks, Zachery. Well, I'm excited today to talk about how you can level up in your career. One of the reasons, I knew I wanted to have you as a guest, but why this particular thing, because from the time we first met, I was so struck by just in every place that you've worked, you consistently got promoted. I wanted to talk about was that by design, or obviously, a lot of hard work, but what was some of the strategy? I guess, just to kick us off, could you walk us briefly through your career path?

**[00:04:09] ZJ:** Oh, sure. Undergraduate, I went to Howard University in Washington DC, the home of our Vice President, Kamala Harris, and many other distinguished alumni. I reached this decision my junior year. I was in sports. I went on a track scholarship, so I was really involved in sports. I started realizing that I wasn't going to try to run in the Olympics that I had to make a pathway for myself once I finished my senior year. So I set a lofty goal of attaining my MBA and law degree prior to turning 30.

I set out with that goal, ended up initially taking a job in sales, and I was based out of Chicago. I went to night school at Loyola University of Chicago; excellent school on the north side. Ended up getting an MBA and marketing. Upon my graduation, it quickly switched gears and took an offer, an acceptance at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Minnesota attending law school and went to their law school.

Then upon graduation from law school, came out and practiced for a large law firm, which is many times, a traditional path, where you go in and prosecutor at the Justice Department, or State's Attorney's Office. I ended up taking a job at a major law firm. Practiced there for nine years, had a fairly successful career. Ended up

opening [inaudible], a sports and entertainment practice for the law firm. We ended up representing about 30 NFL football players.

Then, when I left the practice of law, I started teaching at Howard University, returning home to the Bisons and taught business law in the School of Business to undergraduates and graduate students for close to a decade. After being an academia, wanted to get back into corporate America government, and took a job at the National Mediation Board as a federal mediator, under the Railway Labor Act, which basically focuses on airlines and railroads.

I was able to help companies in those industries put together their collective bargaining agreements. One thing I always enjoyed, even about the study of law, was contract law and the deal making. I knew I wanted to be, versus on the litigation side, I wanted to be in the negotiations deal-making side. I ended up doing that for about a decade and got a tremendous offer at CSX Transportation in Jacksonville. That's where we met.

**[00:06:49] TF:** Yay, Jax.

**[00:06:50] ZJ:** That's right. Came down to Florida, and spent eight and a half years at CSX, and decided it was time for a change. Lo and behold, I get this text from a former mentor, who was at United Airlines that led to me being introduced to United Airlines, met my current boss and an interview. Fell in love with United, day one. Ended up taking a job there. I left CSX. In two, three months later, I started at United. It was I tell you, this is probably the one of the best moves of my career.

The culture at United — it's been tough with the pandemic on the airline industry. When you have a culture that is caring, that's supportive, that has a plan, you really see all of those things come together. It's been a challenging ride, but a very, I would say, beneficial ride that I think in the long run is going to — United is going to be in real good shape.

**[00:07:50] TF:** That's always amazing to hear people say how they feel it's such a good culture match. That's one of the things in working with clients, I always say, you really have to research the company to know what's in their DNA and does it match your values?

**[00:08:04] ZJ:** I cannot agree with you about — I hear people that come to me and, “I'm upset with my boss, or I'm upset with this situation. I'm not moving fast enough and I'm not getting promoted. I'm leaving.” I always

say, "Okay, it's okay to leave, if that's what you actually want and if that's what's best for your career." Many times, at the beginning of the process of another company, everyone is putting their best foot forward. The company is putting its best foot forward, you're putting your best foot forward. When you're looking on the other side of the fence from where you are, the grass will always look greener.

**[00:08:41] TF:** Sounds like dating.

**[00:08:43] ZJ:** Yeah, exactly. You said you're an agent, right? Yes, so you always have your best foot down. When you see that green grass, make sure it's green grass, because sometimes when you get to the other side, you find out it's artificial turf. If it's an artificial turf, many times the collisions and the falls on artificial turf are going to cause a lot more damage to your knees and your hips and your shoulders. It could damage your career, if you go somewhere that is not authentic.

**[00:09:12] TF:** I love the sports analogies. What exactly are you doing in your current role at United?

**[00:09:18] ZJ:** Right now, I'm Vice President of Labor Relations. United has six unions on its property. You'd say, a 100,000 employees, about 85% are represented by union members. I have a team right now of 17. Small, but mighty. We're responsible for the labor strategy, the collective bargaining negotiations with union partners, the management and administration of the collective bargaining agreements. If there's grievances, if there are grievances, we're responsible for working through those grievances and disagreements.

There's many ways to do that. One way is to sit down and just talk about it and see, can you negotiate some type of amicable solution? If you cannot, yeah, I have a saying that we can agree to disagree, without being disagreeable. Now, what you have to do is say, what is our pathway to resolve this dispute? Our pathway normally to resolve the dispute is through a grievance and an arbitrator. Then that third party will decide who's right. The company will present its case, the union will present its case, and the arbitrator, he or she, will decide who is right and why. Then you both live with that.

**[00:10:35] TF:** Wow. It must be very complicated, architecting all of these negotiations and all.

**[00:10:40] ZJ:** It is. One thing that United focused on well before my arrival, and hopefully continue to, is a good union relationship, a good partnership, strong partnership. Many times when you have that relationship, you have that partnership, you're able to work through the disagreements. Even during the bad times, you're

able to effectively communicate with each other and get to the other side of the dispute. That's what's most important.

Then when you get to the other side of the dispute, you have to have a short memory. You cannot say, "Oh, I remember when such — " You have to move on. We resolved it. Let's move on and let's continue to have a strong relationship. Because I always say, it's not about me, it's not about you. It's about the enterprise. It is what's best for the enterprise. Because if you do that, everyone is going to benefit. All employees are going to benefit.

**[00:11:38] TF:** Well, they sound lucky to have you at the helm of that. What was it about United that stood out to you, when you were talking to various recruiters about opportunities at several companies?

**[00:11:50] ZJ:** It really came down to, I thought United had a dynamic organization. I thought that one of their core four pillars of caring, caring about each other, caring about our customers, caring about our employees, was very important to me. Employee engagement is something that is really important to me, and how we treat each other with respect. I knew that that was a place for me. Although, other companies had similar pillars and other companies are saying the same thing, I knew that this is what I was going to get at United. The funny thing about it, now that I have been there for almost two and a half years and I look back, I believe they undersold their culture.

**[00:12:32] TF:** Really? Wow, that's huge.

**[00:12:34] ZJ:** It's how strongly I believe in the company and the culture and how we treat each other. I just think that's a great thing. As we come out of this pandemic and we look forward, I just look forward to the friendly skies, flying at a very high level.

**[00:12:49] TF:** I definitely think we all do. Zachery, since we first met, I really was struck by the way you leveled up throughout your career and earned several promotions with your past employers, including CSX and the National Mediation Board. What would you say are the main factors that helped you secure promotions along the way?

**[00:13:06] ZJ:** The first thing I would say is, be prepared. Be prepared, because success sometimes, to me, is at the intersection of preparation and opportunity. If you're prepared and you get the opportunity, then more

than likely, you're going to succeed at that opportunity, which will lead to more. It's like, many times in a corporation, they say, "I'm going to trust you with the little, before I could trust you with a lot."

At the National Mediation Board, coming in as a professor, I had certain platform skills. I communicate it and engage people in a Socratic method. Whereas, if I'm in a classroom, it's not just a one-way lecture. It's like, if you walk through the door of the classroom, be prepared to participate. That creates to me, a dynamic learning environment. Whenever CSX offered me an opportunity to train, whether it was at a railroad, or airline, I never said no. I never said I had a conflict. I never said it was too much for me. I always said yes.

Always take on opportunities and challenges. Whatever there were tough cases that you said, "Wow, this one is really going to be tough and I may not succeed in getting a deal together. I don't want that loss on my resume." Don't be afraid of the challenge. I always said yes. In saying yes to different opportunities, I think it gave me different exposures. It gave me exposures to different corporations, leaders in different corporations.

Even when I was at the NMB, a few airlines offered me jobs. I said, "No, I was in Washington, DC. My son was growing up. I really wanted to be close to him and spend time. It just wasn't the timing to leave. It just so happens in 2010 when CSX approached me, my son was graduating from high school, off to college. So now was the time for me to spread my wings and fly. I would say, always be prepared to take on a challenge and an opportunity.

When I got to CSX, the eye-opening opportunity for me, they were conducting their first ever employee engagement survey, to try to understand what drove our employees? What was important to our employees? The second half was to go out in the field and have focus groups to peel back the layers and having a conversation about what does effective communications mean? What does career opportunities mean?

I ran the focus group side of it. Then once we consolidated all of that information, we had an opportunity to present to our executive team. Again, the platform scales are so important, how you communicate, can you communicate effectively? I think that when we went into the room, a famous line from my favorite play, *Hamilton*, the room where it happened. When we went into the room where it happens with our executive team, I think that I held myself in good stead. I think I was effectively – I was able to effectively communicate and give a visual of what our field employees were thinking. That led to me being formally assigned a mentor, who happened to be the COO, who went on to be president, COO, president, etc. That gave me a lot more exposure.

Then the next day, I got another opportunity in HR, and I had never been in HR before. I said, yes. I had a good team. That great team that I had is what drove my success, not me. I had a great team. It's like a coach who had great players. You're going to be successful.

**[00:17:11] TF:** You are also a great leader. Now, when you're talking about the mentor, did you ask for that? Or did you just get to a certain point where they finally said, "Okay. Well, you're on the leadership track here to this degree. We want to pair you with this person."

**[00:17:27] ZJ:** Yeah. This one was the latter. You'll see that in many corporations, they will have mentorship programs that are formal, where they identify a high-performing individual, high-potential individual and say, "Okay. This person is on the leadership track and we need to get him or her up to the level that we want him or her to be at." They assign you a mentor. That mentor is normally at a very high level in the organization, who can introduce you to people you would never meet, could open doors for you that would never be open. Other times, you just get mentors along the way, who are equally as positioned in the organization. I was fortunate enough at CSX to have both.

**[00:18:14] TF:** That's great.

**[00:18:15] ZJ:** Yeah. I was fortunate enough to have both. For me, the joy of it is, Tiffany, to this day, I remained in touch with them. To this day. It's not unusual for me to get a text from one of my mentors, who will talk about all of the unrest that was going on in 2020. I will talk about education, or they shoot me something about the political, the politics that was going – the presidential election, the senatorial election in Georgia, sports, their families. It's amazing that the connection was so strong.

These were just informal mentors, who took an interest in me. When you have the formal piece going for you and the informal piece going for you, it's a work of beauty. It's really something that can help your career.

**[00:19:09] TF:** That is so true. I mean, mentors can be life changing. My mentor, she's actually, Dr. Jeanne Stanley, is on another podcast episode that we're doing on getting in and out of graduate school. We have been in touch through the years. We just got back in touch. It's great, because I think you become friends, but somebody you respect and just somebody who was in the field, their opinions you really value.

**[00:19:35] ZJ:** Right. As I have advanced in my career and I have mentored people. I remained in touch. There are students from Howard University, who I still remain in touch with, who are lawyers, who are on Wall Street, very successful, who are accounting executives, things like that. There's mentors from the NMB, people I've mentored, and we are friends. They also mentored me, because they were pilots. One thing I didn't understand was the pilot agreement. They would coach me on the pilot agreement and then I would talk to them about the mediation process. It was a two-way street. Many times, it gets to a point where the mentee is coaching you as much as you're coaching them and that is great.

**[00:20:26] TF:** Oh, that's awesome. Now, how far ahead do you set your career goals, Zachery? Are you someone who has a five-year plan? Or do you live more in the here and the now?

**[00:20:35] ZJ:** A little bit of both. Early in my career, I definitely thought out. Like I told you. I say, "Hey, I had a plan my junior year to get an MBA and a law degree." That was a decade process. Then after that, I would always go five years, long-term, two to three, mid-term. Then I would go about 60 to a 180 days, short-term. I always have buckets of goals to accomplish in those years. Then it becomes a moving target as you advance.

At this point, is a mature state of my career, I just enjoy the journey. I am really taking the time to appreciate where I am, appreciate the great company I'm working for, enjoy my team, enjoy my colleagues and the collaboration. I take it a little bit more of, someone once told me, always enjoy today and the present, because it's truly a gift. That's why they call it the present. I think, really enjoying the day-to-day, the week-to-week, the month-to-month and not worried about 2025, 2030.

Although, I do have plans and do understand, from a labor relations standpoint, from a strategy standpoint, from a corporate standpoint, what we think needs to take place. Me personally, from a career standpoint, I think I'm really enjoying the short-term.

**[00:22:01] TF:** That's great to hear. Now, were all the promotions, the results of the long-term plan, or could some of them be attributed to being in the right place at the right time?

**[00:22:11] ZJ:** I think it's a combination. Again, I have a strong bias towards education. I think the MBA and law degree has helped. A lot of times when I get calls from executive recruiters and things like that, that is a value. I think that if you look at the career track, that has helped. Because many times people will look and say,



“Well, okay. He was successful at Howard University and he was successful at the mediation board. He was successful with CSX. He's successful at the United, so I think he can be successful here.”

Being in the right place. For example, I was heading up CSX's arbitration group and labor relations and I get a call from my boss' boss at the time, who happens to be one of my mentors, and I still stay in touch with her. She said, “I have an opportunity in human resources. I want you to consider taking this opportunity.” I said, “Well, I haven't worked in human resources before.” She said, “Don't worry about it. You're a leader and you'll have a good team. Would you consider it?” I did. I ended up taking that job and worked for nine months. The next thing you know, I said, I have an opportunity for you and it is in employee relations. Employee relations, basically, was designed. It was like the ethics group that investigated all of wrongdoings, conduct, things like that. I said, “Okay.” I took that. Now I'm in the vice president's ranks, because I went to assistant vice president.

When I got in, there are a lot of times you get to an opportunity and you're at a such a great altitude with no turbulence, you just say, “All I need to do is just fly the plane. Just keep it steady.” Then other times, you get to a position and you say, “Wow, there's an opportunity to take this to a higher altitude.” There's a high opportunity to do something different. What I thought, it was really based on my mediation background, that there were conflicts in our field operations, that really came down to communications.

If you had a third-party mediator guiding the communications between the conflicting parties, maybe they will understand that throughout the conflict, it's just how we communicate with each other. Let's come up with a resolution going forward on this dispute. I had trained — just so happened, you talk about opportunity, had trained a union group, I went through when I was a mediator, maybe six years earlier. I had gone to Ohio and resolved the dispute. There was — became a big dispute between our BLET engineers, and a group in Indiana.

The union leader said, “Okay, if you'll mediate it, well go.” It was, I left Florida. It was 85 degrees. Went to Indiana, it was 10 degrees. We spent the Sunday resolving the dispute, and came out of it with a great resolution. When you're successful like that, people talk. The next thing you know, it starts spreading and I start getting calls, “Hey, we got this going on.” I call them class disputes, when you — It's not just two people, it's a community of people clashing with a community of people. You get everyone in the room and you resolve it.

That became something that our team started doing effectively. That just helped us. Then, we created a workplace barometer that was a predictive model. If you think, it's certain variables were going up or down, you could almost project out, that it was going to be a conflict here. That just created a lot of opportunities. Again, companies were calling. I said, "No, no." I was really beginning to get attached to Jacksonville. Then of course, there was a changeover. I started thinking, "Maybe I should be a little bit more open to a different organization." Then United came.

**[00:26:18] TF:** It's interesting looking at your experience and how you saying yes to so many things. I like to almost think of it in terms of setting yourself up for serendipity. Because with being so open and saying yes and it's not always what you had maybe envisioned, but yet, you could see the value in every opportunity and stretching yourself a little bit, then you just keep opening yourself up for these other opportunities to come along.

**[00:26:45] ZJ:** That's true. There's a reason why. Early in my career, when I was practicing law, I interviewed with the major sports management company. I wanted to be an agent. They didn't have an opening for an agent, but their general counsel called that said, "Well, I have an opening for an associate general counsel, if you're interested." I said, "No, no. I'm already a lawyer." I said, "I want to be an agent and I want to be able to –" And so they kept asking me to at least meet with them. I said, "No. Never considered it."

Years later, we were on a panel together. We got into a deep engagement. He was teasing me about saying no, without even talking to him. I realized at that point, yes is okay. Yes is an okay answer, because as I said earlier, it's just lunch. If you think that's something you want to do, you can listen. It's going to do one or two things. It's going to pique your curiosity, or it's going to make you really appreciate and realize the position you're in right now. You're really going to appreciate and understand that the company I have now is really good, is basically great. There might be room for me to improve within the company. It might be room for the company to improve, in my eyes. Where I am is a really good spot. I think that that has its benefits.

**[00:28:21] TF:** Yeah. It's definitely good to evaluate along the way. Now, for people who are at mid-career level, who are feeling stagnant in their current roles and companies, what steps can they take now to break out of that rut and accelerate their careers?

**[00:28:36] ZJ:** One is to make sure you're prepared. I think, continue to challenge yourself. Seek feedback. Do a 360. Seek feedback from others, to see what are some of your opportunities to improve. It could be platform

skills. It could be writing skills. It could be some analytic skills. It could be how you collaborate. You get some people who will "I, I, I, I, I," versus we as a team putting this together. There's a lot of opportunities for an individual to work on improving him or herself.

That's always a difficult question, because sometimes when people feel stagnant, the first thing they want to do is say, a different company is going to deliver something different and better. A different company will probably deliver something different. \$64,000 question is, will it be better? That goes back to my earlier comment about artificial turf. It may look green over there, but make sure that that grass is real; real grass, natural grass, not artificial turf.

I would say, try to develop within the organization and take on opportunities. There's always opportunities for someone to expand. Talk to your leader and see what opportunities your leader has to get you possible exposures, because there could be something where a leader say, "Okay, I'm sitting in on this project. And my time-frame — I think you would be perfect." To meet this team, and to work with a team over in marketing, or work with the team in engineering, or operations.

If you're working for an operation company, try to get out in the field and meet people in the operations. Understand the operations. It's a lot of different things, people at mid-career who feel stagnant can do. Sometimes I say, "Okay, get a graduate degree." That's something that could help, because that's going to put you in a think tank room, a cohort of different individuals, at different points in their careers, that will just give you a different vantage point of where you are. Always say, learn a foreign language, if you can. There's a lot of different opportunities.

**[00:30:52] TF:** That's great. As people are trying to figure out whether they can accelerate their careers more quickly, do you think then it is switching companies, or staying with the same employer? Because when you were talking about the artificial turf, obviously, you've got to be careful that you research what you're getting yourself into. What are your thoughts in general on internal promotions, versus switching companies or even industries?

**[00:31:16] ZJ:** It's a combination and it can work either way. I have friends and I know people who have stayed in the same organization for decades, who are vice president, senior vice presidents, executive vice presidents. They have advanced. Sometimes when you're within the same organization, you can create different experiences for yourself. Some organizations have different departments, so you can work in

operations, you can work in sales, you can work in, depending on your background, ethics, or legal, or labor relations, human resources. There's a lot of different departments that you could go. When you work in those different departments, there's different opportunities and challenges. Versus, I'm doing the same thing for 30 years.

In some companies that have different divisions, you can go to the different divisions of the company. I had a friend who said, "No, I try to change companies every six years, because every time I have changed, I have gone from manager to senior manager, senior manager to director, director to senior director." Some people view it as a step that you have to go to a different company to get a promotion. That's not necessarily so. Some companies you even see today, who are flattening the curve, will call an individual and say, "Oh, I see that you're a vice president, or I see that you're assistant vice president, or a senior director, I have a manager position for you. A manager to us is a vice president everywhere else," right?

**[00:33:05] TF:** Uh-huh.

**[00:33:06] ZJ:** People have to evaluate whether they believe that statement is true.

**[00:33:12] TF:** Well, and you hear that about pivot points, too. Because for some people, maybe they want to completely change their job and completely change their industry, but it may be hard to do both at once. Maybe they even see if they can do another function within the same company to get that other job title, or that experience and then pivot to another company, or industry later. Or, how those jumps are, sometimes it's almost like a chess game.

**[00:33:37] ZJ:** Yes. I've heard from different industry. I've heard from healthcare industry, automotive industry, pharmaceutical industry, transportation industry. I think, it still goes back to that skill set and the different things that you have done within an organization. You're absolutely right. If you can get the different functions, I think people say, you can work in different industries.

**[00:34:07] TF:** Do you think it's realistic in this day and age for people just starting off to think of anybody staying at one particular company and going through the ranks? Because typically, these days, you see people switch jobs much more often than they used to.

**[00:34:20] ZJ:** Yeah. That I think comes down to patience. You come in, and someone works two years and say, "Oh, I should be senior vice president." I do think that there are companies that are set up for individuals to advance through the organization, or to get to a point that they are content. "Here's the company I want to be at." That the likelihood of that, you say, "Okay, our parents, they would go to an organization and work forever." My dad worked for two organizations. He was with the United States Army for 23 years and he was with the Washington Hospital Center in Washington DC for 23 years.

He would have never thought of going anywhere else. I think, I have worked for five organizations. I'm interested to see what my son does. He's on his second organization now. He's been out of school for eight years. We'll see where he ends up. It can work both ways. I think that there's opportunity because it also depends what else is going on in your life, what's important in your life. If you look at your career being a piece of your life and then you have family, you have just outside interests that you like, other things; all of that comes into play in an evaluation. Where am I in my career? What do I want to do?

**[00:35:56] TF:** I like that you talk about that. Because when I go over the values exercise, and I'll put this in the notes, where I ask jobseekers at the very beginning, look at these 35 attributes that a job could have. Then pick the five that are most important to you. It could be location, salary, being able to work with people, helping people, all these different things. One thing I will say as they pick their top five, what you pick at 20, or what you pick at 30, 40, 50 or 60 will be different, even though it's you. Always continually reevaluate what's most important to you right now, as you conduct this job search.

**[00:36:35] ZJ:** Absolutely. It's, what are the variables that are most important? They will be different at different points in life.

**[00:36:43] TF:** Speaking of that, for the young professionals in their 20s, launching their careers with aspirations of executive leadership roles, what can they do now to position themselves for continual growth and professional success?

**[00:36:57] ZJ:** Again, I have a strong bias towards education. I would say, prepare yourself that way. I would say, communicate with your leaders at your organization, people who are mentoring you and others who can give you feedback on opportunities that you have to either cultivate your strengths, or to improve on some of your opportunities. I would say, be willing to take a chance. Don't just stay in a comfort zone. Discomfort has its place.

Normally, when you're in a good organization and a good leader and you have good colleagues, you're not going to fail, because everyone's going to be running together. Lockstep. That means you're part of the team and the team is going to look out for the team. You always hear, there's no I in team. As a team looks out for the team and supports the team and you're part of the team, you're going to get the support that you need to succeed. If you have a chance to build your resume, do it.

**[00:38:11] TF:** Yeah, I felt like that at Penn Career Services. It was just such a great organization to work with. I love the people I worked with, the mission we had, and it was just when you're in that environment, it's like no other.

**[00:38:24] ZJ:** It's like no other.

**[00:38:26] TF:** It's hard to leave, too, because I knew I wanted to come do this and it was time for me to go out on my own. It's easy to leave a company that you don't like. When you do like it, it's hard.

**[00:38:36] ZJ:** Yup. Yeah, companies that you don't like; you don't like the environment, you don't like the culture, I joke that you're sprinting out the door. Companies you really like, that you embrace the culture, you embrace the people, it is tough to leave. But what I have found in my career and in life, is your career and life is just like a long train ride. You can start that train ride in Washington DC, and you can go to Pittsburgh. You'll meet people along the way. Then some people will get off the train and new people will get on as you go across the country, or the world. Of course, you'll be on a plane if you're going around the world, United hopefully.

As you do that, you're going to meet people on and off. People who will always be in your life. You will always stay in touch with them. Sometimes on a weekly basis, sometimes monthly, sometimes quarterly or annually. That's what I have found.

**[00:39:43] TF:** That is so true. I think I've worked at about five places. I have friends from every place. I mean, one of my closest friends is from back in Drexel. We still laugh about our adventures back in the day.

**[00:39:56] ZJ:** Exactly.

**[00:39:58] TF:** Throughout your career, Zachery, you've been involved in succession planning at various points, what goes into succession planning from the corporate perspective? How can understanding that help employees learn to better market the value that they can deliver?

**[00:40:13] ZJ:** Make sure that you're performing at a high level. Because now, when you're in a succession plan, if a corporation uses a 9-box, and I always say the 9-box reminds me of a country. You want to be in Boston, Vermont and Maine. You want to be in that farthest northeast corner of the 9-box, because that is where the high-potential, high-performing, and high growth potential, high potential.

It's those folks who are normally selected to go into development programs, who are selected to get mentors. You get to that position by performing daily. Bring your A game. Bring your A game every day, to the extent that you can. If you're performing at a high-level on a consistent basis, then your manager and other managers, leaders in the organization are going to recognize you for that. That creates leadership opportunities for you, whether it's to go to one of the universities that have an executive program, or whether there's an executive program internal to the company that you keep going through, whether you're assigned a former mentor or not. All of that comes into play.

I think by performing at your highest level on a consistent basis and doing good work, that's what sets you up. That's what I would tell a young person. Some people will come and say, "Well, how do I become an executive vice president?" I would say, "Let's back up." The starting point, and I would tell you to perform at your highest level.

**[00:41:57] TF:** Perfect. Securing the promotion is just one piece of the puzzle. Now, the person is thrown into a whole new role that may be vastly different from the one they just had. For example, managing people versus working as an individual contributor. Now, they have to navigate a whole new world of office politics and administrative responsibilities. What can a newly promoted employee do to set themselves up for success?

**[00:42:23] ZJ:** I think you come in, and you're a leader now and you have a team. Rely on their expertise. Rely on your team's expertise. I would suggest having a meeting, talking about your leadership style, getting an understanding of what their expectations, the team's expectations are, setting your expectations. Don't come in thinking that you have to know everything, because you don't know. What you want to do is come in with a base of knowledge. What you want to do is come in with certain leadership style, I would say a participatory leadership style, versus a style that says, it's either my way or the highway.

Bring in the team, because many times, that's how you're going to get to the best conclusion, if everyone is weighing in. To me, I really value diversity of thought. When you have diversity of thought, the way I'm feeling resolving the problem is just one way. You might have three or four other different views in the room. If we all start talking about the views in the room and why, and everyone feels that it's a safe haven to candidly voice their opinion, to me, I think you're going to get to a great conclusion.

I think when you're leading a team, you have to establish what is your leadership style. I tell you, give an example, when I went to human resources, that's what I did with my team. I really relied on that team to get me through the tough spots. I really relied on that team to teach me about human resources. We were able to, I think, deliver for the business.

**[00:44:12] TF:** Zachery, for companies that do not provide extensive training for the new role, if somebody is just newly promoted, what resources can they find on their own for learning how to be a better leader? Are there books, or other resources? We can put these in the show notes that people can look at.

**[00:44:30] ZJ:** Right. There's tons of books.

**[00:44:32] TF:** Which are your favorites?

**[00:44:34] ZJ:** I like John Maxwell on leadership style. I think that Tony Dungy has a couple of good books on leadership. There's a lot of articles on leadership. If you're on LinkedIn, many times people will post, these out of 12 top qualities of a good leader and things. Or someone will do a story about here's what my leader did. Sometimes talking to other leaders within your organizations. "Look, I know you've been in a leadership position for a decade. You've been in a leadership position for five years. What did you do when you first started?" Just talking and getting other ideas.

There's also organizations, whether you're an engineer, human resources, labor relations, and these organizations have leaders from different companies and organizations, that you can rely on their expertise and experiences. I just think that there's between the Internet and googling articles on leadership, between going to a Barnes and Noble, or Amazon and searching through, you can find all types of books on leaderships.



Then if you read one and you really like what the person is saying, you might become, here's how I want to leave. Or there may be somebody in your organization and you say, "God, I want to be a leader like that person." You hear a lot now about being a servant, leader. I hope that that's the type of leader I have been. A servant leader to me is a leader who places his or her team above their interest, his or her team above his or her advancement. I hope that I have reached out to try to give to my team in that way, wherever I have been.

**[00:46:28] TF:** Well, the fact that you're even saying that, and you're so aware and trying to do that, that is huge. Now for new leaders, once promoted, people, as a leader, will come to you for answers. What happens if you don't know the solution to their problem, especially like you're saying, you go to a new area. While you have the general leadership skills, you may not know the specifics of this. How have you handled that in the past?

**[00:46:53] ZJ:** Oh. Many times I would say, "Hey, I don't know the answer to that." What I will do is if you give me time, I will research it and I will come back to you with that answer. Other times, they will come and say, "Okay. Well, it's not a specific place in the collective bargaining agreement I have to go to to get this answer. Let's talk through your problem." Then I will try to give guidance on how to resolve it.

I'm not a leader who feels that, oh, if I don't have the answer, then my credibility is destroyed. I'm not going to – I think if I make it. If I come with an answer that eventually ends up wrong, then I think that's a problem. Now, I've never been into a situation where people would ask questions, "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know." Most of the times, you have an answer. Even if you're new to the position, most of the times you will have an answer, or some type of an analogy to say, "Okay. I'm not familiar what you're talking about now, but here's an analogy. Let me tell what that analogy is. Let me tell you how I resolve this analogy. Let's talk about your specific problem and let's see where we can go to find that answer to that."

**[00:48:04] TF:** You stick with them to find a solution together.

**[00:48:06] ZJ:** Yeah. You stick with them to find a solution. Then remember, on most teams, there are what I call subject matter experts. These are the folks who I say, can swim in 30-feet of water with the sharks, because they know everything about this area. Sometimes, you say, "I'm going to pull my expert in with me and then the three of us going to talk about it, and then the three of us going to talk about it, we're going to find a solution." Then you're new to the position, but you're learning and you're learning very quickly.

**[00:48:37] TF:** That makes a lot of sense. Now, for internal promotions, it can be socially tricky for people who are once part of the team to make the leap to managing their peers. Many of whom may be their friends. Any tips for navigating this territory?

**[00:48:53] ZJ:** Yeah. I think, it comes down to effective communication and establishing respect. I believe, friends can manage friends. I think you just have to establish what the expectations are. Maturity comes into play also. I get promoted and now my friend thinks that because his or her friend is in this management position, they don't have to do their job. No, no, no, no. Absolutely not. It's been my experience, that people who were friends, or I was closer with, if I went up into a position and I was managing them, then they would work, it seems, that much harder, because they wanted to make sure that their friend was successful.

**[00:49:39] TF:** That's true.

**[00:49:40] ZJ:** Yeah. I haven't found that to be a problem. If it ever was a problem, I think I would just sit down and say, "Hey, let's get an understanding of what you believe the job is, so I can tell you what I believe the job is and we can align on expectations." I had to do that one time. It wasn't because they were friends of mine. It was just two people I thought were trying to take advantage of a work situation. I said, "Okay. Well, let's talk about that." They were trying to change the subject.

I said, "No, no, no, no. We're going to finish the conversation on expectations of the job first, and then we can talk about whatever you want to talk about. That's what we're going to align on." We aligned on my expectations of the job and performance and what they were going to do. Then I say, "What else do you want to talk about?" They didn't want to talk about anything. Okay.

**[00:50:42] TF:** Sounds like you're using a lot of empathy in there, too. Thinking of how they're feeling. Love all these tips, Zachery. We're rounding out here, so just two more quick things. One, what tips do you recommend for managing the stress that comes with leveling up in your career? How have you avoided burnout over the years?

**[00:51:02] ZJ:** Try to take vacation, your downtime. If you can, do that. What do you love to do? Is it gardening? Is it music? Is it reading? Is it learning a foreign language? Is it working out, running, biking, golfing? Find things that are separate from your job that you like to do, that you really enjoy doing and make sure that you are doing it.

For me, it has been one time, I got it – it could be different things. One time, I got into running. I was running. I ran three Marine Corps marathons. I ran about a 15 marathons. I was going to get back into running right before the pandemic hit. I had joined my running group in Washington DC, and then the pandemic hit. That's a super spreader situation, when you get all these people out. Didn't do that. Find what you love to do. If it's baking and cooking, taking cooking lessons.

I mean, all of these things, or they're stress relievers. Spending time with family. Spending time with friends, kids, whatever takes you away from the stress and the burnout and places you in a different situation that allows you to rejuvenate. Make sure you're doing those things.

**[00:52:29] TF:** Yeah. It's so important to have the balance. I mean, your career is basically a marathon. You have to take care of yourself along the way. Now, any final pieces of advice for how people can formulate a strategy for their continued career growth?

**[00:52:46] ZJ:** Have a clear vision. For me, I've always liked the five, the long-term, the mid-term, the short-term. Have a clear vision, understand accomplishments, continue to challenge yourself, and try to think clearly about different situations. Sometimes leaving a particular situation could be a great result for you. Other times, it may not. If you make a critical decision, and it doesn't work out, have a short memory, don't beat yourself for it. It's just the decision you made that didn't work out.

Try to remain positive. Don't get disenchanted with the process. Because we get disenchanted with the process, I think it shows. I've met people who spend more time complaining about an organization, or complaining about the situation, talking about how qualified they are, how great they are and how bad the situation is. Try to remain positive. Don't get disenchanted with the process. Because individually, you always have a choice. You always have a choice and just try to make sure you're making the right choice and remain positive and strong.

**[00:53:59] TF:** Well, I think those are such great words to sign off on now. I am so grateful for your time. I know you are a very busy man. It's always wonderful to catch up with you. I just learned so much every time I talk to you. Thank you, Zachery for taking the time and sharing your journey.

**[00:54:17] ZJ:** Thank you very much. I really enjoyed it. Again, thank you for helping me along on that journey. You're one of the people I met on that train ride. I'm sure we'll stay in touch, right?

**[00:54:30] TF:** Definitely. I'm so grateful for you. Well, thanks again, Zachery. You take care.

**[00:54:34] ZJ:** Okay. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[00:54:37] TF:** Thank you so much. I really appreciate you and hope you will join us for the next episode. If you would like a career strategy session, or you need help with career exploration, or your resume, go to [tjfcareercoach.com](http://tjfcareercoach.com), where you can book an appointment with me, or you can find additional episodes of this podcast to help you in your search.

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