

# AZ | CPA

December 2018

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from Extinction**

**Free Speech in the  
Workplace?**

## **Training for Leadership**

**Jessica Iennarella's Story**

The Arizona Society of Certified Public Accountants | [www.ascpa.com](http://www.ascpa.com)



by Jessica Iennarella, CPA

*My life has never felt more well-balanced. I believe that balance comes from changing my personal definition of success from reaching the top of a narrow road, to reaching a very high pinnacle (but not necessarily the top) on a very wide road.*

**Iennarella will be on a panel at the  
ASCPA Accounting & Assurance Conference  
on January 9.**

## Training for Success

*In October 2016, I graduated from the AICPA Leadership Academy. The experience absolutely changed the course of my life, both professionally and personally. The purpose of this article is to help educate Arizona CPAs on why they should want to attend, and why they should want to send their most promising staff to this program.*

### Initial Sell

The AICPA's Leadership Academy is an annual selection-based program for leadership-focused CPAs between the ages of 25 and 35. The year I attended, approximately 150 candidates applied and 38 were selected to attend. The AICPA deliberately sets out to split each class between male and female candidates, as well as between practice area, firm/company size, ethnic background, geographic location and age. This results in opportunity to interact with one a most diverse group of professionals. The program runs for four days, and you will spend literally all day with your fellow classmates. You have the opportunity to interact directly with the senior leadership of the AICPA. My participation in Leadership Academy was my first opportunity to interact with Barry Melancon (president & CEO), Eric Hansen (chair of the board of directors) and Mark Koziel (executive vice president).

I wanted to attend Leadership Academy because, as a natural introvert, I struggled to connect easily with others. I also wanted to develop my professional footprint outside of the work performed for clients.

### Major Takeaways

The majority of Leadership Academy graduates leave with a changed perspective on the profession and the role they want to play in it. The changes are different for everyone. Some changes are immediate, and some fall into place years after attending. One of the most unique parts of attending Leadership Academy is experiencing how the information learned, and the connections made, compound over time.

Because Leadership Academy is a unique experience, it is a difficult task to quantify why attending is so beneficial. All I can do is share my two biggest takeaways to date (I am very confident more are to come).



## 1. Success Is a Personal Definition

Prior to attending Leadership Academy, I defined success as reaching the top of the company ladder, which I think is common for many ambitious, young CPAs. But I was not as excited about that prospect as I should be. I love forensic accounting and can't envision practicing in another area of accounting, but did success have to be defined as becoming managing partner? After completing the personal evaluations and exercises, and talking to my fellow classmates, I realized the answer is resoundingly no.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to be "THE" person in charge. However, there are also upper management positions in need of passionate and talented professionals, and aspiring to those positions is an equally worthwhile goal if done for the right reasons. In realizing that maybe a second-in-command type position might suit me best, I also took a leap of faith and expanded my goals beyond just those tied to promotion at my firm. I now sit on multiple committees for both the ASCPA and the AICPA, and I spend time working on an event planning committee for the Arizona Humane Society.

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## 2. Connecting With Others Is One of the Best Parts of a Career

Leadership Academy deliberately sets out to be a group of diverse people, yet the most surprising part of attending was how accepted I felt. While we come from different backgrounds and have different approaches to solving the problems currently facing our profession, we are, for the most part, startlingly similar in our passion for promoting and bettering our profession. Leadership Academy graduates form an affinity group that has bonds just as strong as those created in more traditional affinity groups (I would argue stronger than some).

The best part of Leadership Academy for me is not just the connection with my classmates from the 2016 graduating class, but the immediate connection to graduates from classes before and after mine. Leadership Academy graduates from different years bond over the shared experience, and the passion for the profession that seems present in all graduates.

Most graduates, especially those that become and continue to be active within the profession after graduating, leave with a nationwide network of other up-and-coming CPAs who they can turn to for honest and educated advice.

Having mentors and advisors within your firm and local community is an excellent first start toward building your personal network. However, in my experience, there is additional value to be had from hearing from those in different geographical spaces, different practice areas and from backgrounds much different from yours. Leadership Academy provides you with an opportunity to form unusually close bonds within a very short period of time, and gives you access to a pool of talent and thought leadership which is invaluable as you navigate your way forward.

## Conclusion

The application process can be daunting. Because of the deliberate mix in the backgrounds of each year's selected class, you may have to apply for multiple years to be accepted. Once you are accepted and you realize how vulnerable you will have to be in front of 37 strangers, you may feel in over your head. Acknowledge those feelings and do it anyway. I don't know exactly how Leadership Academy will change your life, but I am confident that it will. I am happier, more productive, and more focused in my career than ever before. You can be too, if you allow yourself the opportunity.

I am always happy to answer questions about Leadership Academy, so please feel free to reach out to me. I hope to see some more Arizona graduates join the list (and congratulations to our newest alumni, Benjamin Field)! ■

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## Next Emerging Leaders Event:

**January 26**

**"In It For the Outcome, Not the Income"**

Community Service Event with Free Arts

(Recommended CPE: 1 hour)