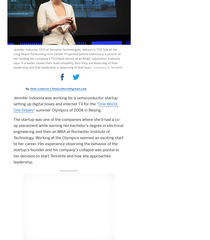
How an early job that fizzled refined Jennifer Indovina's understanding of leadership

Updated 10:08 AM; Today 5:25 AM



Jennifer Indovina, CEO of Tenmile Technologies, delivers a TED Talk at the Syracuse University Newhouse School of Communications. Indovina's presentation has lasting her company's PitCheck device at an NABJ convention in Indianapolis earlier. It's shaken shows that have spotlight, then they are deserving of their leadership and leadership lessons. Syracuse University Photo/Provided

By Nick Cotsonis | Nick@syracuse.com

Jennifer Indovina was working for a semiconductor startup setting up digital boxes and internet TV for the "Fine World, Only Dream" summer Olympics of 2008 in Beijing.

The startup was one of the companies where she'd had a co-op assignment while earning her bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and then an MBA at Rochester Institute of Technology. Working at the Olympics seemed an exciting start to her career. Her experience observing the behavior of the startup's founder and his company's collapse was pivotal in her decision to start Tenmile and how she approaches leadership.

Tenmile (pronounced TEN-mile) is ethernet-spelled backward. The company is based in Rochester. It designs and sells custom, energy-saving electronics. Its main product is called PitCheck, a patented wireless shell plug that monitors and reduces energy waste from electric devices. (PITCO stands for Portable Intelligent Communication.)

Indovina is president and CEO. She has been a TED fellow, and she is an advisory board co-chair for the Syracuse University Scholarship for women seeking undergraduate degrees in science, engineering, or math.

Indovina speaks with passion and joy about moving Tenmile to Upstate from California. "I'm proud of Tenmile Nine's history in technology. And I'm extremely excited for its future because there are good partnerships here and good people you can work with.

"I love the partnerships that we've created with companies like Optiscan in Webster and CNYcon in Auburn. We want to grow with Optiscan. We want CNYcon to grow with us. Close proximity and understanding of resources that we can share helps everyone."

She says aspiring leaders need to be observant – it may teach them what to work towards. Leaders also need to bring joy to what they do because successful business relationships tend to involve fun and empathy.

Give me the elevator pitch for Tenmile.

Tenmile is a design and manufacturing company. We make electronics that save energy.

Most industries are in search of a sustainability vision or plan for themselves. When I was founding Tenmile with my team, we were talking about sustainability. It's become more important that companies build in metrics and tolerances that are measurable. A lot of these metrics have been out of pure processing. The product has been made and after the fact they're looking at integrating some sustainability.

My vision is different. It's got to start at the beginning, at the manufacturing process. We want to make a product that is something that is worth the natural resources that go into it. The cobalt, the gold, the printed circuit board that you'll never get back, and the energy that goes into the machines that make these electronics.

Are you making something that is worth all of those natural resources? If the answer is yes, OK, then we move forward with the design. You can be a successful, profit-making company that aspires to do it in a responsible, green, and sustainable way. There doesn't need to be a trade-off.

Tell me about the founding of Tenmile.

I graduated from [illegible] with an electrical engineering degree and my MBA in 2007 and I went to work for one of the companies I had done my co-op for. So my first job out of school was waiting for me, ready to go. It was this startup semiconductor company, and I got to go to China in 2008 for the summer Olympics.

It was all so exciting and glamorous and wonderful. But behind the scenes, the CEO was quietly nonincorporating the company with Chinese investors and cutting out the American investors. The CEO sort of did a few other things in China, and the company ran out of money. We got furloughed. We founded Tenmile because we wore out had to do something. So we took the assets of that company and formed Tenmile. Glass Street Revenue in 2008, a small group of us started Tenmile. We built a few prototypes for networked product ideas. We made a smart TV prototype.

With our connections made at that failed startup, we were able to get in touch with companies like Samsung and say, Hey, what do you think about this smart TV?

We were lucky that we knew people we could trust, who gave us feedback immediately. Oh no, no, no. Don't bother with your smart TV. We'll be coming out with our own smart TV. So that prototype's not gonna work out for you.

One of the prototypes we built was a smart plug, and we entered it into a bunch of prototype competitions. The Consumer Electronics Show is the world's largest industry trade show. It's held every January in Las Vegas. They used to have a prototype competition, called Gadget, so we entered our PitCheck smart plug into the competition. We didn't win. (Laughter) The winner of that competition was a solar power charger for the iPhone.

But we did win a free booth at CES and my experience working for the failed startup was if you're going to go to a trade show, you need to have a booth. We had a booth next to a technology partner and supplier that we had put in PitCheck and said, Hey, we're this tech startup from Central New York. We're doing this smart outlet plug, and it's gonna blow people's mind. We had our phones cued up at our booth at CES.

And boy, did they come cued. It was just me and Carlos Barrios, one of the other founders of the company, with our PitCheck prototype. We got onto Fox Business News for interesting green startups. CNet came to us and handed us a postage bag full of merchandise that said Best of CES. They'd like: This is for all your booth people.

There were just the two of us. (Laughter)

They said: Make sure to show up to the award show. We did, and my guys, we were so surprised. We were nominated for Best Green Product of the Year. One of the companies showing products in the same space was Kensington Computer Products was showing that year. You ask: We won – we were picked Green Product of the Year.

Since then we've been designing custom, energy-saving electronics. We do about a half-million dollars in business a year. We want our customers and our suppliers to grow with us. We partner with a contract manufacturer called MCustom in Auburn. CNYcon manufactures the circuit board and Optiscan does circuit board with the electronics that we design and put into boxes.

Is PitCheck sold to consumers?

When we designed PitCheck, we thought we were going to be a direct-to-consumer company. What we found was, even though we were willing to raise money, we weren't willing to raise the kind of money, and the capital requirements were too big to big-box retail stores. It didn't seem sustainable.

When our retail direct-to-consumer effort stalled, it led to partnerships with companies. For instance, a company in Ithaca called Cayuga Energy Management Solutions, and large energy systems for data centers. Optiscan contacted us and said, Hey, can we take PitCheck and put that into our systems to make data centers more efficiently?

We were able to save some of Optiscan's customers 30, 40 percent on their electricity consumption of large scale data centers. They don't have to build power plants or construct their own solar plants to say energy bulk in wholesale.

You mentioned another founder, Carlos. Who owns the company?

I'm the CEO. My father, Mark Indovina, is the COO. Russell Prudente is our CTO and partner. Carlos Barrios was our first engineer. He's worked for the prior startup, and we brought him into the Tenmile team. And now Carlos is my husband.

So Tenmile is a family business. You could kind of think of us as the Magnetic family but for electronics not produce. (Laughter)

Tell me about early influences. Were you in leadership roles growing up?

My parents were both working engineers and absolutely influential in my life. Mom's Inette Indovina's business school degree when I was about 9. She was an inspiration, and it was very important to me that I grew up in a household where women can't do well. My mom is a software engineer at L3Harris Technologies. Having a career that is typically gender stereotyped to be male was very formative to me.

My dad is entrepreneurial. He's also a hard-core feminist. He's always been completely supportive. That environment and the financial support of your parents gives you a platform to build your personality.

I went to camps and after-school programs. One program was part of the Boy Scouts called Explorer, which was sort of a career exploration. And I performed in musicals in high school (Bishop Kearney High School in Rochester, class of 2005). Theater is absolutely an incredible tool for young leaders. Theater and live performance teaches you self-confidence and communication skills, which are invaluable to all leaders, not just entrepreneurs.

There are times being an entrepreneur when you sort of feel like you're standing on a stage and you're in the middle of the spotlight and all you have to do is call, well, I'm sitting here with the power and the cues to make things happen. There are times when you take off that costume and put on the engineering costume and get down in the trenches with your team. You're putting all rights to make the software compile and build the hardware to fit into the enclosure.

As a leader, you need to move between scenes smoothly and confidently. I absolutely think that the performing arts helped me with leadership.

I also did sports. I was a competitive swimmer (sprinting freestyle and backstroke) from the ages of 9 to 22. So being part of a team, understanding and learning listening skills, and knowing the description that practice plays a very big role in to focus your skills for performance – all of that mattered.

When I got to college and enrolled in engineering school, the ratio of female to male made it hard to find female role models. But I found many feminist male role models in my department in electrical engineering. They completely supported me and my career. They were very supportive and a school curriculum and faculty mentors helped build my self-confidence and self-reliance. I don't think you can ask for more from mentors.

You mentioned Stephen. What did you perform?

I got to play interesting roles. I think my favorite role was in my freshman year at Bishop Kearney I played the Artful Dodger in "Oliver Twist." In my sophomore year, I played the lead character in "Sweet Charity," which was a Broadway musical. Saying "My name your I played Joe in "Grease." And then my senior year, we did "Guys and Dolls." They kind of made up a role for me. They took a male lead role and transformed that into a female lead role. These roles were absolutely a joy.

What advice would you give to an effective leader?

The first thing, probably the most important, would be to be observant. I say that because of my own past experience at that semiconductor startup. It was almost a reverse case study – be observant of what not to do.

I don't know if you can get it from just having a conversation with me, but I enjoy being fun. There needs to be an aspect of play or fun within employees and even customers. We want to enjoy each other because we're going to spend a lot of time together. A product can be a five- to 30 year lifespan. That's a long time. That's a relationship, and there needs to be a lot of fun there.

Then, of course, we could talk about the importance of listening and being honest, not just with your clients but with yourself. Be willing to get down in the trenches to get something built and shipped.

When you look at leaders that you admire, what qualities do you see?

Accurate and honest distribution of resources. It's important for leaders to manage time, effort, and money for their teams. Some people call it vision or strategy, but I see it as the proper distribution of resources so that your team can function well and have fun. I keep going back to fun. It is absolutely instrumental for our team to succeed that we enjoy the work that we do. We have to be able to laugh at ourselves. We can make mistakes, right? I think that a lot of very large companies sort of suffer from that lack of fun.

I am privileged to run this small company and I'm the small fish. We're probably only going to see a certain size in order to keep this personality, but I'm really proud of us and the size we are and how we're doing.

As part of raising money for the company, I'm sort of participated in a San Francisco incubator. It was called Green Start, and I met some invaluable friendships at that incubator.

One of them was Will Glaser. Will Glaser is a Cornell graduate – go Central New York! He moved out to the Bay Area. Will Glaser, as part of his student work at Cornell, developed the process for pasteurization. The music genome project became the algorithm behind Pandora. So Will Glaser's the founder of Pandora. He met with me and spoke with me about Tenmile. I told him about the team and what we want to do. I told him this is a family company. We're protective and proud of it.

His reaction gave me confidence, and I learned so much from my interactions with Will. Society has a specific narrative about a successful entrepreneur. In that mainstream with Will, I learned that success looks different. Will's company, Pandora, is successful. I could give Tenmile, we could be successful, and I don't have to look like the nerd Elon Musk or Steve Jobs or weird case scenario like an Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos. By the way, Elizabeth and I were raising money at the same time in Silicon Valley in 2010. So for a little bit of context, Tenmile was getting nos at a lot of VC (venture capitalist) offices while Theranos was getting a lot of yeses and welcomed into board rooms.

It was sort of a gut check moment back in 2010. I'm about the same age as Elizabeth, and I'm proud that I was willing to walk away from a situation that lead of money and certainly any criminal activity. (Laughter) I'm proud that we ended up in Rochester, New York, where headquartered here in Rochester. We want to stay here.

Tell me about that gut-check moment. It sounds like a test of your leadership.

Oh yeah! I talk about 2011 a lot, because that's when we participated in the seed round of funding in San Francisco. We had a lot of fun. We had a lot of great experiences. We met in the world at the time. One wanted to make a large, multi-million-dollar series A investment in Tenmile, but only if I got rid of my entire founding team. So I would have to fire my father and my boyfriend, now husband. This VC wanted to nonincorporate, reload Tenmile with his team in San Francisco. I would have a new office in the VC office so he could basically like watch me every day.

We considered the investment. We even signed paperwork. At the time, we were looking at the money and thinking how could we say no to this?

The investor came his hotshot to see our work. I had been honest with my team about the fact that he wanted me to get rid of all of them. And some of them were like, sure. We take the money and figure out what to do after the fact. He came to our office and he looked at our product. He looked at our team and we felt the vibes of what he was requesting, we made a retroactive gut-check that he wasn't the right investor.

Our lawyers and their lawyers had to get involved, and it was a very, very uncomfortable situation. We had to say, no, we're serious. VC because everything was done above board. Ultimately, it was a free and let loe situation. We recognized that their investment, even if it was enormous, was subject to much fo fear apart the team. They wanted a company inside their office, like a portfolio company that they could completely control.

To some people, it might seem like a failure on our part – we failed to raise that massive multimillion dollar Series A investment. In hindsight, I handled it the way that I thought was best for the team. I'm proud of how the company has evolved and grown and changed from that pivotal moment.

Now that I've told you this story, I'm aware of a reputation anecdote that could get created – that I don't have to do my father and my boyfriend. But it goes deeper than the face value of that. My father and my boyfriend, my husband, I mean, are not family, but I treat them that way. Going back to Will Glaser's advice to me, know the size of your company and know what you want to work with. That has guided me in many ways to make difficult decisions that I'm sure that I'm proud of and that the team is proud of as well.

The weekly "Conversation on Leadership" features Q&A interviews about leadership, success, and innovation. The conversations are condensed and edited. To suggest a leader for a Conversation, contact Steve Lindner at Slindner@gmail.com. Lead week Matthew Hintz (Syracuse University Newhouse School of Communications Partner executive says: I cannot pretend to be good at speech, even with those who deserve sincerness.

Nick Plochek on leadership: Are America's workers with the skills to succeed

Nick's leaders. If you perceive something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.

Around the web

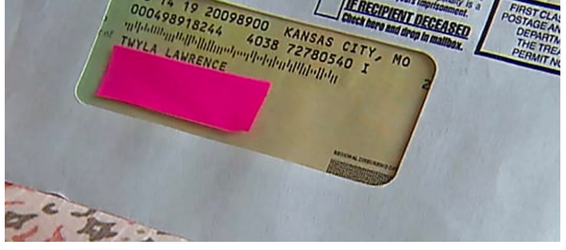
Taboola Feed

People On Medicare Are Getting A Big Surprise This March

Comparisons | Sponsored

What Rice Does to the Human Body

Gundry MD Total Restore Supplem… | Sponsored



All Senior Drivers Should Claim This Large Reward…

Smartlifestyletrends | Sponsored

All New York Low Mileage Drivers Should Claim This (Check If You Qualify)

Smartlifestyletrends | Sponsored

Homeowners Should Only Pay This Much for Home…

Life360Tips | Sponsored

New York Launches New Policy For Cars Used Less…

Smartlifestyletrends | Sponsored

The 1 Clever Trick Most Mac Owners Don't Know (Do It Today)

SecuritySavers | Sponsored

Winning Mega Millions ticket worth $96 million came from Central New York store

syracuse

NY eviction ban: Tensions rise between Syracuse landlords and tenants, as rent help sit…

syracuse

ADVANCE LOCAL

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our **User Agreement**, **Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement**, and **Your California Privacy Rights** (each updated 1/1/21).

Cookies Settings

© 2021 Advance Local Media LLC. All rights reserved (**About Us**).
The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Advance Local.

Community Rules apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

Ad Choices