

S3E2: The Accidental Leader with Dr. Gayle Iwamasa

Speaker Name	Text
Dr. Shari Dade	You are now listening to The Audacity to Fail podcast, a podcast about myth stepping into success. Get ready to dive into conversations and real stories from leaders as they share. How failure activates a growth mindset is an important part of learning and motivation for improvement. I'm your host, Dr. Shari Dade, psychologist with the National Center for Organizational Development.
Dr. Shari Dade	Thank you for tuning in. Let's get started.
Announcer	Support for this leadership podcast comes from the National Center for Organization Development. ENCODE aims to increase the long term growth and performance of the Department of Veterans Affairs by collaboratively working with the leaders throughout the VA to improve organizational outcomes by supporting the development of an engaged workforce. For additional information on our services, click the link in the show notes.
Dr. Shari Dade	There is a phrase that describes the individual who one day looks up and finds themselves in leadership. This person didn't necessarily set out to lead, but because they were well-liked, maybe good at their job or they were good at following, they found themselves being promoted, getting more responsibility, getting direct reports until suddenly they're a manager who leads the term accidental leader came up during a conversation with today's guest, and it has stuck with me ever since.
Dr. Shari Dade	Today, I am joined by Dr. Gail Iwamasa, the national director of inpatient Mental Health Services and the Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention and the VHA Central Office. Along with this role, Dr. Evelyn Iwamasa is currently detailed to lead the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee for the Department of Defense. Get ready to join us as we explore the journey of Ms. stepping into success.
Dr. Shari Dade	This is the Audacity to Fail Podcast Episode 22 The Accidental Leader. Hi Gail. It's great to have you here today. How are you?
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Hi, Shari. Thanks so much for inviting me. Thrilled to be.
Dr. Shari Dade	Absolutely. I am so excited to have this conversation, mostly because I'm pretty intrigued by this term accidental leader. I had never heard it before. You talked about it, Never used it before. And like I said, it's stuck with me ever since. So I've read a few articles about it and kind of nerd it out and dived into some of the the research about it.

Dr. Shari Dade	And it actually appears to be happening across several work settings. So I'm excited to talk a little bit about it. When you think about the term accidental leader, it may seem pretty intuitive, right? A leader who accidentally falls into leadership. But I want to be clear about how we're defining this. Can you talk about what you mean when you use that term and how we'll talk about it today?
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Sure. Thanks. I actually think you did a fabulous job at the top of the introduction, summarizing how sometimes some, if not most people in leadership roles end up in that position, at least initially. Many folks, I think, find themselves in various roles. And I do want to emphasize, though, that sometimes at least in my opinion, leadership is not necessarily associated with a position, but might be more a role that a person has, either formally or informally, where they're leading a project, not necessarily a job position, but maybe something related to their job or something that's added to their job that their supervisor is typically that person has said, Hey, I need X, Y, and
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Z to be done and really love for you to have this completed by such and such a date, right? So I want to make sure that I'm including those situations as well, because sometimes I think leadership is expecting in ways that perhaps is related to your current position, but sometimes, you know, is not. It could be something that completely separate.
Dr. Shari Dade	Yeah, I really appreciate you making that distinction between formal and informal leadership. It doesn't have to necessarily be a position, but there are moments where you look up and you may find yourself leading a project or leading a peer or leading across the office. Right. And so it's so important to think about and we've talked about this before on other episodes, just the expansiveness of leadership, because I think we do often set it up to mean we are in this formal role, this formal position.
Dr. Shari Dade	But accidental leading can happen in many different avenues and many different situations. So I appreciate that you made that distinction there.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Yeah, that's right. And I think the key sorries that these are roles that oftentimes individuals have not sought out that sometimes have been sort of presented to you in unexpectedly or maybe you've been vocal and bold. I'm sure we've all heard.
Dr. Shari Dade	That.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Phrase over. Yeah. So leaders, certain projects, a lot of times I think people end up in leadership positions because of timing or unexpected circumstances and somebody needs to continue to move things that have I'm not sure how many I it sounds like you've done more research than I have on leadership, but a lot of the folks that I've talked with over the, you know, who have been in leadership

	roles and leadership positions are not necessarily people who had a career plan that said, you know, I want to be a leader, right?
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	I don't want to be in this leadership role. I want to do this. Now, certainly there are some folks like that, but I think by and large, many individuals find themselves in these positions because they're to do them, not necessarily because they sort them out.
Dr. Shari Dade	No, that is so true. We hear these terms like a natural leader or born leader or even natural born leader. Right. So we hear these terms and we start to think that leaders are born. And I often say that leaders aren't born. They're made so we create leaders, we create opportunities, and we create situations where people can step into leadership roles.
Dr. Shari Dade	And in that creation, there has to be or we would like for there to be these spaces of development so that people, when they do have these opportunities, are able to step into these roles. They feel fully developed and fully ready for that. But when you are accidentally in these roles, sometimes that development isn't a part of that process.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Exactly. Exactly. And I think that's one of the biggest challenges of finding yourself being an accidental leader. That's what happens is you're asked to do things when you don't have preparation or you don't have an absence or you haven't had an opportunity to really understand the system or the people or the processes that are involved related to that specific project.
Dr. Shari Dade	So certainly and that does lead me into the question of what do you think makes accidental leadership difficult for people who may be in these spaces and in these roles?
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Yeah, I think that that's really it. Sometimes I think expectations are unrealistic. You're asking somebody who maybe doesn't have the experience, doesn't have the connections. You know, being an effective leader really requires a lot of knowledge about whatever the issue or the system that this project or this role lives in. Yeah, And I think for many people who are accidental leaders, they don't have that development that you were talking about.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	They don't have mentors. Heck, several time I was when I found myself in leadership roles, I didn't even know what I didn't know.
Dr. Shari Dade	Right.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	You don't even yeah, you have no preparation and you kind of have to find your way. I think that's that's the biggest challenge. People have probably heard about the imposter syndrome. I think that many people who are accidental leaders experience the imposter syndrome because they don't feel like they are

	prepared, they don't feel like they have the knowledge or it's and it's only until they get that knowledge and feel comfortable and confident with that that the imposter syndrome can be addressed.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	So I think it's I think it can be very challenging for people.
Dr. Shari Dade	Yeah, that that is a great way to think about that. I hadn't thought about the imposter syndrome and the connection that could be with that accidental leader and how settling would it be for people to hear you're not an imposter, you just haven't fully been trained in this role or you've been given the responsibility but not the support.
Dr. Shari Dade	You've been given the title but not the training. And so that would be so comforting. I know for from my perspective, being in roles where I have felt like an imposter, being in spaces where I have felt like, Oh my goodness, I kind of just fell into this. What do I do now? Like, where does this go? So I hadn't thought about it.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	In that way. Yeah. And I think if a person finds themselves in a role like that and they don't have support, they don't have resources, they don't have a role model or a mentor or even know who to ask questions or which questions to ask, which person, I think that that could be very, very challenging.
Dr. Shari Dade	Absolutely. I know you mentioned in some of your past experiences of leadership, there have been moments where you felt like you've been thrust into these leadership roles. What has been some of those experience? Have you had any missteps while taking up some of those roles?
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Oh, absolutely. I think we all make you don't have to be in a leadership position to make mistakes. I think.
Dr. Shari Dade	That's.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Right. That's just sort of part of being a human is making mistakes. I think what's important is learning from your mistakes so that you now have that experience and that information. So, you know, I think I'm one of those people who, just from personality wise, I'm a problem solver and I'm a doer. So I just try to get things done.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	And what happens is that ways sometimes you have blinders on because you're so focused on what your goal is for that project or whatever it is that you're trying to complete. And I think when you do that, when I do that, sometimes that means I'm not paying attention to all these other things going on in the environment. And then, you know, you need to sort of wake up at some point and go, Oh, okay, we'll do an environmental scan here, what I'm just saying.

Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	And then sometimes you find out the hard way, Oh, well, you forgot to add this particular stakeholder in or so-and-so should have been consulted before you did that. But I think what's important is a leader meeting is to acknowledge that you will continually make mistakes. And so it's learning from those mistakes as much as possible that will help you become a better leader.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	It's almost like a leadership journey when you think about making mistakes, don't you think?
Dr. Shari Dade	Oh, absolutely. I think the eggs in the flows, the ups and the downs are all a part of what pushes you and continuously pushes you forward. The missteps that you take, it's like a dance, you know, There's moments.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	When.
Dr. Shari Dade	It gets like a dance where it's not this straightforward step by step. There are moments where you are kind of winging it at times and you learn from those moments. And I think those are the parts. It's not the missteps that fully matter. It's the way you rebound from them, the things that you learn and how you turn that into the ability to continue moving forward.
Dr. Shari Dade	And so I think that is a big part of the leadership journey, especially for, like we talked about, accidental leaders who may be building the plane, why they're flying it at times.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Absolutely right. And a lot of times, especially those accidental leadership roles that are project based, that's exactly what you're doing. Sometimes it's great if there is a model or there was a previous project that you can sort of look to, so you're not reinventing the wheel. Nobody's got time for that. That's great, right? But that's not something that people should expect, right?
Dr. Shari Dade	Yeah, especially with new projects, like you're saying, new projects, you really are forging new ground and you may have to figure out things where no one's done that before or we did it a certain way. So now you're doing it differently. And so those are the moments where those missteps really matter. You know, they really count in those moments because there's so much opportunity for growth and learning from those trials and those errors that come along with trials.
Dr. Shari Dade	Right. And so that is a big part of that leadership journey. I think even hearing the conversation around it for many leaders can be comforting to say like, oh, okay, I'm not supposed to absolutely have this together the first time that I'm doing this or, you know, being able to have those moments where they can sit and say, okay, I didn't do that in the way that I'd like, What can I learn from this?

Dr. Shari Dade	How can I do this differently? How can I ask others and build my resources in order to do this differently.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	And just another thing that popped into my head is that, you know, sometimes when somebody tells you that you've made a misstep, in reality, you might not realize this until, you know, years later, but sometimes they're not missteps. So I'll give you an example. I think it's very important to be inclusive as a leader and hear everybody's input.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	So you have a team that you're supposed to be leading on a certain project. I think it's important that everybody has an opportunity to have a voice now. Not everybody's voice might end up, you know, in the final product, but everybody's voice should be part of the process. And sometimes I think accidental leaders get feedback that, you know, maybe they shouldn't be so inclusive or maybe they should do things a certain way.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	And if you're inexperienced, you might actually believe that for a while and maybe even beat yourself up for it. But then when you continue on in leadership roles, other leadership positions, and you realize that being an inclusive leader is really the best kind of leader, I think it's really important to understand that. So even if you might have started out as an accidental leader and you know, people might love to share your missteps with you, I think as time goes on, as you develop your own leadership style, then you should really be assessing what other people are telling you about your leadership.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	And sometimes we can't reach. I guess my point is we just can't assume that all the feedback that you get as an accidental leader is necessarily great or helpful feedback or leadership.
Dr. Shari Dade	No, that's a great point. That is a great point. To be able to assess that feedback. We receive feedback all the times in all spaces in many different ways, and sometimes we do. If we're in that space of accidental leadership where we are kind of forging our path for the first time, we do assume that that feedback is fact and sometimes it necessarily isn't.
Dr. Shari Dade	And so being able to assess some of that feedback and check in and say, you know, go to another trusted person and say like, Hey, this is the feedback I got. Just wanting to check in. Like, do you see this in the same way? Do you hear this in the same way? Do you perceive me as this person that received this feedback?
Dr. Shari Dade	And sometimes it's good to to just get second check ins?
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Oh, absolutely. I absolutely.
Dr. Shari Dade	Agree. Gail, would you say that there are certain types of people, certain folks who may fall into accidental leadership more often than others?

Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	I would I this is not an empirically based answer. Absolutely. But I would venture to say it's likely sort of hard working people who are known to get things done, folks who have third products that they are known for, good services are often people who are tapped to lead projects.
Dr. Shari Dade	Absolutely. People who are out there doing the work and you're getting noticed and they're like, Hey, you know, you're a great worker. You're a great follower, you're great at your role. Can you take this other role? Like what would it look like to lead this? What would it look like for you to to step into kind of this leadership space or leadership role?
Dr. Shari Dade	And oftentimes when you're you're broached with that question. I know for myself at moments when I've been bridge with that question, there is an automatic like, oh, my goodness, this could be a really great opportunity because like you, I am one of those people that I get things done right. I like to see the outcome of hard work.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Yeah.
Dr. Shari Dade	And so oftentimes I may not pause and I know people may not pause to say, am I ready to move into that role? Or yes, I can move into that role, but I'm going to need some mentorship, I'm going to need some support and asking for that and advocating for that. And so I appreciate just that thought around certain people, certain types of people who may fall into that space are being tapped for leadership just to be aware and just to bring that to the forefront of people's attention.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Yeah, it's it's often those people who already have too much on their plate.
Dr. Shari Dade	You know, people.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Know who you are and you laugh them like, just like, sorry if I said that. Right. You find the busiest person, right?
Dr. Shari Dade	Not us on that way when.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Everybody else and you know but that person because you to go get it done.
Dr. Shari Dade	Right and you know that's not always the the best way to choose Can we pull into some of those leadership roles. And I think that is a message for leaders who are currently in their role looking for other people to pull into kind of leadership roles or positions as they're tagging people to have moments where they can assess and say, Hmm, I know that Gail is a go getter.

Dr. Shari Dade	I know she's going to get things done, but I also know that girl has a lot on her plate. Or I also know that Gail hasn't necessarily led something of this magnitude before. How can I offer this? But how can I offer support? How can I offer mentorship? Or maybe how can I offer this to someone else who may be able to get the job done?
Dr. Shari Dade	It may take a little longer, but it will still happen. So I think those are spaces for people to sit in and to start to really assess as we think about kind of moving and choosing who gets those opportunities to lead.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Absolutely. I think something you mentioned is so important, though, that unfortunately doesn't happen a lot and that is sort of what is the responsibility of the person who is tapping this I'm leader. Right. Can you described really an ideal scenario, right, where the person is sort of doing the asking or volun telling has some understanding that they need to be responsible to provide support or training or experiences or preparation in some way, shape or form in order for this person to have to lead a project or move into a position will be successful.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Because at the end of the day, that's also what a good leader is responsible for. A good leader is responsible for ensuring the success of their team. And if you're not doing that, then that just, you know, creates unnecessary stress and tension and then it jeopardizes the outcome of the project. So I did want to throw that in because I think that sometimes in thinking about leadership and accidental leadership, that people forget that, you know, the person who's doing the asking or volunteering has a responsibility to the person that they're asking to move into that role.
Dr. Shari Dade	MM And it also allows a little bit of the onus to be taken off of the accidental leader, right? Yeah, because I think even just calling this leader an accidental leader, it makes it seem as though, well it's kind of your fault that you fell into this, you know, and that's not true at all. We're not saying that accidental leaders leadership is a bad thing.
Dr. Shari Dade	You know, we're just saying that there are moments that this happens and there is some responsibility on both sides. Right. The person who is asking this individual to lead, asking this individual to move into this space, it's their responsibility to do a little bit of the assessment and say, how can I offer mentorship? How can I make sure that I can support this person if there is a need for support?
Dr. Shari Dade	And then also on the leaders, the accidental leaders, by being able to say, how can I make sure that I'm asking and advocating for myself and assessing my ability to move some of these things forward in these leadership spaces. So it just kind of allows for the onus to be in many more spaces than just the person who has fallen into accidental leadership.

Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Yeah, absolutely.
Dr. Shari Dade	Yeah. It goes into this understanding of how as an organization we can address this, you know, how we can make sure that we're increasing this intentional leader of people who are developed and well prepared for their leadership roles and we're not pulling in accidental leaders. Are there other ways that you think our organization can make sure that we're being intentional about pulling people into leadership?
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Yeah, I actually think that VA's doing a really nice job, sort of a way of identifying that we need to better develop leaders instead of just having the onus be on individuals to make a decision about, Oh, I want to move on to my next position and I want to get a promotion. So what do I need to do?
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	There always have been those formal sort of processes in place and there's always been informal mentorship. But VA is really starting to understand that to have sustainable, effective leadership, we really need to provide training, knowledge and like this, the key word offer to Unity's to more people. And so I know that there are a number of initiatives and new collaboration with LinkedIn.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Yes, you can sort of customize your own leadership training and and it's open to everybody in the air, regardless of what your position is. And I think that that's really key when you look at folks who are in the senior executive roles and you read their bios, it's actually really amazing to see how far many of these folks are from.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	You know, they started out maybe in the canteens service and worked their way up or they started out as an or a specialist and worked their way up because a leader embodies sort of skills and knowledge that's not necessarily related to a position. So, you know, the profession doesn't give you leadership, right? It's your leadership skills that demonstrate your leadership.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	There are a lot of people who have positions that have fancy titles, but they really don't demonstrate effective leadership skills or they're you. We've heard this phrase a lot, too, right? They're toxic because they think that the only way to lead people is by being threatening or punishing. And, you know, I think there's there's tons of research on effective leadership.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	And it all boils down to taking care of your people. And so VA, I think is doing a much better job of providing, you know, tools and resources. This, for example, at this point have been fantastic. And in a different way of presenting information to potential leaders to think about. Yeah.
Dr. Shari Dade	Absolutely. Gail, if someone is listening to this episode and they believe that they are an accidental leader, are there some specific foundational pieces that they could put into place so that they could be less accidental?

Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Yeah, absolutely. And you mentioned this before, Find a mentor or two or three actually. In other words, find folks who you trust, who have experience and whose opinion you really value. And the reason I say have more than one mentor is because as you go through life and you go through your career, you're going to encounter different experiences.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Women leaders have different experiences than men. Leaders. People of color have different experiences as leaders than white leaders do. And then we have the whole intersectionality right? Right. For people who fall into a number of different categories. And so it's always great to have ongoing supportive relationships with people. I think that's the most effective leader is somebody who is able to develop effective relationships with folks and work collaboratively together.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	And you might mentor somebody and then two years later, that person that mentored you might be coming to you for mentorship, which is super, super fabulous and wonderful. And so I would say that that to me is really key and important because those are the folks who will help support you through the imposter syndrome or when you have been informed that you made a misstep, like I loved your example of, you know, touching base with other people and saying, Hey, how did you perceive this?
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	I don't you experience this. I think that that's that's really important. And I think the other piece is really take advantage of really the vast literature on leadership. There's so many resources out now for so that you can just really go down a rabbit hole, you know, looking at researching different topics. So I think some of those resources are out there.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	So make sure that you're availing yourself of them as you move ahead.
Dr. Shari Dade	So position Yeah that that just really makes me think that leadership is not done in a vacuum, right? It makes me think of that quote like we don't do this alone. And so being able to look for resources, whether that be information, research our people, because this can't be done in a vacuum.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Right.
Dr. Shari Dade	And that effectively I'll say that. Well, Gail, this has been a great conversation. Like I said, I was really intrigued to talk more about accidental leadership, mostly because it's a new term for me. And hopefully, you know, this is something that people can listen to and ask themselves, you know, have they fallen into accidental leadership and if so, what to do with that?
Dr. Shari Dade	But also, leaders can ask themselves, how do I prevent this from occurring in my work group and my team and my organization? And so it's been a great

	conversation. Before we head out, I'm going to do a game of word association for you. Some words. I know it's a fun time. It's not game time where I give you some words and I just want to know what comes to mind as you hear these words.
Dr. Shari Dade	Okay. All right. All right. So the first word is accidental leadership opportunity. Hey, I like it. The next one is intentional leadership progress. Hmm. And lastly, audacity to fail.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Inevitable.
Dr. Shari Dade	Yes.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	Yeah, it will for leaders, right?
Dr. Shari Dade	It definitely for us all. Yes. Well, again, Gail, thank you so much for being our guest on this episode. I've so enjoyed this conversation. Is giving me a lot to think about. And so I appreciate you sharing your knowledge and just some of your experiences with our audience.
Dr. Gayle Iwamasa	But I really appreciate the invitation so at least one person has found it to be helpful. So that's good. But it's always good to have new ideas, new topics to mention as we progress some journeys. So thanks for that.
Dr. Shari Dade	Absolutely. Thank you. So we've come to the end of another great episode of The Audacity to Fail podcast. Thank you for tuning in to learn how missteps can lead to growth and success. Be sure to check out the key lessons in the show notes for a refresher. To request services from the National Center for Organization Development, check out our website.
Dr. Shari Dade	Also links in the show notes. Remember, if you missed the target 100 times, you have not failed. Instead, you've simply found 100 strategies that did not work. Be well and continue to fail forward until next time. Thank you.