

Success is a Shared Belief in the Power of Relationships



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MOXY Staff

In the competitive and ever-evolving world of project management, it takes more than just technical expertise to stand out. At McKnight International, Shawn Pressley has built a company that distinguishes itself through a unique blend of strategic vision, adaptability, and with the help of Thalia Andre-Noel, an unwavering commitment to building meaningful relationships. In a recent interview, they shared their journey, the challenges they've faced, and how a relationship-centered approach has been key to their growth and success.

Building the Brand

We sat down with Thalia, Director of Business Relations & Operations, who shared how she got her unexpected start at McKnight International. For Thalia, the journey began after attending the AMAC conference as a guest, where she was captivated by the energy and leadership of women and minorities in the architecture, engineering, and construction sectors of aviation. It was a world she was eager to be part of, and as fate would have it, she soon found herself talking to Shawn Pressley, the CEO of McKnight International.

"It was almost serendipitous," Thalia recalls with a smile. "I was in the car listening to Shawn talk to my now colleague, Candace, encouraging her to pursue certifications and push her career forward. I was so impressed by his leadership style. I knew right then that I wanted to work for someone like him."

Thalia, without hesitation, asked Shawn if she could work for him. "I just said, 'Excuse me, can I work for you?' to my surprise, he laughed and said we'll see. But I didn't wait, I immediately sent him my resume through every channel possible—email, LinkedIn, and text. I wasn't going to let that opportunity slip."

That initiative marked the start of Thalia's career at McKnight International, where she was tasked with various marketing efforts, such as rebranding the company and, later, business development.

A New Look, A New Era

One of Thalia's first significant responsibilities was to rebrand McKnight, a task that came with its own set of hurdles. Shawn, like many leaders in the construction industry, was skeptical about the return in marketing like websites, social media, etc. in a field where face-to-face networking had been the norm for years.

"Shawn didn't see the need for an online presence," Thalia explains. "But I knew that if we were going to grow and stand out, we had to be visible in the digital space too. I talked to him about the company's history and what McKnight stood for. That's how I developed the concept for the new logo. It needed to represent strength and dedication, which led to the image of a horse—a 'workhorse,' symbolizing the resilience and hardworking nature of the company."

Her rebranding efforts paid off in a big way. Clients began noticing and commenting on McKnight's new look. "One client even told us, 'I'm glad to see you've joined the big leagues,'" Thalia says. "That kind of feedback made all the effort worth it."

This success of the rebranding and marketing efforts helped secure Thalia's role within McKnight and opened the door to a more significant responsibility, business development in a new region of the country, Houston, Texas.

A New Approach to Business Development

For many in business development, the goal is to close deals and secure projects, but for Thalia, the approach has always been different. Rather than focusing on immediate sales, she prioritizes long-lasting relationships.



This philosophy has proven incredibly effective for her. Within six months of taking on the role of business development, Thalia has made some vital connections, including C-level executives in locally and federally funded construction sectors. These relationships didn't happen overnight, and Thalia reflects on the hard work and persistence it took to build a reputation in a new market.

"When we started in Texas, no one knew who McKnight International was. We had no brand recognition, and it was tough. But over time, through consistent networking and just showing up, people started to remember me. The first time someone said, 'I know you, you look familiar, I was thrilled, and it meant I was making progress.'"

The emphasis on building relationships was further reinforced at the recent NAWIC National Conference, where Thalia attended Natasha Ozybko's workshop, "We Are Stronger Together, So Why Are We Still Standing in Each Other's Way?" The session highlighted how a woman alone has power, but collectively they have impact.

We know that when women come together, their strength multiplies and their impact becomes profound. Collective action can create transformative effects.

Unfortunately, pervasive conscious and unconscious bias amongst women exists and we are unwittingly impeding our progress. If we hope to achieve equity in male-dominated industries, as advocates for change, we need to unify. The core message of the session was clear: women often stand in each other's way, turning potential collaborations into unnecessary competition and it was reinforced that we need to shift this mindset and start supporting one another.

As she sat through the workshop, everything Natasha touched on resonated with Thalia's personal experiences. When the session ended, she waited and stayed behind to chat with Natasha to see if she had any additional insights. They began talking about business development, and Thalia told her about the unique strategy she and her colleague Bridget Mickins of Just Touch Interactive developed. "Bridget and I work for different companies, but we've created a system to maximize our networking efficiency. At events, we split the room, gather business cards, and then regroup to debrief afterward. We each record the contacts we made and then swap the information. This way, we can cover more ground with less effort, getting 100% of the results with 50% of the work."

Reflecting on the workshop, Thalia realized that her approach to business development with Bridget exemplifies the collaboration the session advocated for. By working together rather than competing, they've found a way to maximize their impact while minimizing their efforts, reaffirming her belief that supporting one another and fostering partnerships is the key to success in both business and personal growth.

Patience, Adaptability, and Leadership

While Thalia drives McKnight's marketing and business development efforts, Shawn's role as CEO focuses on leading the company with patience and adaptability. Thalia credits Shawn's supportive leadership for helping her stay focused and determined while helping her achieve her business goals. "Shawn is a rare leader. He understands when things don't go perfectly, allowing me to focus on the bigger picture without getting bogged down by small setbacks."

Shawn's leadership style is deeply rooted in patience. Whether working with seasoned professionals or mentoring younger employees, he believes in giving people the time and space to grow. "You have to be patient with yourself and others," he says. "People need the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them." Which is what originally inspired Thalia when trying unique business development strategies.

In the aviation sector, where McKnight operates heavily, patience is crucial. With many experienced professionals retiring, Shawn is committed to ensuring the next generation of talent is prepared to step up, making sure Thalia and the rest of the team have the tools they need to grow and succeed. "Aviation is a unique field—it requires long-term coordination and a passion for learning. I'm constantly working with our team to ensure we're ready for the future."

Shawn's leadership at McKnight exemplifies the power of patience, adaptability, and a focus on long-term growth. His commitment to fostering talent, providing the space for employees to learn from their mistakes, and building strong relationships has been pivotal in both Thalia's success and the company's overall progress. In a challenging and evolving industry like aviation, Shawn's vision ensures that McKnight is prepared for the future by cultivating a team equipped to handle it. His belief that "starting a business is easy, but getting the work is hard" reiterates the importance of perseverance and relationship-building in achieving lasting success. Through his steady guidance, McKnight has become more than just a company for his employees; it's a platform for growth, collaboration, and continuous learning.

A Look Ahead

Both Thalia and Shawn have ambitious goals for McKnight International. Thalia is focused on continuing to grow the business while advancing her career goals within the company. "I want to help McKnight International double in size and transition from being a subcontractor to a prime project contractor."

For Shawn, the future is about building a company that stays reliable and adaptable in a fast-paced industry. "We're a smaller company, which allows us to make quick decisions and adopt new technologies and practices faster than larger organizations," Shawn says.

At the heart of MCKnight International's success is a shared belief in the power of relationships. For Maia and Shawn, it's not about chasing short-term wins or quick deals. Instead, their focus is on building lasting connections that drive long-term success. As they continue to grow, their commitment to adaptability, perseverance, and the people they work with will undoubtedly be the key to their continued success.



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