

SEPTEMBER 25 2025

FUTURE LEADERS PROGRAM

OCEANCLIFF HOTEL 65 RIDGE RD, NEWPORT, RI 02840, UNITED STATES

Future Leaders Panel

- Moderator: Nir Kaissar, Bloomberg
- Allison Adams, CFA Society
- Mark Okada, Sycamore Tree Capital
- Xay Khamsyvoravong, PFM

Blue Ocean Conference: Future Leaders Panel Explores Failures, Adaptability, and Resilience in Finance

At this year's Blue Ocean Investment Conference, hosted by CFA Society Providence and The Investment Diversity Exchange (TIDE), the spotlight turned to the Future Leaders panel. The session was designed to equip the next generation of finance professionals with candid insights about career growth, failure, and adaptability in an ever-changing industry.

Moderated by Bloomberg columnist and CFA charterholder Nir Kaissar, the discussion featured Allison Adams (Head of Research at CFA Institute), Xay Khamsyvoravong (former Mayor of Newport and finance professional), and Mark Okada (CEO of Sycamore Tree Capital Partners). Together, they shared stories not of polished success alone, but of detours, failures, and pivots that ultimately defined their careers.

Failure as a Teacher

Mark Okada opened with refreshing honesty: many of his most valuable lessons came from failure. From the collapse of firms he once built to the cycles of misplaced capital in the industry, Okada emphasized that turbulence is inevitable but also breeds innovation. His creation of one of the first CLOs, for example, came directly from an adverse situation. His message to students: *"Hold on to the fundamentals of finance and stay curious. Curiosity, not judgment, is what will sustain you through change."*

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Adaptability and Career Pivots

Allison Adams underscored the importance of adaptability in shaping one's career. After starting in distressed debt trading, she pivoted into publishing and eventually leadership at CFA Institute. Her advice to future leaders: manage your own career intentionally with the "law of twos" (plan where you want to be in two years, then map out the steps over two months and two weeks). She also highlighted the value of seeking champions, people willing to advocate for you when opportunities arise.

Public Service as Parallel Track

For Xay Khamsyvoravong, adaptability has meant navigating between private finance and public service. From working at Morgan Stanley to serving as Mayor of Newport, he reminded the audience that meaningful leadership includes service to community. He encouraged young professionals not to chase only the glamorous sides of finance, but to recognize opportunity and fulfillment in overlooked areas. *"Our founding fathers didn't view public service as a profession,"* he said, *"but as a through line of life. Stewardship and finance go hand-in-hand."*

Takeaways for Future Leaders

The panel distilled three enduring lessons for the rising generation of finance professionals:

1. Failure is not an endpoint but a catalyst — many breakthroughs are born from crises.
2. Adaptability is essential — embrace pivots and don't fear stepping into new territory.
3. Curiosity sustains growth — judgment closes doors, while curiosity opens them.

As the Blue Ocean event highlighted alternative approaches and overlooked opportunities in finance, the Future Leaders panel offered a timely reminder: success in this industry is not a straight line, but a journey of resilience, reinvention, and the courage to keep learning.