A sk Ms Tan Aik Na about the one thing she did early in her career that yielded a substantial return on investment, and she’ll probably recount the time she read the career progression manual of chemical multinational company DuPont. It was 1994, and Ms Tan was just starting out as an accounting manager in DuPont. Being driven and ambitious, she wanted to figure out how she could chart her career in an environment that offered tremendous room for growth.

Her time and effort paid off. Ms Tan went on to scale the highest rungs of the corporate ladder at DuPont in an illustrious career spanning more than twenty years. In November 2011, she was the first Asian woman to become Chief Financial Officer in DuPont’s 220-year history, managing its S$5 billion Titanium Technologies business globally. She later also served as the Finance Transformation Leader of The Chemours Company, a spin-off from DuPont, before joining NTU, where she now serves as Vice President (Administration).

“Looking back at how I’ve charted my career, I’ve had my fair share of challenges, and I hope that whatever I share tonight will provide food for thought,” Ms Tan said during her Tête-à-Tête session at the NTU Alumni House at Marina Square on 8 November 2017.

NO SECRETS TO SUCCESS

While there are no shortcuts to success, there are also no secrets to attaining it. Ms Tan shared with some 100 alumni the habits and mindsets she acquired over the years which got her to where she is today. Foremost among her list of ingredients for success: goal-setting.

“It’s important to set goals because if you don’t, you don’t know where your destination is,” she said. Ms Tan planned her own career in ten-year cycles, and often found that she attained those aspirations ahead of time. Whenever that happened, she simply planned ahead again.

Another critical element was ownership—taking control of situations and dealing with them as they arise. She noted that “the path of least resistance is to let somebody else do it… but that can actually lead to a lot of frustration”.

When seeking solutions to problems, Ms Tan recommended keeping things simple and maintaining a positive outlook. After all has been said and done, regardless of the outcome, learn from the good and bad experiences and “move on”, she said.

SIX STEPS TO SOAR

To help audience members recall another set of useful tips, Ms Tan coined the acronym ‘PRAISE’, which stands for priorities, resilience, authenticity, integrity, setting an example, and engagement.

Noting that priorities are deeply personal, she urged alumni to reflect on what is close to their hearts, and to always keep those things at the top of their to-do list. Building mental resilience and tenacity is also important, as one cannot expect to sail through life without encountering difficulty or failure.

Ms Tan then emphasised authenticity as a gateway to happiness because “being somebody you’re not is extremely difficult. You’re acting every day, and that’s really tiring”. Meanwhile, she championed integrity as the key to building trust, also highlighting that leaders who set a good example inspire respect and goodwill.

Last but not least, Ms Tan touched on engagement, which, to her, means more than just interacting with people. She views engagement as an inward-looking process—being in tune with one’s own strengths and weaknesses, challenging the status quo and learning all the time.

Alumni left the session feeling uplifted by Ms Tan’s advice. “She’s awesome, a true role model,” said Ms Jane Chua (NBS/2009). “I was really inspired by the talk and I hope to be like her one day.”

Ms Tan’s PRAISE formula for success: