



# NAVIGATING THROUGH STORMY SEAS

Leadership through adversity



**BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.**

At the beginning of the new year, I embraced the fact that I had weathered the storm. 2021 was behind me, and almost two years of the pandemic were left at the dock. Optimistically, I looked to smooth sailing ahead. Then, at the outset, 2022 hit abruptly with rogue waves.

On New Year's Day, one of my staff members informed me that she had spent all night in a hospital emergency room after a serious fall at a wedding she'd attended the evening before. Her leg was broken in two places, which required surgery and a multiple-week recovery period. Shortly thereafter, another team member called me one morning and told me the nurse at his children's elementary school just called and advised him that one of his children was exhibiting COVID-19 omicron variant symptoms and that all his children would need to be immediately taken out of school. A couple of days later, I returned to the office after lunch, and another staff member reported that she received a call because her daughter, who had been disturbed about the noise in her classroom, lodged a pencil eraser in her ear. She had to be rushed to the emergency room. Fortunately, the pencil eraser was removed from the youngster's ear, and she emerged from the experience unscathed. My co-worker and I now chuckle about the situation.



To make matters worse, the morning this article was due, one of my staff members texted me and said that he had tested positive for COVID-19. Then I arrived at the office to finish this article, only to be locked out because there was an electrical power outage in the area. My firm's server was also down, and the draft of this article had been saved on the server.

Life happens. But over the last couple of years, when unfortunate and unexpected incidents happened, they felt more overwhelming and demoralizing than usual. Clearly, the pandemic's direct and indirect effects have exacerbated our reactions to the valleys in our lives. Like most of us, I am more than ready for the coronavirus pandemic and the havoc it has wreaked across the world to end — immediately. Unfortunately, neither I nor anyone else has any control over when it will be over. And that is what is so frightening — it's the lack of control and the uncertainty. It hangs over us like a blanket, suffocating our positivity and momentum. It is difficult enough as an individual to successfully navigate life and be motivated during challenging times, but how does one do so as a leader when you are responsible for inspiring others? This question and its answer are not limited to the present time during the pandemic. Leaders confronted hardships before, and they will after the pandemic. But my experiences during the first couple of weeks of 2022 led me to ask this question and remind myself about the answer.

### Not Every Disappointment is Devastating

Lately, life is constantly in flux. As business and organization leaders, it seems as if any planning is for naught. In the right of way industry, public improvement projects are started, stalled and then restarted at a breakneck pace because funding for such projects is now free flowing. In my profession, trials and hearings are scheduled, continued, converted virtually and continued again. In professional organizations, including IRWA, in-person programs and other events are planned and scheduled and then rescheduled, converted to virtual events, a hybrid or, even worse, canceled altogether. Although these circumstances are disappointing, it is important to remember that not every disappointment is devastating. The postponement or cancellation of an event, even one that you helped plan substantially, is not life altering. When you view life through the lens of disappointment about everything that does not proceed as you wish, not only will you be discouraged most of the time, but to do so is intellectually and emotionally exhausting. Although it may sound trite, as the philosopher Aristotle professed, "Everything happens for a reason." In thinking about my own life, I know that circumstances that were disheartening at the time often ultimately led to something grander. Without them, I would not have moved forward to new, more enriching experiences.





## Relinquish the Belief You Have Control

Many people have lived life with the illusion that they have control over almost everything. The pandemic shattered this illusion. Such a belief is a mirage because in life, there is little over which we actually have control. We delude ourselves with the belief that we have control because it provides a sense of security and predictability. But that security and predictability are false and never existed before the pandemic. Let go of the belief that you have control over everything.

Although we cannot control most circumstances, we can control how we choose to react to those circumstances, and that is where your attitude becomes significant. Even when an incident is disappointing, a positive side typically exists. For instance, if an event that you were scheduled to attend is canceled, it opens up time on your calendar and becomes one less commitment that you have to fulfill. If an employee leaves your company, it provides the opportunity to add someone new to your team or distribute the former employee's assignments to another team member, who may appreciate the new work and be outstanding at handling it.

Positivity as a leader is crucial. A leader serves as an example, and your team will closely watch how you conduct yourself. If you act fearfully, agitated or negatively during tough times, your team members will become fearful, agitated or negative, and morale will be greatly undermined. They may become insecure about the future of the company and their positions and leave the company.

A sense of humor is also important when you lead during onerous times. The Mayo Clinic confirms that medical research shows humor has beneficial psychological and physical effects. Who hasn't felt better after a good belly laugh?

According to his article published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1976, Norman Cousins, author and former editor in chief of the "Saturday Review," miraculously recovered from a life-threatening, degenerative collagen illness due to a daily "[t]en minutes of genuine belly laughter."

A final word about attitude — don't be so hard on yourself. Although you should not abandon your high standards, do not expect perfectionism or be unrealistic about what you are able to accomplish. Remember that you are a single individual and only capable of achieving so much on any given day. Do your best, but do not expect to perform at a standard that is unsustainable.

## Practice Gratitude and Extend Appreciation

Although related, gratitude and appreciation are not the same. Appreciation is about acknowledging the perceived value of someone or something, while gratitude is the thankfulness you express for what you have been given. When times are strenuous, rather than reviewing a list of all that it wrong, I turn my attention towards being grateful for all that I have. We have many things about which we can be grateful.

During all times, but particularly when times are challenging, consistently and frequently express appreciation to your team members for their contributions. I make a concerted effort to always say "please" and "thank you" to my team members, as well as those with whom I work in the organizations with which I am involved. People like to feel appreciated, and particularly those who are volunteering their valuable time for IRWA or other organizations.

## Prepare to Pivot

I am an avid boater and spend time during the summer on the Brown Eyed Girl, a 26-foot Pursuit, on Lake Michigan. Perhaps surprisingly, I have learned many things about leadership through boating. The weather and the seas on the lake are unpredictable. They can change in an instant from fair, calm seas to stormy, rough seas. A boat captain must be prepared and equipped to navigate through bumpy seas. The way that I address stormy weather as a leader is to pivot and adjust to the circumstances.

Earlier, I mentioned that the morning this column was due, my office lost electrical power. The firm's server was inaccessible, and the draft of this article was on the inaccessible server. So, I pivoted. I headed home with my laptop. Luckily, I live only a few minutes from my office, and my neighborhood was unaffected by the power outage. When I arrived home, I took a few deep, cleansing breaths, which I learned practicing yoga, plugged in my laptop and finished the latter portion of this article in a separate document. Thanks to the fast-acting utility company, electrical power was restored within a few hours, and I was able to merge the two parts of the article for completion by the deadline. As the playwright William Shakespeare once said, "All's well that ends well." 🌟



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