

Riding the Waves

Challenges and opportunities touch our personal and professional lives. In order to be successful and flourish, it's important to learn to appreciate the highs and weather the lows.

By Jill S. Tietjen, P.E., F.SWE and Mary D. Petryszyn, F.SWE

From promotions to layoffs; from births, weddings, and graduations to divorces, hospital visits, and funerals, every one of us experiences highs and lows throughout our professional and personal lives. In order to thrive, we must become adept at riding those waves — appreciating the highs and weathering the lows. You can deal successfully with the myriad challenges and opportunities in your life by: identifying what areas of your life you can control, understanding that change is a constant, and acknowledging that you are a “steel magnolia.”

What you can control

You can't control anyone else's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. You *can* control *your* attitude and *your* behavior. Do you feel yourself becoming grumpy because of life's issues? You have the ability to experience something else because *you* control your attitude. Tired of looking at glum faces all around you? Look in the mirror; is yours glum, too? Guess who has the ability to change that? That's right — you!

But, you protest, life is hard. Life presents challenges to all of us. Remember the saying “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade”? That means you see the silver lining in the dark cloud, and you seize whatever positive moment you can out of the negativity. You choose to control your attitude and your behavior.

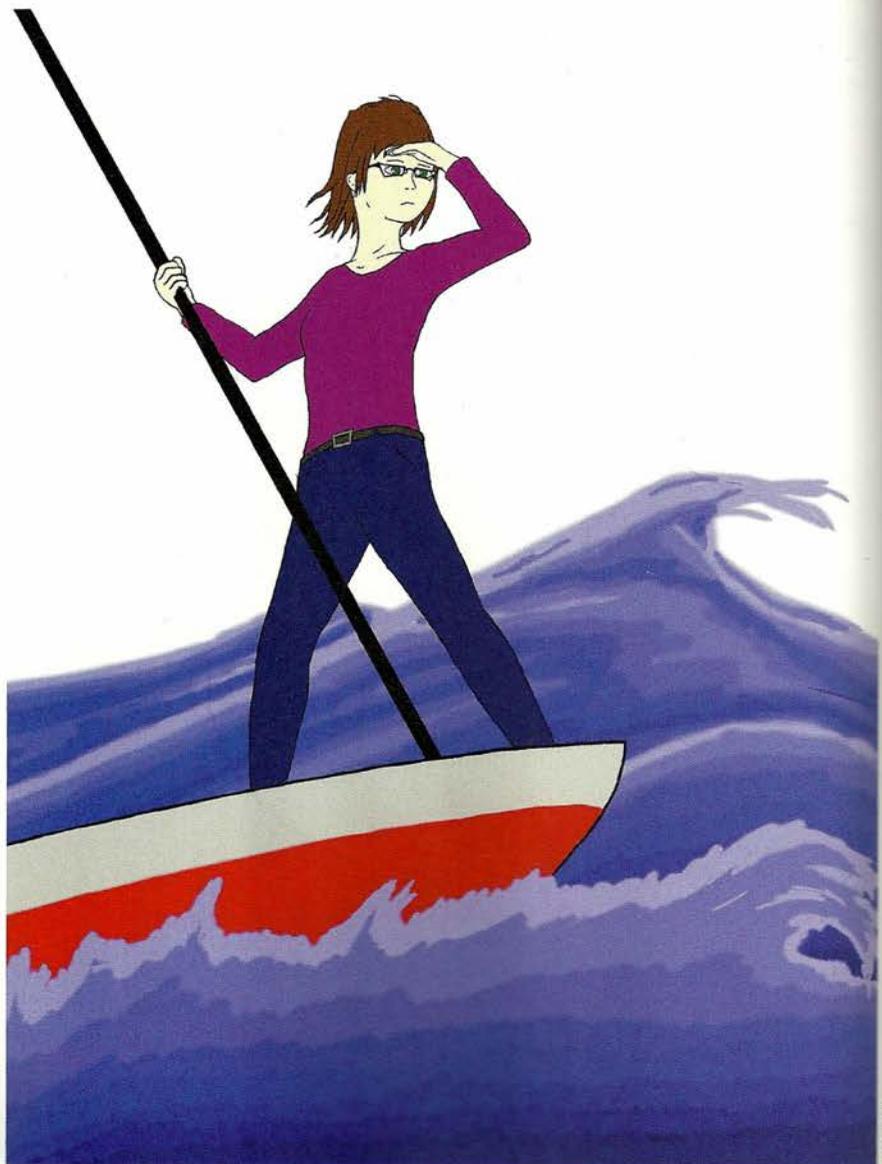
Think about a recent difficulty you've encountered. Perhaps a co-worker retired or chose to pursue a position elsewhere. Often this creates a hole on the team. How did you perceive this turn of events? Many times, the people around us look at such a situation as one that “drops more work on me” or “there goes the expert; now what do we do?” Did you get caught up in this negative tide?

Another way to look at this challenge is in the opportunity it creates. Can you

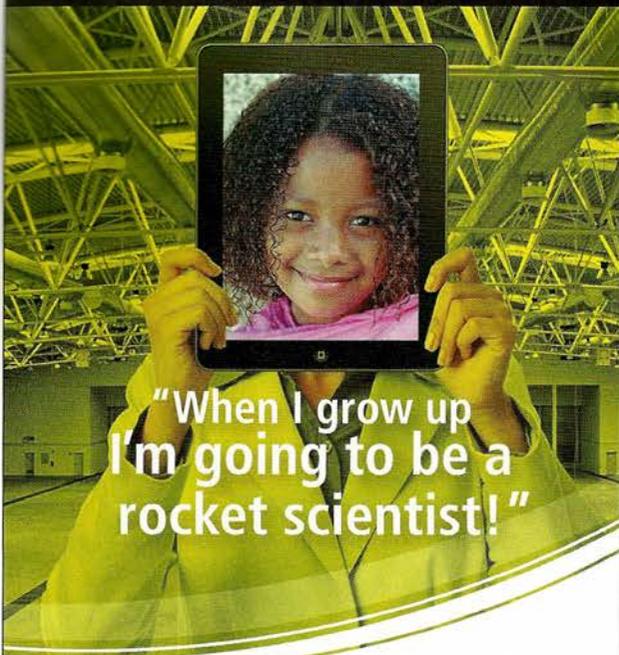
assume additional responsibilities? Is there a chance for you to step up and become the new expert? Think about how you can position yourself positively by setting the example. And your constructive attitude and behavior can optimistically infect others around you, making the whole situation much more manageable.

The only constant is change

Did you know that the sun rises and sets at a different time every day? The world around us is constantly changing! Why is it, then, that so many of us continue to believe that tomorrow will be like today and that we will not need to adapt to conditions that are continually in flux? The truism to not get too



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comfortable in your current situation is worth noting, because, as soon as we think we know the answers in life, all of the questions change.

Consider this situation: Everything in your professional organizational role is going well. The section is vital, and the meetings are at a good time that doesn't conflict with other family obligations and in a location close to home. You put yourself into contention for a leadership role because you've been a member of that section for a while and you enjoy networking with your fellow members. You thought it would be a great opportunity to gain some leadership skills, and you've had strong support from your employer. Suddenly, the economy takes a downturn, and budgets are tightened. A number of members have transferred across the country — or worse yet, are on the receiving end of a layoff. And top it off, the location you've been meeting at has become unavailable. Ughhh, what else can go wrong? That depends on you.

In good times, when things are going well, we are confident we can handle situations. It's when things are up in the air and in a state of change that we really face the test of who we are. So, in the situation above, you can run for cover and think "woe is me," or you can embrace the opportunity to take charge of the circumstances. What better time to truly develop your leadership skills? You can summon your strength and rally your section, navigate the budgetary constraints, and find an alternative place to meet. Your ability to persist in the face of change, especially adversity, will set the tone for others.

When you really think about it, the status quo can become routine and potentially boring. When circumstances change, they can become interesting. Yes, the unknown can be a bit intimidating, but recognizing that things undoubtedly will change can allow you to anticipate, be better prepared, and adapt.

Persistence and flexibility are two critical keys to riding the waves. Embrace all of the changes that come your way. Acknowledge that each day is unique. Change is the only constant.

You are a steel magnolia

A magnolia is a tree with beautiful blossoms. A "steel magnolia" is someone beautiful on the outside — you — with a steel core who is able to face life's adversities. You do have the ability to deal with all that life hands you. You just have to believe that there is a steel core within you. Don't doubt that you will weather whatever situations you face. You can do it! You are a steel magnolia.

Life is full of ups and downs. By understanding what facets of life you can control — remembering that change is the only constant, and that you are a strong steel magnolia, able to handle everything that you experience — you will successfully ride the waves. ■

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