



# Learning to Surf: Career Advice for a Turbulent World

“When you’re ready, just opening the eyes again...” finished the audio from my Headspace meditation session.

It is August 2017, and I am in Hakuba in the Japanese Alps, experiencing the cool summer air. The only sound comes from the water running down a mountain stream, and for the first time in years, I feel grounded enough to reflect on what has been one of the most challenging and formative periods of my career and personal life.

I am reminded of the famous quote from mindfulness expert Jon Kabat-Zinn: “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” It’s an obviously appealing metaphor for resilience, especially to a native Australian who grew up with surfing as a national pastime. It also aptly describes my career journey to lead the RGA Global Financial Solutions team in Asia. Despite the success we have had in Asia, I have encountered quite a few terrifying waves, and there were moments when it seemed as though I was underwater, overwhelmed by expectations and obligations and unsure what the future might hold. These experiences were transformative in many ways. They taught me four lessons in leadership that may help others in today’s turbulent times:

## 1. Work with the wave.

Experienced surfers will recommend that you “work with the wave.” In other words, if you fear, resist or try to control too much, the wave will win – you have to be agile enough to adapt your actions to the direction, speed and momentum of the wave ahead. Surfing, too, is about more than seizing the moment; it’s about overcoming adversity. Even highly skilled surfers get knocked down by rough surf or that unexpected large wave. The secret is to continue to learn from those with greater experience and to get back on the surfboard and go with the flow.

In my case, I recognized that I needed to seek advice to work with my personal and professional waves. Just as I was stepping into a leadership role and building a new Asia business development team, I received a phone call every husband and father dreads. I had just landed in Singapore to conduct interviews with potential job candidates when the Tokyo police called to say that my wife had suddenly fallen ill and been hospitalized. My children had been taken into the care of social services. I immediately checked out of the hotel and flew straight back to Tokyo to recover my children and care for them as my wife recuperated. Soon after, my father, who had been my trusted advisor, unexpectedly passed away.

Amid these family struggles, I had the added demands of a promotion into a new position. These struggles brought down my confidence, and I sought help from an executive coach who could help me to navigate these new waters and provide an objective assessment of my leadership style. We began by surveying my colleagues with respect to my strengths and weaknesses, and I gained two key and surprising insights: It was evident that my peers were looking to me to be more assertive to express my viewpoints as a leader, and yet I also learned that I had strong credibility within the organization that I was not fully leveraging. Instead, I had developed a faulty belief that I was not good enough, which reduced my self-confidence and often led to my acquiescing in discussions. This realization changed the way I perceived my performance in the new role and gave me more confidence to lead and to look at the challenges (waves) with a new lens.



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## 2. Be present.

Surfing forces us to be present. You can't be consumed with the last wave, because then you might miss the next one. And yet far too often our business routines seem designed around distraction. We are constantly facing ringing devices, notifications, meetings, and alerts, and this can lead to far too much reacting and far too little thinking – and leading. In late 2016, I attended a senior management meeting in Nashville, Tennessee. As part of the meeting one of the senior executives arranged for a local expert in mindfulness to provide an introductory session. Over the course of the session, we engaged in two brief mindfulness practices to demonstrate how we could focus on the moment.

I could feel the benefits in just those two sessions, and my associates were somewhat bewildered at my excitement. For me, the exercise was revelatory. Mindfulness refers to the basic human ability to refocus on the self – to be aware of where you are and what you are doing at a particular moment in time, and to avoid becoming overwhelmed by events going on around you. The human brain has a tendency to replay past decisions or speculate on future scenarios. At times this can sidetrack leaders and lead to reactive decision making. Rather than look back to the past or forward to the future, there are times where leaders must remain in the present to truly see the world as it is and be in the “zone”. My mindfulness training has really helped me to slow down and accept the negative thoughts and emotions as just thoughts and emotions, while leaving space to embrace business uncertainties, build resilience, and achieve a better work-life balance.

## 3. Focus.

Surfing is not purely about winners and losers – it is about a group of people who share a common set of objectives. When I set about developing a strategy for the GFS Asia team, the most important aspect was to narrow our scope by focusing the team on a clear set of business opportunities and goals and avoiding distractions. I found that, when I could clearly articulate a clear strategy to myself, I could better defend our priorities to colleagues and counterparties, and it better prepared me to say “no” when a request did not align with those goals. Too often organizations fear to say “no” because they may be perceived as unhelpful or miss future opportunities. But in my experience, when I could explain that our strategy required us to decline an initiative in order to deliver long-term value, I was able to build respect for our team and our strategy. In turn, I believe the emphasis on prioritization helped the team achieve greater focus, deliver higher success rates, and attract and recruit people who share our philosophy.

## 4. Stay balanced.

Surfing is, above all, about the mastery of balance. Part of my journey involved learning this art of balance and applying it to my interactions with my team. My leadership style is to inspire and empower my staff by giving them the freedom to solve problems using their own creativity, instead of issuing orders. And yet, while the entrepreneurial spirit really thrives in my team, I realized that I had to more actively manage at times. Being approachable, amicable, and solutions-oriented were my strengths, but it can also be important to have tough and honest conversations to address sources of conflict. Being “nice” doesn't mean being “good” as a leader. For example, when I discovered that our team was not aligned around our objectives, I had to summon the courage to have those tough conversations and make tough decisions to ensure that we had the right people and we were aligned in our objectives. True leadership requires giving and receiving constructive criticism and taking action when necessary.

Often we hear the term “turning point” applied to defining moments in a career journey. But my experience suggests career development isn't about turning, but surfing. There is no smooth path to success: challenges and struggles inevitably arise, and while you can't stop these waves, you can learn to read them, accept them, and ride them. ■

*This article is adapted from an original paper that won recognition at the [RGA Leaders of Tomorrow](#) program as part of the [2020 Global Insurance Forum](#). A virtual event, the 2020 Global Insurance Forum connects thought leaders, executives, regulators, academics and policymakers from across the insurance industry for a complimentary two-day virtual forum on October 13-14. Prominent thought leaders will share their diverse views on key issues that will shape the future of risk and insurance around the world. Through the RGA Leaders of Tomorrow program, the Global Insurance Forum also showcases the rising stars who are poised to lead the industry into the future. Learn more about the program and its important mission on the [IIS website](#).*