



CHANGE MANAGEMENT:

Permanent White Water

| MIKE KENT

There's a term I like to use in discussions over the years with staff, colleagues and clients about change in work and in life: Permanent White Water. Although it took on a different connotation during the investigation of the Clintons' real estate dealings, both before and since that episode, it resonated with audiences of all types who were trying to deal with the realities of business and life today.

I explain it this way: In the good old days, when I attended business school, the underlying theme to the entire curriculum was that if you studied hard, learned your lessons well, applied them with intelligence and flexibility and kept your nose clean, you would succeed in business. Your career was likened to a river gradually widening and deepening as it progressed from its beginnings in business school until you reached a successful fulfillment of your goals and, presumably, a comfortable retirement. It was explained that, along that river of your career, as you sped along, you would occasionally encounter some rapids or "white water."

The white water in the river of your career were the disruptions; the unexpected and unforeseeable disruptions to an otherwise orderly progression. This occasional white water could be caused by a shift in the market, a new competitor, a change in leadership or a change in legislation. (In those days no one talked much about mergers, takeovers, layoffs, economic or technological upheaval.) When you encountered that white water, if you had studied hard in school and continued to learn at work, you could make a smart maneuver, paddle through the rapids, overcome the disruption and come back out into calmer waters again for a reasonable period. There was time to regroup, assimilate the new, plan for the future, learn from the tribulations and move onward before you hit the next white water.

The problem today, of course, is that today we live and work in a world of "permanent white water." Just beyond those rapids are even tougher waters to negotiate and the frequency of

encountering rapids is increasing such that there is no time to recover before facing the next Class V cascade.

As a manager, there is not only the difficulty of surviving and learning from each successive encounter, but also, maybe even more importantly, managing expectations for yourself, your colleagues and your family. It's almost instinctive, after a tough week or a tough project, to kick back and say to ourselves and others, "Well at least that's over and we'll have a breather next week." Of course, many times next week brings even bigger challenges and we long for the last time things appeared "easy."

As long as we continue to indulge in the belief that problems will settle themselves out and the waters will become more "lake like," we continue to feed the frustration that we ourselves and others experience when the next "big one" inevitably comes our way. The best thing we can do for ourselves and those around us is to accept the situations, celebrate our successes, and learn from each experience. Permanent white water is just that; permanent. The sooner we understand that and convey it honestly to our co-workers and families, the sooner we have a chance of reconciling all of our expectations with reality. 🌈

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