

A New President's Letter



Lisa Karwoski, PE, WTS-LA President (Mott MacDonald), Photo by John Livzey

Lily Tomlin said, “For fast-acting relief, try slowing down.” For virtually all of us in the transportation industry, that’s heresy. Slow down? We all have too much to do in too little time with only more piling up on the horizon. But it’s wise advice. And it’s also my somewhat cryptic way to explain why this is the first president’s letter in some time.

Yes, it’s been a while. Like many of you, I struggle with time management and balancing work, life, and the future. Adding my role as WTS-LA chapter president ratchets things up by an order of magnitude. Still, I made it a priority to keep our business plan moving through our board meetings, and to keep engaged with all WTS-LA members at programs and events and through social media and email. But with only so many hours in a day, something had to suffer. It was the president’s letters.

While I’d like to say I can “perfectly” accomplish all the tasks I set out to every given year, who’s kidding who? Too many of us struggle in silence, never asking for help or guidance, yet striving for perfection. And if we don’t achieve it, it is always our fault, no matter what. I once overheard someone say, “I beat myself up every day, without so much as a scratch,” in their quest for perfection. So, what are we to do?

I’m not a mental health professional, career coach, or mystic. But I do know that the first step in addressing any issue is realizing it exists. So, the next time you feel that pressure mounting inside, take a moment and notice it. Stop. Breathe. Think about it. Mark it in your memory for future review in a quieter moment. Then, determine, are you asking too much of yourself? There’s a fine line between positive drive and damaging self-coercion. Try to recognize that line. We all know that moment, that inner feeling when our blood pressure rises, our ears burn, and something just isn’t right. And that brings me perfectly to what I’d like to cover next.

Metro Chief of Staff Nadine Lee led a brilliant WTS-LA panel in July that has received outstanding feedback. In it, she discussed numerous strategies women and men found essential for the workplace. Though impossible to do it justice in this space, I do want to note some of its themes that resonated for me.

The first is recognizing your strength. Often, women fixate on their weaknesses instead of their strengths. Numerous studies have illustrated this. Take job applications, for example. If a man has three of ten qualifications, he applies. If a woman has seven out of ten, she often won’t, perceiving herself as unqualified. The same is true in asking for promotions. This is a really uncomfortable space for women in particular. It doesn’t have to be. But it will take practice. So, how do you focus on a strength? Talk about it. Analyze it. See how it’s helped you. When did you discover it? What other strengths does it feed? By simply raising your own awareness about your strengths, you can start to rely on them more

autonomically and connect them to other qualities like stopping to review progress and analyzing various courses of action.

Next, Nadine spoke brilliantly about risk-taking and fear. We all know about fear and risk. Just ask anyone who has tried to merge on the 101 downtown during rush hour. But transpose that exact moment where you decide to hit the gas and gain freeway entry to raising your hand and speaking up at a meeting. They're not that different. Both can be perilous. And both can feel like they have serious consequences, though one obviously has more immediate repercussions. The important thing here is to properly gauge outcomes. If you merge blindly onto the 101 at rush hour, the outcome will most likely involve physics and the LAPD. But in a meeting what is the worst that could happen? Is it really that bad? What about the potential upside? Just as you properly gauge openings in traffic, seek out openings in meetings and speak up. Factor out what the worst outcome could be, accept it, weigh it, and if it's favorable, take the chance. Like many things, this becomes much easier with repetition.

Finally, we all—women and men—give quite a lot of themselves at work, especially in this industry. As I've noted, the pace can be unrelenting. That's a given. But what do you do to take care of yourself, to recharge? If you have to think about it, you're not doing enough. I cannot understate the value of taking time to take care of yourself. What brings you peace? Recharges your batteries? Makes you feel good about yourself and who you are? Remember the warning on every flight, "Put your oxygen mask on first, before you take care of anyone else."

For fast-acting relief, try slowing down. Though it seems impossible, it's great advice that we should all heed. Ultimately, the more we take care of ourselves, the more productive and effective we will be.