



Now is the time for resilience, optimism and personal development. A mentor once taught me a valuable lesson about resilience. She used a card game as a metaphor and she said, “Ron, you have to learn to play the hand you have – not the hand you wish you had. That takes self-awareness and understanding that you get some bad hands, some really, really bad hands and, once in a while, a great hand. Invest in your capability to play them all better than anyone else could.”

2019 started with the best economy I’ve seen in my lifetime. Suddenly, we are now experiencing the trauma of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic with over 114,000 U.S. deaths and a government mandated shutdown bringing a grinding halt to all but essential travel, trade and economic activity. For many recent graduates, job prospects which looked promising now look grim. For early and mid-career leaders, downsizing and layoffs are a deep concern and, for many, will be a reality as the full restoration of the economy will take time. In addition, recent events have spotlighted issues of racial inequality that are impossible to ignore. All this, and 2020 is only half over.

Many early and mid-career leaders have assumed leadership positions during the 12-year period of unprecedented economic growth since the Financial Crisis. I have seen numerous recessions and the Financial Crisis which led to the Great Recession. Each one was painful to families and companies. My own son was launching his career during the Great Recession and did not start his career when and where he hoped to – the good news is that by being resilient, optimistic and engaging in personal development, he has now found a great opportunity he enjoys.

Another mentor whose hobby was bird watching counseled me with the following example as we were discussing pessimists vs. optimists: he said pessimists make terrible bird watchers of rare birds. He believed pessimists never see the bird when it appears as their eyes are closed and their head is down complaining about how rare the bird is. Optimists have their eyes open and are constantly scanning the horizon looking for the bird and spot it quickly when it appears. Optimism is free, he said, and you can only win the game if you are actively involved in the game.

A few recommendations I would like to share:

- *Personal development is critical. Focus on being 15 percent better every year – you can never coast.*
- *Develop a fundamental business competency, understand how the business operates at the fundamental molecular level and how the business creates value for customers, stakeholders, and society.*
- *Don’t worry about when promotions will happen – focus on gaining skills, competencies and experiences that make you the best possible candidate for an opportunity.*
- *Develop a values-based, high-performance leadership model that you understand and can consistently follow. Beyond a certain level of IQ, your emotional intelligence is more important. For higher-level positions, all final candidates have the required skills, but emotional intelligence is often the winning attribute.*
- *Search out risky assignments – you learn more and learn faster.*
- *Build a diverse team that includes people of color, women and other underrepresented groups that reflect the customers you serve. Your team reflects your diversity and inclusion values.*
- *By assuming positive intent, you avoid creating needless enemies of people who do not intend to offend you. The true jerks quickly show their colors – and most organizations deal with them effectively.*

As leaders you will be called upon to communicate bad news in many ways – always deliver bad results early and personally to your manager. When communicating tough decisions regarding reductions, layoffs, or elimination of product lines always be empathetic and authentic as people hate corporate speak and double talk. Remember these decisions impact the employee and their family’s livelihood and quality of life.

I have no doubt you all will succeed, and the current crises will leave you better equipped to deal with adversity throughout your lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ronald A. Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Ronald A. Williams
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