

Hello colleagues! My name is Rodrigo and I am a surfer. I'm also the second generation of industrial engineers in my family, and I work for a family business in Brazil.

When I was 22 years old, my father offered me the opportunity to manage and renovate a vegetable packing plant, located 750km from my hometown. When I accepted the challenge, I felt as if I was about to ride a big wave!

There are two kinds of surfers - medium wave surfers and big wave riders. Medium wave surfers maneuver around 2-6 foot waves, while big wave riders just, "ride the waves," which range from 7-100 feet high. My hips aren't limber enough to be a medium wave surfer, so I chose to be a big wave rider.

The first great challenge a big wave surfer faces is to paddle his way through the nuclear zone, where you are being hit with white water. Normally waves come in sets and then, for a moment, there is a lull – when no waves hit the shore. An experienced surfer has excellent timing – passing through the nuclear zone in shallow waters. Once he reaches deeper waters, he will enjoy the peaceful lull while paddling to the outside - the area just beyond the nuclear zone. For the inexperienced surfer, by the time he makes it to the outside, he is exhausted and out of breath.

When I first started assumed management of the vegetable packing plant, I dove in immediately, landed in the nuclear zone, and faced tremendous resistance. I tried to get everything done as soon as possible, led meetings with all the departments, and created key performance indicators and controls. These were all good actions, but my timing was poor. I did not wait to cross securely to the outside.

People were stressed out, and did not trust me. I later understood that people and processes have a learning curve. A wave will only break in its due time, which is something that can't be rushed. To begin, you first have to surf small waves. So I spent time with my

workers in the production line, cutting iceberg lettuce 7 hours per day. It helped me value the strength of those working in the facility.

It took a whole year for people to start trusting me. This happened when I demonstrated that I knew what was needed from a technical standpoint, but more importantly, showed respect for everyone in my environment, and respect for their learning curve. After that, we were able to work as a team, paddling together and motivating each other.

Even once the team dynamics were in place, there was a lag in seeing the positive effects of this. I spent over 2 years in the nuclear zone from a financial standpoint, and thought of giving up more than once. It seemed that every time I paddled harder and made some improvements, a bigger wave would come and drag me back to shore. For two years I had to deal with annual losses, submerged underwater with very little air. My father and friends encouraged me to keep paddling.

Early in the third year we finally posted a profit, had a solid customer base and our demand was increasing very fast. Life was good. However, in business as in surfing, you can never get too comfortable with where you're standing, because there's always another wave around the corner.

One of our biggest customers made a deal with our competitor. Just like that, our revenue dropped by 30% and we were once again in the nuclear zone. My team was devastated. I explained that we had to reduce our costs, because to recover that revenue we would have to wait for the whole set of waves to pass. We patiently waited out the set, when we finally saw the lull. Our sales force focused on regaining market share, and after three months, we had safely paddled to reach the outside once again.

Surfers call this state the glimpse, when everything seems connected and your adrenaline is so high that you perceive the imperceptible, such as a drop of water on your wet

face. I made it to the end with a big smile on my face and all my friends celebrating with me in the outside. It was a very happy moment. When we posted six consecutive profitable months as a company, we celebrated our win with a big dinner and I thanked everybody for their hard work and commitment. I thanked them for encouraging me to keep paddling; and hoped that they felt the glimpse as I did.

I believe HSB is a big wave and we are all surfers here. We have all prepared ourselves to ride this wave, which will be filled with case studies, clubs and consulting. We will motivate each other to keep paddling. We will share in the glimpse, celebrating our individual successes, but feeling connected to our collective success. Having conquered this wave, we will be ready to ride even bigger waves. The friendships gained here, in the outside, safe beyond the crashing waves, will live on long after our years at Harvard Business School have passed.