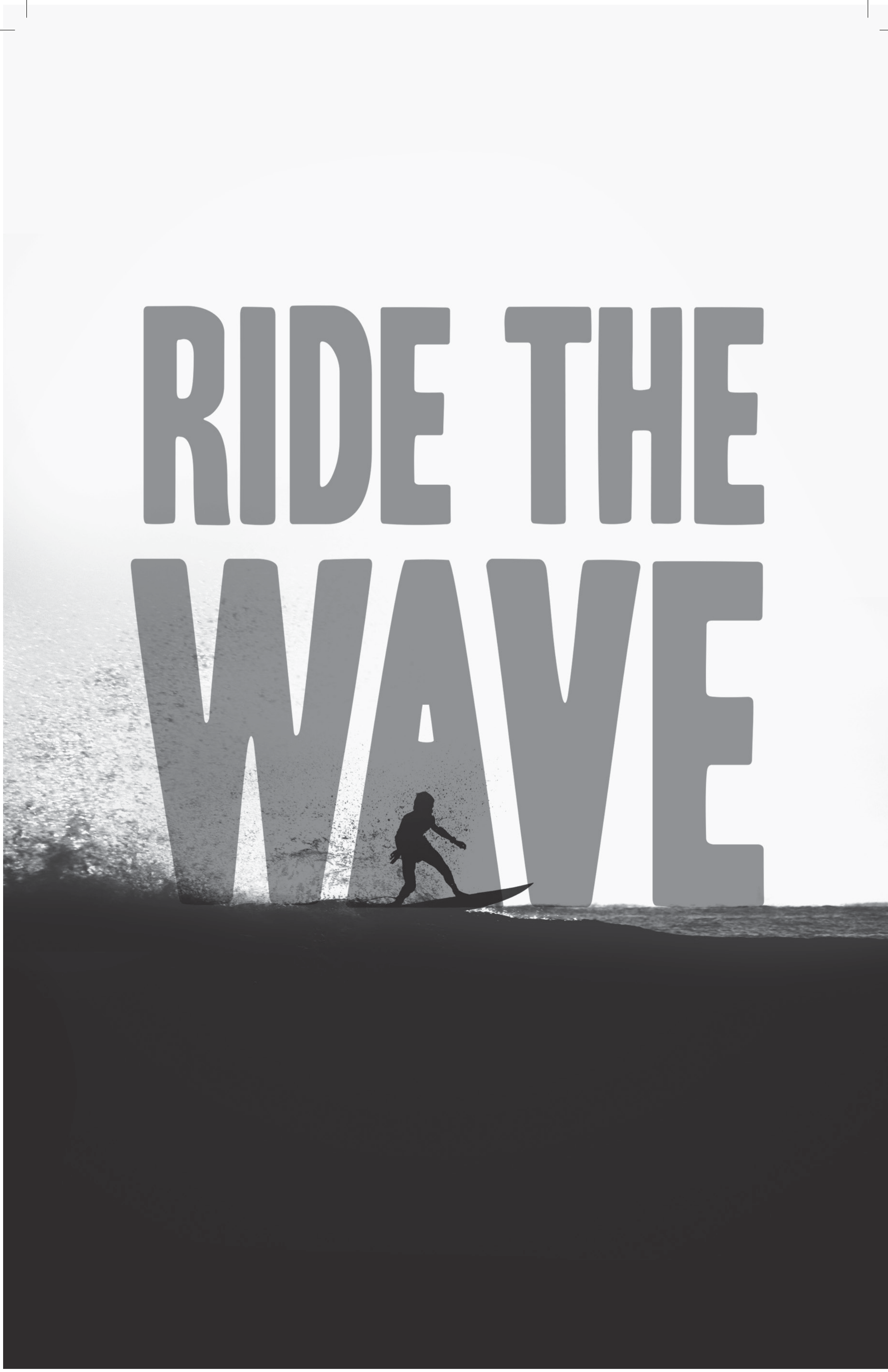
RIDE THE
WAVE

RIDE THE WAVE SERIES: WORK STORY PART I

3

THE DREAM

1. BLOCKBUSTER SALES

THE EXPERT

Around the same time I ventured out to Malibu and almost drowned in the Pacific Ocean, I was well into my career at a healthcare company where I had worked for the previous ten years. I had held a few different roles at that point, supported company-wide sales and marketing projects, and completed my MBA. I did well in my roles because I was organized, I stuck to the plan, and my customers seemed to respond well to the way we marketed and sold our products. My customers saw me as a resource and an expert when it came to how our products could help patients. We had products that were market leaders, I was trained well, and I was passionate about my job. For almost a decade, I had experienced some level of success and thought that success would always continue without stopping anytime soon.

SALES AND MARKETING

A strong marketing and sales organization, our company used a strategy that was always the same. Marketing would put together the plan and sales would execute. Our sales force was considered one of the best in the industry, and we had achieved "blockbuster status" with two products that were considered the gold standard treatments within their healthcare specialty. We had executed the same game plan for years and experienced a lot of great success. As an organization, we focused on "working the plan" because that's what worked. If someone was struggling and not making their numbers, we would say, "Stick to the plan." This internal mantra guided the organization, and we made a name for ourselves by doing things that way. When we rolled out any new sales or marketing initiative, we would also customize that plan for our customers based on the market they were in, since certain parts of the country had different barriers or obstacles to our products. There were subtleties with coverage and even with the way customers interacted with the sales organization. Understanding the new initiative was always important, but then you had to figure out how best to execute that plan in the field.

PREPARATION AND PLANNING

Shortly after my trip to Malibu, our organization was in the process of launching a new product within our specialty niche, and we were bringing a new product to a market in which we had a strong share. This new product would not be another blockbuster but would be a nice addition to our portfolio and would solve a need for patients that was not currently being met in the market. In order to prepare and be ready for the product launch, we went through the same process we always did. Even though we were the market leaders, respected by our customers, we still needed to make sure we executed our plans properly and brought the same level of expertise to this product launch that we had brought in the past. During the weeks leading up to our launch date, I started training on the new product, learning the technical aspects of how it worked, and most importantly, the new benefits to our patients.

2. TRAINING DAY

HOME AND FIELD TRAINING

There were two parts to the training for a new product launch: at-home training and in-the-field training. There would also be training at the official launch meeting in the coming weeks. The launch meeting was essentially a national sales and marketing meeting attended by almost everyone from within the organization. We had to study at night and were tasked with completing training assignments during the day while still in the field. Training was in addition to managing a territory, completing project work, and meeting with customers. Regardless of the upcoming launch, it was business as usual for the organization. The expectation was that business did not drop off because of the launch and that regular day-to-day activities were still completed. This situation was challenging, considering that training included learning the marketing plan, the messaging and positioning, the entire package insert, and a series of tests to develop your ability to quickly recall the information.

SALES AND MARKETING PLAN

We were launching a new type of product, but within an established and well-defined market. Our product would solve an unmet need, and from the market research we had done, our customers were very receptive to the new opportunity to treat this type of patient. What we assumed about the market was that we could launch under our new indication and then add additional indications as the market started to become more comfortable with our product. On paper, this was the right strategy and the best way to approach the product launch. This approach made a lot of sense from the standpoint of our launch strategy, but it really gave our customers the opportunity to progress through a treatment method and expand their product usage over time. It also made sense from the standpoint of offering a new product with a specific indication so that we did not cannibalize our current book of business with a product that was new to the market. Again, on paper, the plan was solid, and the expectation was that this launch would be another success.

PLANNING TO LAUNCH

Prior to the launch meeting, I had set up meetings with the key customers in my territory. I wanted to return from the launch meeting and hit the ground running. To do that, I set daily appointments for the first four weeks coming out of our launch meeting. I wanted my workdays to be productive, and putting meetings on the calendar in advance would allow me to focus on selling versus prospecting or appointment setting. I wanted to wake up every morning, jump in my car, and go "chop wood" in my territory. I knew that the faster I got my customers up and running with the new product, the better my results would be. I anchored my days with morning appointments where I would bring breakfast into offices, had lunch meetings with preordered food from the day before, and filled the midmorning and mid to late afternoon timeslots with shorter meetings that were made based on territory routing and drop-in calls. During the four weeks leading up to launch, I had my schedule wire-tight and was ready to go.

3. LAUNCH MEETING

MEETING EVENTS

After four weeks of completing online tests and spending every free minute I had learning the new product, I was ready to attend the launch meeting. Once there, the pace didn't slow down at all. It intensified. We watched presentations from marketing, sales, operations, and our leadership teams. It was impressive. Each functional area had a motivating message, was focused on the product strategy, and gave us the tools we needed to be successful in the field. It was amazing to see the entire organization focused and so well prepared for the task at hand. The goal was having a successful launch, but helping customers and patients in the process. This week was filled with more tests and certifications, the dreaded role-play, and evening events that were more like rock concerts than business meetings. A lot of learning took place, but more importantly, there was an effort to bring the marketing and sales teams together and have everyone fired up for the challenges ahead.

CONFIDENT COWORKERS

After a full week of intense training, I was ready. I talked to my coworkers, and they were ready too. We talked about our customers and which ones would start using the new product right away, but also about the benefits that came along with the new product for patients. Admittedly, we also talked about the financial incentives that would be tied to our eventual successes and what we would do with the rewards that went along with success. Coming out of the meeting, I was energized, focused, and believed firmly in what we had learned over the previous weeks. For the organization, this was business as usual. We had been in this position before, having launched successful products previously. We had gone through training like this in the past, and we knew how to execute in the field. We could implement on marketing and sales plans better than anyone else in our particular industry. We were beyond confident and ready to go.

MY KOL

Coming out of the launch meetings, I began to think about the KOL I had in my territory. A Key Opinion Leader is someone who the organization deems as having a tremendous amount of knowledge about the disease state and experience in the best products to treat patients. I had an appointment with the top KOL in my territory the first day of the field launch. He was one of the highest prescribers in the state and ranked nationally for the number of patients he treated. I knew that having this customer up and running with our new product would make or break my launch. It was important that I met with him right away to make sure he had all the information he needed to use our product. I had a great relationship with this customer and felt confident in the fact that I had just gone through my training and knew that our plan along with my experience would be a recipe for success.

THE REALITY

1. DON'T TEACH ME

KOL LUNCH

On the first day out of the launch meeting, I had so much anticipation for the day ahead. I was brimming with confidence, having just returned from training, and felt great about having scheduled a meeting with my KOL. I put on my favorite suit, had a big breakfast, and gave Kate a kiss as I went out the door. That morning I made a few calls to get my feet wet with the new sales message, but I knew that my big moment was coming up later that day and that my KOL lunch would put my entire launch into motion. In preparing for the lunch meeting, I had preordered the customer his favorite meal—a meatball sandwich, BBQ chips, and Orange Fanta. The sandwich shop did not have Orange Fanta, so I had to make a couple additional stops, but finally found Fanta at a gas station not far from the customer's office. I spent a few minutes putting together marketing packets of information for the customer and the rest of the staff as well as reviewing the launch materials before the meeting. During my pre-call planning, I reviewed the sales data for the customer, wrote out some notes, and planned what I would say during the call. I was ready to go.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

In terms of my relationships with customers, the one I had with this KOL was by far the best I had with any of my customers over the ten-year period. Having called on this provider for years, I knew his favorite movies, that his kids went to the same school where I did my undergraduate work, and that he saw me as an expert in terms of what I knew about his patients and practice. My call strategy was to go through our product information, and in the end, get him to agree with what I was saying about our new product and how the benefits would be a breakthrough for his untreated patients. Coming out of the launch meeting and feeling confident, my plan was to continue to play the role of the expert, and I was going to go through the information as I had done during my training. It was time to leverage that great relationship I had with him and jump-start this launch.

THE CALL

After making some small talk on the front end of the call, I waited for the rest of the staff to leave the lunch area. As my KOL started to take the first bite of his meatball sandwich, I decided it was time to start my call. As the sandwich moved toward his mouth for the first bite, I grabbed my presentation and launched into the call. As I started to go through the front cover, focusing on the message and positioning our product, I noticed a change in the energy within the room. The meatball sandwich dropped onto his plate and a hand stretched out toward me as if it were happening in slow motion. He slapped the presentation piece down and onto the table. Shock waves went through my body as I reeled back from what had just happened. Not knowing what just happened, I looked up and made direct eye contact with my customer, who looked me dead in the eyes and said, "Don't you try and teach me about your product."

2. NEW DECISION JOURNEY

EXPERT CUSTOMERS

In the decade of calls prior to this one, this had never happened before. Not knowing how to react, since my customers typically saw me as the expert, I was so taken aback by what happened that I paused and asked politely, "Excuse me?" There was a deafening silence in the room and a long pause from my customer. "Don't. Don't try and teach me about this product." Still back-pedaling and trying to figure out what had just happened, I honored the customer's request. Instead of going through the presentation I had just spent the last four weeks learning, I started to ask some questions and then listened for a long time. As the customer started to describe what he had been doing during the four weeks I was at training, I was shocked to hear how much he knew about our product, what he did to educate himself, and how I just lost control of a sales call that I had been planning for weeks in advance.

NEW CONDITIONS

For years, my customers had seen me as the expert. Yet, somehow this customer knew everything about my product, including how and where to use it. He had come to these conclusions independent of meeting with me and done this on his own. In the four weeks leading up to our meeting, he had visited a microsite to learn more about the product. This customer had participated in a webinar and learned about the product from his colleagues. He had visited patient-driven websites that discussed the product, its potential adverse events, and how patients could benefit from a trial. And most surprisingly, he had already started to use the product, identifying patient profiles within his practice and using the product as he saw fit. In four weeks, he had found all the information he needed, gone through a decision journey on his own, and had already made up his mind about how and where he was going to use our product. In that moment, I realized that everything I thought I knew about sales and marketing had changed.

THE CHANGE

My role had changed. I was no longer the expert. My customer was now an expert too. With all the information that was available, this customer had circumvented our marketing-to-sales process and become an expert on his own. I had prepared for weeks, going through the materials and learning about the product. This customer had done the exact same thing, just without my help or support. This was tough to take at first, but I quickly realized that my role of expert had changed and that if he had come to new conclusions about our product on his own, then I needed to find out what those were, so that I could best support him and his practice. Instead of going through my presentation, I found out where he planned to use our product and if those plans were different from what my organization and I had planned. This customer had done his own research, made up his mind, and knew everything he wanted to know about our product. The problem was that it was very different from what we had planned for and not at all close to what we put down on paper.

3. NEW WAY TO BUY

NEW CUSTOMER DECISION JOURNEY

I did what I could to salvage the call, but I definitely felt the sting of being professionally punched in the face by one of my customers. My KOL and I left things on good terms, but there was a noticeable change in our interactions from that day forward. What happened on that call was not just specific to this particular customer. As I continued to make additional calls, I noticed that something similar was happening across my territory. Customers already knew the material I was presenting and had come to a conclusion about how they planned to use our product before I could meet with them. The customer went through a new decision journey that I had not expected and that my company had not planned for. Our customers had leveraged the new technology that was available in healthcare, had spent their own time doing research, and moved through a buying process without the help of anyone from the sales organization. They became self-informed and walked themselves through a new decision journey completely independent of anyone from our organization.

NEW SKILLS AND CAPABILITIES

As a result of what was happening to myself and others in the field, my company had to change the way we were going to approach this launch. The company held conference calls and meetings to discuss what was happening. It had become obvious that situations like the one I had experienced were happening across the country and that these were not isolated incidents. Our customers now had a new way to buy, and we now had to change our approach, adapt to the market, and learn some new skills in the process. So much of our training up to that point had been focused on product knowledge and understanding how the medication would benefit a specific set of patients that we failed to plan for our customers becoming educated on the product and deciding on their own where and how they would use it.

NEW APPROACH TO RISK

Instead of falling back on strategies and tactics that had worked for us in the past, we had to start doing things that were new. We had to take a different approach and try to meet our customers where they were along this new decision journey. We had to try things that were new and that were going to be a risk. We needed to hit certain goals and metrics during the launch, and at the rate we were going, it was obvious we would not hit those projections. New sets of skills brought new training, and it was even more challenging to have everyone across the organization on the same page. It was tough to change as an individual and even tougher to change the internal processes and systems from the way we had done things in the past. This would take time, cause more headaches, and slow down our launch momentum, even before we had a chance to get it off the ground. From this point forward, things were different. Before long, serious change started to happen industry-wide, and it was obvious that we were not the only ones experiencing titanic shifts in the market conditions.

SLAMMED IN THE OFFICE

1. "WHAT JUST HAPPENED"

INDUSTRY CHANGES

Much like my experience in Malibu, I was left professionally "slammed" in an office. I had been crushed by the new way customers were buying, and my organization was being pounded by wave after wave of change within these new conditions. This had become another moment where I was thinking to myself, "What just happened?" I had spent weeks planning for this launch, but somehow, I got wiped out by market changes that I was not anticipating or planning on. Technology and information-sharing platforms had been kept out of my industry for years because of regulations. But industry-wide disruption was slowly breaking down walls, and technology was entering into every area of healthcare. Electronic medical records, patient information-sharing platforms, telemedicine, and mobile platforms began to replace methods that had been in place for years. The shift in how healthcare companies would engage with customers had fundamentally changed, and the days of delivering a message and having a customer take action based only on your efforts were over for good.

UNIVERSAL SENTIMENT

Around the same time I noticed these changes happening in my industry, I saw that the conditions were changing for companies within other industries as well. A universal shift in the way people bought was underway and happening to businesses regardless of the product, industry, or market. The business conditions as we knew them were changing, and it was time either to change or to become part of the past. I started to look closer at what was happening, talked to colleagues within other industries, and tried to figure out what the best course of action would be to overcome these new challenges. Switching jobs or companies would be like leaving one challenging situation and entering another. Being promoted to a new role within the same company would be hard since consolidation was happening at the top as well. Trying to switch to a new industry and try something new meant completely starting over with a new career.

PROFESSIONAL CHANGE

Knowing that the conditions would always be changing and that it would be hard if not impossible to predict or anticipate what would happen in the future, I thought the best thing to do would be to make a change that started with me. As I began to set out on this journey, I reconnected with a former professor of mine that happened to have a background in organization development. We grabbed coffee to talk about what was happening in business. My professor agreed that the conditions were changing within business at breakneck speeds and that it was up to the individual to make the necessary adjustments to stay ahead or fall behind. I started to formulate a plan about what I could do to survive these changes. Over the course of several subsequent coffee meetings with colleagues, I discussed how I could learn more about these new conditions and see if there was some way I could better manage what was happening around me.

2. A NEW DECISION

THINK DIFFERENT

Coming to the realization that I needed to change was hard. I had success selling and marketing a certain way, and I didn't think there was a better way to do it. To change, I needed to think differently and also start doing things differently. I felt a sense of urgency to make these changes happen, but it was hard to think differently because most of my colleagues and coworkers were experiencing the same thing, but still doing the same thing. People acknowledged the changes happening in the market, but everyone around me passed them off as short-term trends, thinking that the business would always go back to the way things had been. Most people had a fixed mindset toward these changes and continued to do things that had made them successful in the past. Many people saw doing anything new as either being too difficult or too risky. Without a good understanding of what was on the next horizon, most people just held on tight to what they knew and did little to think differently about their situations.

ACT DIFFERENT

Once I realized that I had to start thinking differently about my situation, I started to look for opportunities to begin making changes. Thinking differently was mentally challenging, but physically changing what I was doing was much harder. I had worked a certain way for years and had developed habits that were ingrained into what I did on a daily basis. I noticed myself reverting back to patterns and behaviors that once made me successful. Some patterns were as simple as checking email at a certain time every day or syncing my computer by 5:00 p.m. every night before I finished for the day. At other times, however, I noticed myself selling a certain way or taking a particular approach to how I was marketing or positioning our products. In those moments, I realized that so much of what I had done before was still with me and that I had to do something more significant to truly make a change.

TIME FOR CHANGE

After spending some time thinking through what I needed to change and attempting to make those changes, I knew that the only way to do something different would be to hit the reset button and take on a new challenge. As much as my company at the time made changes to adapt and meet the challenges of the new market, I soon realized that this process was going to take time, and there was a chance I would either be lost in the shuffle or come out on the other side in a place I didn’t want to be. I started to plan my transition and talked to family and friends about how I would change. This process was also hard since the people closest to you are the most protective, and they want to keep you safe. The advice I got was to stay the course and play it safe. People kept telling me that everything would work out and that things would be fine. For a time, I refused the call and made the best of it. But over time, it was obvious that my situation would not change and that I could not continue in the direction I was headed.

3. MANAGE THE CHANGE

NEW CONDITIONS

After some thought and planning, I decided to make a change. I decided to take a journey that would give me insight into the new conditions and a better understanding of what was happening within sales and marketing. I wanted to step into the new market conditions, learn some new skills, and take on risk—something I had yet to do in my professional career. During this first part of the journey, I spent time exploring the new conditions, as if I were the surfer, paddling out into the conditions to try and catch some market waves. I would need a good understanding of what was happening, and I also wanted to see where my expertise stacked up within the market. Being in the conditions was the best way that I could build new skills to overcome these new challenges. Understanding the new conditions would be very important and the first step in my new journey.

NEW SKILLS

After understanding the new conditions, I would need to expand my sales and marketing capabilities. Over the years, I had been successful at selling and marketing products at retail and was able to do the same thing within healthcare. With both experiences, I had used traditional marketing and sales strategies as well as some of the new technology and platforms that were available. I had used CRM platforms, marketing automation, and mobile devices within both industries, but I knew that technology and information-sharing platforms would continue to change and that my traditional skills would need to be augmented with more modern marketing and updated sales abilities. It would be important to know what new skills I needed to add and how I could build those marketing and sales skills for the future. After understanding the market conditions and the new skills that I would need, it was then a matter of how much risk I was willing to take in order to make this change happen.

NEW RISK

Risk was something that, up until this point in my career, I had thought very little about. My previous roles at two companies over fifteen years had been very stable, and there was little to no professional disruption at all during that time. I was able to focus on learning the business and how to be successful within it. If I stuck to what I had done previously, it was relatively easy to be successful. However, if I made a change and decided to enter the new conditions, risk was going to be something that I faced on a more consistent basis. I was going from a safe, almost risk-free environment to a new way of thinking about business that was driven by risk. This change would be hard, but I was up for the challenge, and there was just as much risk staying where I was as there was with doing something new. I decided that regardless of the risk, I was going to make a change and would take on any challenge thrown in my direction. I was bringing a lot of risk into my personal life and professional career, but I was also ready for a new challenge.