Resources to get you out of your comfort zone

Let these stories and pieces of advice, from IESE professors and Olympic sailor Theresa Zabell, inspire you to overcome your fears and push your limits.



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Expanding your comfort zone involves taking risks designed to improve yourself, which in turn builds confidence, enabling you to shift your life in new directions and grow in new areas.

This was the theme of TEDxIESEBarcelona, organized by IESE's Business Communications Club in Feb. 2023. What's holding *you* back from achieving your goals and living your dreams?

As the saying goes, "A boat in harbor is safe, but that is not what boats are made for." Words that Olympic sailor Theresa Zabell (featured below) knows all too well.

Winning isn't always smooth sailing

By Theresa Zabell, two-time Olympic gold medalist in sailing

Summer 1976. I was 11 and I was staying with family friends in England to improve my English. That's when I saw the Olympic Games on TV for the very first time. I was inspired! And that inspiration became my life goal. From that day on, every time I went onto the playing field at school, I asked myself, "Was this the sport that would take me to the Olympics?"

A couple of years later, I started sailing, and I fell in love with the sport and with the sea. Feeling the wind on my face gave me an incredible sensation of freedom. I knew that was my sport.

But there were quite a few stones in the road. Back then, women weren't invited to compete in sailing. So, until that changed, I decided to just focus on the sport itself. First, I needed a boat, so I fundraised until I had enough to buy a small secondhand one. I needed to compete in regattas abroad. Again, I fundraised so I could pay my own way. Male competitors got their hotel and meals paid for them; I slept in a tent, which was cheaper, and in the Netherlands I discovered you could go an entire week eating nothing but chips with mayonnaise!

By 1988 the rules had changed to allow women. During the trials to select who would represent Spain at the next Olympics, although I was in the Top 10, I wasn't chosen. Everything I had worked for was gone. I was so crushed that I decided to distance myself from the sport.

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But, as I began to view my life from a distance, I realized that I had been so focused on the goal that I had not given any thought to the incredible privilege of the journey. Swallowing my pride, I went back to sailing, but this time I resolved to enjoy the journey, get stronger mentally as well as physically, and push myself to shatter the records. And I did.

Barcelona 1992. Our team qualified. Despite a rocky start, we ended up winning the gold. Four years later, I competed in Atlanta and won the gold again. Looking back, I would say, if you want to do something you've never done, you need to do something you never did. And I can assure you that it lies outside your comfort zone. For that is where life begins. So go there, and enjoy the journey.

Since 1999, Theresa Zabell has dedicated herself "body and soul" to Ecomar, her educational foundation to raise awareness among children about taking care of our seas for a better planet. This column is based on her TEDxIESEBarcelona talk.

> ***Let these stories and pieces of advice inspire you to overcome your fears and push your limits...***

Get outside your head

Should I start a company? Your brain is wired to resist taking such a risk, so you need to still the inner voice that would hold you back from growing to your full potential. Don't wait for someone else to give you permission or for a moment of total clarity: that will never come. Stepping outside your comfort zone requires actually stepping out. So get off your sofa and summon the courage to cross those bridges — metaphorically as well as literally, as IESE lecturer Conor Neill depicts in this video, where he draws life lessons from a nature walk with friends. Find more advice like this in his blog.

Be interested, ask questions

From doing a PhD in Economics to working as a data entrepreneur for Wharton Research Data Services before joining IESE, one thing has remained constant throughout Mireia Giné's varied career: "I always liked the challenge of learning." Her research runs the gamut, from corporate governance concerns (such as common ownership and gender pay gaps) to AI adoption and fintech. She is also a big outdoors person, having previously competed in modern pentathlon (fencing, swimming, riding, shooting and running). Her advice to her daughters applies to everyone: "You can do anything, really, anything. Find the thing that makes you tick. Be interested in things. Be interested in people. Ask for help.

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Ask questions. Above all, you have to work for it. No excuses." Read the full interview here.

Keep trying, keep dreaming

Sometimes the most beautiful things result from ordinary experiments. And even if those experiments fail, you can still learn and grow from them. These are just a few of the lessons from the architect Antoni Gaudí whose magnificent Sagrada Familia in Barcelona has been 140+ years in the making. Stuck in a slow period? Use this time to take stock, hone your skills, and dream up new solutions. You may not make a lot of money, but your legacy will be priceless. Read lessons in leadership from the Sagrada Familia.

Feeling powerless? Let it go!

When out of your comfort zone in foreign markets where you have limited expertise, networks or influence, resist the temptation to fall back on top-down leadership behaviors that may have worked in the past but won't cut it in the new context. Practice "downward deference" instead: Leaders who deferred to the expertise of subordinates and closed social distance with them performed better over time, according to a study by IESE's Sebastian Reiche, winner of a Research Excellence Award. Read it here and watch this video of tips.

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