

# Giraffes Never Worry About the Deep End of the Pool

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As a child, even into my teen years, one of my biggest fears was jumping into the deep end of the pool—and to this day, it is not my favorite thing to do. I've tried my best to overcome this fear, but it lingers. My swimming mantra is, why jump in when I can wade in from the shallow end? Trust me when I say, I've heard advice from the best and the worst, from my own kids to full-grown adults. Nothing seems to convince me otherwise.

Faced with similar challenges as an independent educational consultant (IEC), I realized some parallels. Like that boy in the shorts standing on the edge of the pool, heart racing a mile a minute, IECs experience similar fears in their private practices. And it's indiscriminate of age or experience—we all still face the fears. What fears exactly? Well, I learned from my own fear of jumping into the pool that it wasn't just about the pool, but more so my fear of the unknown, my fear of drowning, my fear of my own insecurities. I remember thinking at one point, if only I were a giraffe, I would never have to worry about the deep end of the pool.

I'm certainly not suggesting that we IECs all think of ourselves as giraffes to conquer our own fearful insecurities, but I do believe there is something to be said about believing in who we are as professionals and having the confidence that we have what it takes to be not just good in our profession, but great.

Learning how to swim was crucial to growing my confidence and enjoying those hot summer days. Likewise, as a professional in the ever changing and fluctuating industry of higher education, it's important to keep your feet wet; jump in; and with the confidence that you have knowledge and available resources, swim like you own the pool. The following advice from experienced IECs will help.

## Stay Current

The world of higher education is changing so fast that it's tough to stay on top of the latest trends, regulations, or prerequisites. Sorting through the news and recognizing what is important amid all the change is practically an art. How then can you stay relevant in an industry that has so many diverse significant topics? Maintaining a continual curve of learning is imperative, but it can quickly become overwhelming without some guardrails. IECA member, **Stefanie Miles** (AL) said she conquers her fears "by eating the elephant one piece at a time, then I am able to prevent becoming overwhelmed with those unanticipated situations that can arise. By tackling the biggest issue first, I can diminish the amount of stress that naturally comes with our profession."

Great resources are available through the Internet or the local bookstore. Whether it's a book by a fellow IEC, such as **Steven Antonoff's**, *The College Finder*, or the *Fiske Guide to Colleges*, find one or two resources that offer credible and constructive material and revisit them regularly—perhaps on the same day every week. I took that approach when I wanted to immerse myself in social media. I started by spending an hour a day in

social marketing after reading Dave Evans book, *Social Media Marketing: An Hour a Day*.

In addition to reading and research, I strongly advise that you meet regularly with other IECs either face-to-face or virtually. This can be accomplished in organizations like IECA, through conferences, tours, the TalkList, and so on; in local or regional groups; or even an online network on Facebook or LinkedIn. No matter what resources you employ, it's important to listen to the experiences of others, their stories, trials, and troubles—learn from them and then share your own.

## Be Responsible

Responsibility comes from knowing our strengths and limitations as IECs. Each of us can likely think of one or two colleagues we believe to be the guru in independent educational consulting. But the truth is that not a single one of us knows this profession perfectly. We are all unique in our styles and our approaches, our systems and procedures, what we know and how much we know. It's what makes organizations like IECA exist and offer a wealth of knowledge with a breadth of experience. Being responsible means doing our own homework and seeking insight and wisdom as needed. In fact, **Susan Dabbar** (DC) said, "We can't know all the answers to everything at any given moment. Don't be afraid to say, 'I don't know, but I will find out.' You will be respected and sound smarter for it."

Having fellow IECs within an email of discovering the solutions to our consulting "brick walls" is a blessing. But a word of caution: like any great personal resource, when overused and undervalued, it can become nothing more than an interruption. Be responsible by knowing your limits and taking time to first ask yourself a few questions when you face challenges that need answers:

- Can I call someone in my personal circle who may have experienced something similar?
- Can the answer to my question possibly be found on the Internet, in a book, from my conference notes, or from a published resource?
- If I'm thinking of posting a question to an organization's LISTSERV, have I looked to see if it has been asked before. Could the answer already be there?

I've always told those I've mentored, lean when you need to lean, but walk when you can walk!

## Trust Yourself

A mentor once told me, "you know your stuff, relax, trust it, and don't overthink it." Those words resonate in my head each time I doubt myself. Both veterans and "newbies" wrestle with believing in themselves and what they know. Self-doubt is a debilitating way of thinking that only spirals towards overcomplicating the process and overprocessing the details. It pushes each one of us to overserve. Don't hear me wrong, our job is certainly to serve—one another and our students—but delivering in manageable, bite-sized pieces in the right order at the right time is critical.

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There are times when we simply need to lean on someone for a moment. But as we do, there's a danger in forgetting what it's like to lean on our own knowledge without relying on others. Let's face it, everyone has wrestled with their own confidence in what they know and whether it is good enough. But rest assured, as an IEC, you know your stuff. Relax, trust it, and don't overthink it!

The pool may be deep, but remember who you are, what you know, and the skills you possess. Then jump and swim like you own the pool. 🏊

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