

***EXCERPT FROM***  
**Moving from**  
**Panic to Purpose**

Surviving and Thriving During  
Unrelenting Change at Work

**Amy C. Waninger**

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# Chapter 4:

## Care and Feeding of a Hero

### What's at Stake

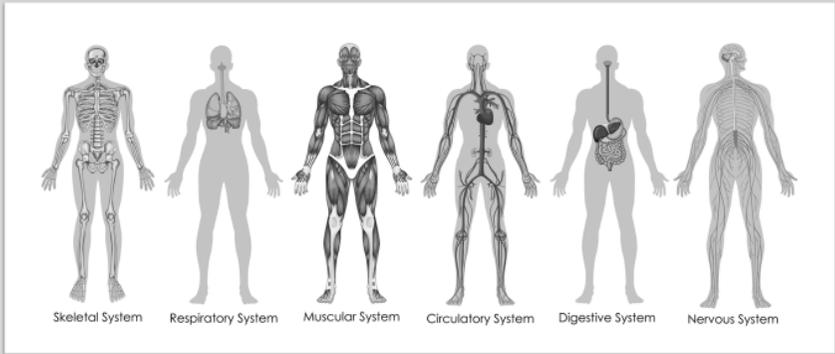
Change is not just something that happens “out there.” It’s affecting us internally as well. The Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory ranks forty-three life events that can cause stress. The word “change” itself appears fourteen times, nine of which are specifically work-related. Even changes we might regard as positive, such as getting a promotion or welcoming a new baby, can cause significant stress.

Healthcare professionals use the Holmes-Rahe tool, sometimes called the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, to determine the level of stress a person is experiencing, whether they may be at risk for stress-related illnesses, and whether stress-reducing interventions may be necessary. A score above 150 points indicates a 50 to 80 percent chance of a major health event. The physical impacts of change can be devastating.

### ***Our Bodies***

Stressors accumulate. They wreak havoc on our bodies, with potential impacts on every major system. Stress can cause, for example, loss of bone density (skeletal system), shortness of breath (respiratory system), tension and muscle aches (muscular system), heart disease (circulatory system), ulcers and colitis (digestive system), and anxiety and

depression (nervous system). These are mere examples, not an exhaustive list!



## The Physical Effects of Stress

*Image Credit: vecton / Depositphotos.com*

We exacerbate these problems by paying more attention to our stressors than to our own physical needs. Our sleep patterns change. We are less likely to eat healthy foods and exercise. If we don't take care of our bodies, our brains do not have what they need to function throughout the day.

Have you ever been on a big project, working hard, with everything coming at you for weeks or months in a row? What happened at the end of that project, just when you were hoping to relax? You probably got sick. Your body had enough and let you know it.

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## ***Pause to Reflect***

- Complete the Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory online. If your score is greater than 150 points, schedule an appointment with your physician. You can find this tool and more in the online resources for this book at:

[www.leadatanylevel.com/panic-to-purpose-resources](http://www.leadatanylevel.com/panic-to-purpose-resources)



- Do a quick mental scan of your body's major systems. Where is your stress most likely to show up? Are you ignoring any physical warning signs? If so, schedule an appointment with your physician, therapist, or both.
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## ***Our Relationships***

Stress doesn't just change our bodies. It also affects our feelings and behaviors, which in turn can put strain on our relationships. When we experience personal turmoil, it's likely that our work performance and professional relationships will suffer. Conversely, when we have a difficult day at work, we might take out our frustrations on our family and friends. Remember, the people around you cannot see your feelings or read your mind. Being explicit about your stress levels can provide the context others need to give you grace and space while you work through a change. If you're feeling especially brave, you can even ask others for help!

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### ***Pause to Reflect***

- Make a list of your most important relationships at home and at work.
  - How might a change in your behaviors at home and at work affect your relationships?
  - What conversations do you need to have to ensure your relationships stay strong during this period of change?
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## Daily Maintenance

### ***My Story***

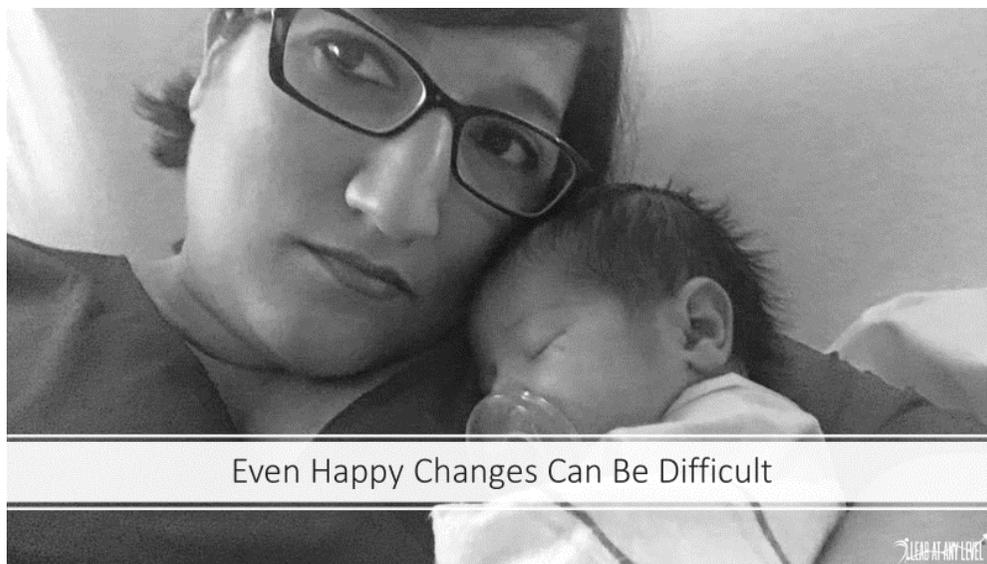
Confession time. After each of my three children were born, I developed severe Post-Partum Depression (PPD). My doctor caught on by Delivery Number Three. Perhaps it was the multiple panic attacks I had before and during my C-section that clued her in. When she visited me in the recovery room, she told me that part of my discharge instructions would be to attend a weekly PPD support group.

Every Wednesday, I was required (doctor's orders) to get out of bed. Take a shower. Get dressed. Pack a diaper bag, load my car full of baby gear, drive across town with my precious newborn, and interact with a dozen other moms who were as miserable and as exhausted as I was. All by 8:00 am.

After three weeks of this routine, I noticed another pattern emerging. Every week, our facilitator asked each of us the same few questions. It didn't matter what we were dealing with at home or in our own heads. How we felt about ourselves, our babies, our partners, or our bodies varied by person each week; the questions remained constant.

In the next few sections, I'm going to share with you everything I learned during and since those meetings. You don't have to go through nine months of pregnancy, labor, delivery, or hours of uncontrollable sobbing on the floor of your closet to get this information.

You're welcome!



Even Happy Changes Can Be Difficult

## ***Sunshine, Lollipops, and Rainbows***

Establish a morning routine that involves a little bit of sunshine each day. You don't need lollipops and rainbows. When you wake up in the morning, get to a window and let yourself appreciate the daylight. (Do not stare directly at the sun. I cannot overstate the importance of this caveat.) Sunlight tells your brain to *WAKE UP!*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Full disclosure: I also use a cup of coffee for this purpose. My brain and body are probably not thrilled with me about that, but it does get the job done occasionally.

## ***Eat***

Make sure you're eating. People often forget to eat during times of stress. If you are not eating properly, your body cannot renew itself and will start to shut down. You will not be able to think clearly, your ability to control your emotions will be limited, and your immune system will go on strike. This downward spiral is avoidable. Simply put fresh fruit on your kitchen counter or granola bars in your purse, backpack, or man bag. Whatever you do, make sure you're not skipping meals.

This advice also works if, like me, you're a little too good at remembering to eat during times of stress. I prefer to eat my feelings with a large side of queso dip, thank you very much. Having healthy foods on hand can keep us on track to make the better choices and step away from the nachos, at least occasionally.

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### ***Pause to Reflect***

- In the last week, how many days did you eat fresh, healthy foods?
  - In the last week, how many days did you binge on junk food or skip meals?
  - In the last week, how many days did you consume drugs or alcohol?
  - In the last week, how many days did you take a nap or go for a walk outside?
  - What adjustments do you need to make so you'll have the right fuel to deal with the change you're facing in the next week?
  - What's the next easiest step you can take? When will you do it?
- 

### ***Are You Sleeping?***

Make sure you're getting enough sleep. This is difficult when we're stressed, because our brains can turn into a three-ring circus as soon as we lie down. If this is a challenge for you, try one of more of these techniques:

- Follow a healthy bedtime routine. Transition from daytime/stressed to nighttime/relaxed by making a big deal of putting on your pajamas, washing your face, brushing your teeth, and going to bed.
- Listen to a relaxation, meditation, or self-hypnosis podcast at bedtime. You can find my playlists and more in the online resources for this book at

[www.leadatanylevel.com/panic-to-purpose-resources](http://www.leadatanylevel.com/panic-to-purpose-resources)



- Write or repeat meaningful affirmations at bedtime. This one has worked wonders for me by shutting down all the trash talk that would otherwise be happening in my head.

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### ***Pause to Reflect***

- In the last week, how consistently did you follow a bedtime routine?
- In the last week, how many nights did you get at least seven hours of uninterrupted sleep?
- What adjustments do you need to make, and when will you do so?

### ***Move It, Move It***

Every day, if you can, go for a walk. A simple fifteen minutes will clear your head. If you can do more than that, great! Not only will you see health benefits, but you might also change your whole outlook.

When I was training for my first 5K in 2014, I noticed the more time I took for myself, the more I felt *worthy* of that time. I eventually trained

for and completed a half marathon, not because I loved running, but because I enjoyed the feeling of investing in myself.

You don't have to run a half-marathon. Start with beginner's yoga videos on YouTube or go for a walk around the block. Maybe if you dig around in your closet, you'll find an old VHS player and a Jane Fonda workout tape. Schedule a dance party in the living room with your roommates or kids. Or break out your hula hoop and start swiveling your hips. Do something (anything) and see how you feel.

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### ***Pause to Reflect***

- In the last week, how many days did you make time for movement?
  - In the last week, how many days did you go outside for at least ten minutes?
  - What's working well?
  - What adjustments do you need to make, and when will you do so?
- 

### ***Be Skeptical, but Do It Anyway***

During my days in the PPD Support Group, I was skeptical about the intense focus on self-care. Can a person really overcome debilitating depression with just these steps? Of course not. These steps alone will not solve all your problems. But here's the thing: Without appropriate self-care, your brain and body lack the resources they need to cope with and heal from the stress you're facing.

# Surprising Tips & Tricks

Now that you've got the basics of self-care covered, it's time to level up. This section offers some surprising and ridiculous-sounding tips for managing your morale during change.

## ***Express Gratitude***

When we focus on what's wrong, we find plenty to complain about. Instead, try focusing on what's right. Whether you keep a mental list or write down your blessings, take a moment each day to practice gratitude. Make a habit of teaching your brain to look for the good in the world so you can find more of it.

You can take this a step further by expressing your gratitude to others. Saying "thank you" in the moment helps others feel seen and valued for their contributions. A handwritten note card may become a cherished memento for a loved one or a member of your team. When we share our thanks with others, we help them see better in the world too!



*Photo Credit: Feverpitch / Depositphotos.com*

## ***Perform Random Acts of Kindness***

You don't have to be a superhero to make someone's day. On those days when you can't find much to be grateful for, see if you can create the experience for someone else. Leave a generous tip, send a thoughtful text message, or compliment a stranger. I often tell people, "The worse I feel, the nicer I try to be." Giving to others with no expectation that they will reciprocate can change how you see yourself and the world around you. Just do good, and don't keep score.

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*You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection."*

*—Buddha*

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## ***Plan Something Fun***

Look at your calendar. What's coming up that you're looking forward to? If you don't have anything, take a moment right now to schedule something you enjoy.

You might be surprised to learn that planning a vacation (not actually *being on vacation*) gives us a big happiness boost (Gilbert and Abdullah, 2002). Why? Because we're imagining ourselves happier in the future. When we do this, we pluck a bit of happiness from this imagined future and drop it into our current frame of mind.

Think about it. Most of our stress and worry come from imagining ourselves in some terrible future. All the what-ifs and permutations lead to catastrophic misery. When you imagine being miserable in the future, you become miserable right now.

Conversely, anything you can do to imagine yourself happy in the future will make you happy right now. Book a tee time or schedule a

pedicure. Plan lunch with your best friend or a surprise date night with your significant other. Project into this happy moment in your future. Your body will experience it as if it were happening in real time. It's fascinating, don't you think, that we can manufacture our own happiness anytime we choose. We simply imagine an alternate reality where we're already happy, and all that happiness time travels straight to us.

Get creative with this and think about what you can start planning. Remember, don't just *do* the happy thing. You must *plan it* so you can time travel in your mind. Then, as soon as the thing you scheduled is finished, repeat the process.

### ***Schedule Time to Worry***

Whenever you're experiencing substantial changes at work, you may find yourself worrying about what might happen. Worry at work zaps your energy and robs you of productive time.

Not too long ago, I worked on a small team in a Fortune 100 company. Our executive sponsor had left the company unexpectedly, and our team was in a bit of a stir. We weren't sure whether we would see the same level of support from the person who would take over the team.

For my part, I was still relatively new in my role and struggling to find my footing. In fact, I had just conducted an internal job search under similar circumstances in another department. Company policy prevented me from applying for another transfer so soon. I was convinced that my position would be eliminated; I felt trapped.

I'm ashamed to admit that my productivity plummeted while I waited ... and waited. Who would be taking over our department? When would we find out? This went on for weeks. My stress level heading into the holiday season was at a fever pitch. My performance in my no-longer-new role was, frankly, abysmal. How could I be effective when I spent so

much time playing and replaying what-if scenarios in my mind? Answer: I could not.

One day, I sat myself down for a difficult conversation. Admittedly, I couldn't control the executive search process, the hiring decision, the timeline, or the perspective of whatever Vice President filled the role. There were, however, some things I *could* control. Specifically, I could control how I structured my time, how much I accomplished, and my own attitude.

Still, some part of me felt that if I didn't worry about those unknowns, I couldn't prepare myself emotionally for the horrible events I was anticipating. In other words, I wasn't ready to let go of my worry.

I decided to try a compromise. Rather than spending all day (yes, it had gotten that bad) worrying, I would "time-box" it. I set up a recurring daily appointment on my calendar. Every weekday from 4:30 pm to 5:00 pm, my schedule was blocked for a very important meeting with myself. The subject line? "Worry."

This sounds ridiculous, and it was. But if you think about it, it's no more ridiculous than worrying without a schedule. When I worried all day, I wasted all day. If nothing else, wasting only half an hour every day would be a huge improvement.

Every time I started to worry at work, my rational self would say to my worrying self, "Remember our agreement? We agreed that we would only worry about that from 4:30 pm to 5:00 pm. It's only 8:30 in the morning. What can I get done right now while I'm waiting to worry?"

I'd start working on something. As soon as it was finished, I'd catch myself in a familiar pattern. "Nope," I'd say to myself, "can't worry for another four hours. What can I get done while I'm waiting?"

And do you know what happened? I got a good seven and a half hours of work done that day!

Then, when my 4:30 pm meeting alert popped up, I got all settled in to worry. After about two minutes, my brain said, “Well, this is stupid. I’m not going to spend thirty minutes worrying about that.” So I moved on and managed to get another 28 minutes’ worth of work done!

This strategy worked so well on Monday, that I tried it every day that week. By the end of the week, I’d stopped worrying completely.

One of my coworkers called me the next Monday to commiserate. He started with, “What are we going to do if they eliminate our jobs in November?” I told him about my scheduling trick and asked him to try it. It worked for him, too.

### ***Procrastination Is Also an Option***

Maybe you’re a free spirit, untethered to the constant demands of your calendar reminders. There’s still a way to make this work for you.

How many people do you know who procrastinate starting an exercise routine or going on a diet? Do you know someone who has put off doing their taxes, making their will, or cleaning their refrigerator shelves?

All the things we don’t want to do, we procrastinate. Try to procrastinate worry. Tell yourself, “I’ll worry about it later. I’ll worry about it someday. Or I’ll worry about it on Monday, right after I start my diet.” If you never get to it, what have you really lost?

## ***Be a Yeti***



*Image Credit: OpenClipart-Vectors / Pixabay.com*

As the previous examples demonstrate, our reality is defined by our perceptions. Change creates a shift in our reality. We must be prepared to manage our own perceptions in response. We can affect our perceptions and feelings with subtle shifts in our thinking and language. That's where being a Yeti comes in handy.

What do we know about the Yeti? No one's captured him ... yet. No one has proven his existence ... yet. No one has invited him to Thanksgiving dinner or made him Secretary of the Interior ... yet. Do you hear how much work "yet" is doing in those statements?

The Yeti is the great unknown. So is an ever-changing future. We can harness the power of the Yeti to create our own change-friendly mindset, one that creates new possible futures at will.

We wield our power by learning to say "yet":

- I don't know how to use the new computer system ... yet.
- Our new reporting structure hasn't been announced ...yet.

- I haven't learned about my new responsibilities ... yet.
- I don't have my degree ... yet.
- I haven't found another job ... yet.

The word “yet” says to us and to others that it’s not too late for us. “Yet” says there is a possibility of the future being better than the present. It empowers us to act and to regain a little bit of control. “Yet” gives us hope.

A Deloitte report (2020) revealed “only 30 percent of CEOs believe their organizations have the skills to adapt” to the changes they face. How would a Yeti rephrase this statement? The Yeti would say, “Seventy percent of CEOs don’t think their organizations have the skills to adapt ... yet.”

This distinction is important. We need to be clear with our employers, employees, and each other that we can grow, learn, and change to meet these challenges, even as the ground shifts beneath us.

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### ***Pause to Reflect***

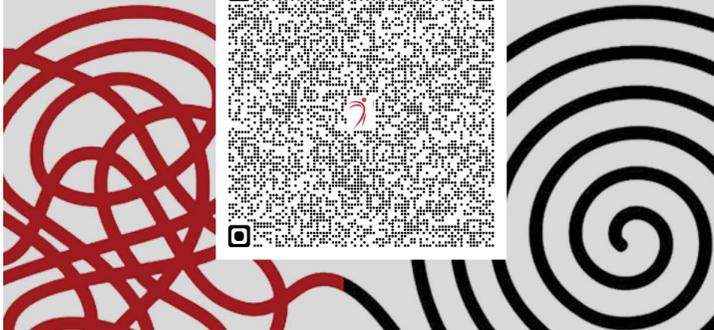
- What steps can you take right away to establish a self-care routine?
  - Do you have something fun scheduled on your calendar?
    - If so, take a moment right now to imagine yourself in that moment.
    - If not, what fun activity can you plan?
  - Schedule a worry appointment. Name three triggers or unknowns. Can you save them until 4:30?
  - List three “random” acts of kindness you could perform in the next two weeks. Which one appeals to you most, and when will you make it happen?
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If this chapter helped you steady yourself, the full book shows you how to move forward with clarity and purpose—again and again.

AMY C. WANINGER

# MOVING FROM PANIC TO PURPOSE

NOW AVAILABLE  
ON AMAZON



# Early Praise for *Moving from Panic to Purpose*

“We know (or ought to know) to expect the unexpected. Waninger walks the reader through hard-earned lessons from different kinds of disruptions, both personal and professional, so we can prepare and respond ahead of time by recognizing patterns. It’s time to move from panic to purpose!”

—Jessica Pettitt, Author, *Almost Doing Good*

“Reading *Moving from Panic to Purpose* felt like sitting across from a wise friend who’s been through the fire—and brought back a flashlight. Amy Waninger doesn’t just offer inspiration; she gives you a roadmap, a hug, and a gentle push forward. This book is as practical as it is powerful.”

—Kelly Swanson, Hall of Fame Speaker & Storytelling Expert

“... [R]elatable stories blend with simple tools of reflection you can use immediately, whether facing a career shift or a personal challenge. By the end, you feel less alone, more prepared, and even a little excited about the adventure ahead.”

—Maria Garaitonandia, Author, *Untangling Communication*

“What I love most about Amy Waninger's book is how authentic and human it feels. *Moving from Panic to Purpose* comes across less like a corporate manual and more like a conversation with a wise, trusted friend and advisor. She offers a fresh mix of real-world examples and practical advice, giving you a clear, relatable guide for navigating workplace changes.”

—Mary "MJ" McConner, Ph.D., Founder, *Inclusive Excellence Consulting*

"Amy Waninger shows us how to transform fear into resilience. Moving from Panic to Purpose is a powerful guide for anyone facing change in their career or life. This book is an indispensable resource for leaders."

—Alison Martin, Founder and Chief Program Officer, *Engage Mentoring*

Amy's book is such a thoughtful and practical guide for navigating change. I love how she combines simple exercises—like pressing your “pause button” or embracing the power of “yet”—with reminders about self-care, support, and staying grounded. Her approach makes big, stressful changes feel less overwhelming and more manageable. It really feels like having Amy walk alongside you, offering encouragement and useful tools every step of the way.

—Sacha Thompson, CEO, *The Equity Equation*

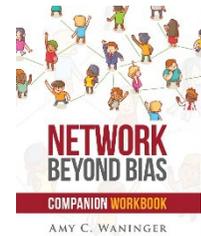
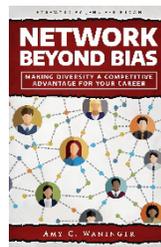
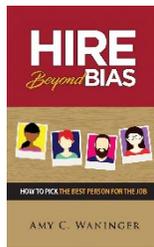
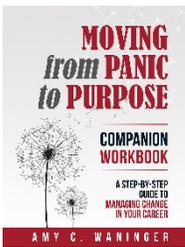
Workplace change is constant, Amy C. Waninger delivers the guide we all need right now to help process it and not be waylaid by it. **Moving from Panic to Purpose** is part candid memoir, part practical playbook—an empowering resource for professionals at every level. Amy's approachable style and repeatable framework transform change from a source of anxiety into a launchpad for growth. Whether you're leading a team through a major reorg or personally facing an unexpected career pivot, this book gives you the tools to manage uncertainty with clarity, courage, and confidence.

—Angel G. Henry, President, *Amulet Consortium*

*Moving from Panic to Purpose* gives professionals the clarity and tools they need to turn disruption into growth. Amy Waninger's insights align with what I've seen in my own decades of change work. This book is a game-changer.

—April Callis-Birchmeier, Author, *Ready, Set, CHANGE!*

# Also Available from Amy C. Waninger



Find all of Amy C. Waninger's titles on Amazon at  
<https://amzn.to/3I89Xun>



# About the Author



*Photo Credit: Lori Cardwell Photography*

Amy C. Waninger is the Founder & CEO of Lead at Any Level, where she helps organizations transform their STEM professionals from reclusive nerds to inclusive leaders. Amy offers assessments, advisory services, and training on essential skills for inclusive leaders. This is her eighth book.

Amy is a Certified Diversity Professional (CDP), Certified Diversity Executive (CDE), and Gallup Certified Strengths Coach. She is also a Member of National Speakers Association, a Certified Virtual Presenter, and a Prosci Certified Change Practitioner. Amy is licensed to administer CliftonStrengths, Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), Intercultural Conflict Style (ICS), Emotional Intelligence (EIQ), and a variety of DiSC assessments for individuals and teams, as well as the Spectra Diversity Inclusion Assessment for teams and organizations.

She's been named a Top 100 HR Influencer globally, five years in a row, and has served clients and audiences on all seven continents, including Antarctica! Her other credentials include two degrees from Indiana University and a "World's Best Mom" coffee mug.