

Commencement Address to NC State Electrical and Computer Engineering
Wes Covell, Division VP Engineering
Harris Corporation
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Thank you, Dr. Trew, for giving me the opportunity to say a few words at this commencement ceremony. This is a very special opportunity for me, as preparing this speech caused me to think back to my own graduation from NC State on May 12, 1984.

In 1984, NC State's graduation exercises were held here in Reynolds Coliseum. Chancellor Bruce Poulton presided over the ceremonies and William Friday, President of the University of North Carolina system, participated in the event. Following the graduation exercises, the Electrical and Computer Engineering department distributed diplomas at a ceremony held in Nelson Auditorium.

In preparing for this speech, I scanned through my photographs from that special day. They helped me recall the pride and joy I felt as I celebrated a significant accomplishment with my family and friends, and I'm sure you are feeling the same pride and joy today. The photos also helped remind me of the anticipation and anxiety I felt as I prepared to move to Columbia, Maryland to start my engineering career with the Applied Physics Laboratory. I'm sure many of you are also feeling that same anticipation and anxiety as you prepare for the next steps of your personal journeys. Perhaps most significantly, however, the photos reminded me just how young I was in 1984 and made me long for the days when I still had bangs. Yes, as evidenced by my current lack of bangs, change is inevitable, and that is the topic of this speech – embracing change.

Most of you have seen the series of television advertisements sponsored by an insurance company with the theme "Life Comes at You Fast." In one of the ads, a father and young son run up a hill together where they find a swing hanging from a magnificent tree. The father pushes the son on the swing, and they both are all smiles and laughter as they enjoy a special time together. But then, in the blink of an eye,

the son is fully grown, and his large body swings into the stunned father, knocking him to the ground. Yes, this ad is an exaggeration for effect, but it illustrates that life really does come at you fast, and you need to be prepared to handle the changes that you will encounter along the way.

As someone who has been in management roles for over 15 years, I frequently deal with life and business events that remind me that life is filled with change. In fact, I have learned that a few simple words can totally disrupt my carefully crafted plans for the day. Those simple words have numerous variants, but typically sound something like “Wes, have you got a minute?” or “Sorry to wake you, but...” or the statement that will always make my heart race with apprehension: “Wes, we need to talk...”

Sometimes, those words are spoken by one of my superiors, and foreshadow an event such as a reorganization, special assignment, or career redirection.

Sometimes, it is a subordinate dealing with a major illness and the prospect that he or she will be out of work for weeks or months. Sometimes, it is a coworker who has unexpectedly and tragically lost a loved one. It can be a phone call at 2 o'clock in the morning from a friend needing help. It can even be as simple as a tearful meeting with a co-worker who is overwhelmed with stress and frustration, and just needs a shoulder to cry on. Regardless of the form they take, these events are almost always unanticipated, yet must be addressed swiftly, with skill, compassion, and integrity.

Over the years, I've learned that life is much like a complex waveform. There are relatively stable components that change slowly over time, and there are transient components that are unpredictable and intermittent. One should take advantage of the relatively stable periods to develop a foundation of core skills and values. These values and skills help one weather the difficult times and to embrace the challenges of change in a proactive, well-prepared manner.

I don't have time to delve into each of these core skills and values, but they include fundamental attributes such as integrity, accountability, teamwork, communications, leadership, sense of urgency, competitive spirit, setting high standards, innovation, customer focus, and disciplined execution. Change brings great opportunity, and you

need to equip yourself with the skills that will allow you to make the most of these opportunities to accelerate your career and be a source of strength in the most challenging of times. Howard Lance, CEO of Harris, likens building a career to building a wall – you want to keep adding new “bricks” of skills and experiences.

I would like to take a few minutes to tell you about the journey that brought me to Reynolds Coliseum in 1984, and that has brought me back to this place today.

I began this journey in 1962. I was born shortly after President Kennedy made his famous speech to a joint session of congress, challenging the United States to send a man to the moon by the end of the decade. Like many children of the time, I was fascinated with all things “space.” I eagerly anticipated each mission, perhaps more eagerly than I anticipated visits from Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, and vividly remember waiting in line for hours just to get a glimpse of an Apollo mission moon rock.

As time went on, I developed an interest in radios and communications systems, became an Amateur Radio operator, and earned my degree in electrical engineering here at NC State. Given my interest in space and communications systems, I accepted a position with The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, eager to design satellites for scientific research missions.

That is when I first learned about change and the impact it can have on your career. Just as I started work with the Applied Physics Lab, I learned that funding for the space department had been slashed, and the funds were being used to build advanced communications systems for the US Navy. Rather than starting my dream assignment with the space department, I was assigned to the Fleet Systems Department. I was heartbroken at first, but quickly grew to enjoy my work. I became a trusted advisor to the Navy and Army on satellite communications systems, and I developed a set of skills that have served me well for many years. Little did I know it, but I was learning to embrace change. Change creates tension and accelerates learning.

In December 1990, I accepted a position with Harris Corporation to be their Milstar expert in support of an Army contract at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Recall that this was during Operation Desert Shield, which became Operation Desert Storm in January 1991. As luck would have it, funds for my Milstar assignment were diverted to Desert Storm, and I thought for sure I was going to be part of a reduction in force (that's a euphemism for layoff). Instead, Harris was pleased with the work I had done in my few months in Arizona, and they promoted me to Chief of the Satellite Systems Branch, which I successfully led for almost five years.

Embrace change. Change brings unexpected challenges and opportunities.

Fast forward to October 1998. I was working for Harris in Melbourne, Florida, as the Chief Systems Engineer on the Ocean Net Buoy Communications System program. I was having the time of my life, designing, building and testing a 10 meter high, 110,000 pound ocean-going buoy that provided a communications link from the ocean to shore via a C-Band satellite communications link. As development of the first buoy neared completion, I was asked to take an assignment as engineering manager of a 130 person engineering department. To say that I was reluctant to give up my Ocean Net assignment is an understatement. After much arm twisting, however, I accepted the position. Since then, I have had engineering leadership positions throughout the division and corporation, and this diversity of assignments has served me well in my career progression. Today, I lead a department of over 4000 engineers and I'm having the time of my life.

Embrace change. New opportunities are often uncomfortable, but they have a way of revealing untapped skills and unexplored potential for growth.

So that is my story. I've never gone to space, but I've done things I would never have dreamed of doing. I've designed and tested communications systems on Navy warships, and experienced the thrill of making systems work under the most challenging of conditions. I've been catapulted off an aircraft carrier, hoisted off ships at sea by helicopters, and toiled in nearly unbearable heat in cramped radomes. I've

been a member of teams who have found a way to be successful in the face of overwhelming odds, and I've experienced the joy of victory and the agony of defeat on numerous occasions. Best of all, I continue to grow and learn, and I look forward to the challenges that await me in my journey through life.

Today, we celebrate a key milestone on your personal journeys. I'm sure that all of you have plans for the future; some are detailed and elaborate, others are vague outlines shaped only by hopes and dreams. Regardless, you need to anticipate that your plans must be able to accommodate change. John F. Kennedy said "*Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.*" Congratulations on your accomplishments to date, and continue to build a strong foundation of skills and values that will serve you well in times of stability and in times of turmoil and rapid change. When you encounter those inevitable change events, embrace them, learn from them, and grow from them. If you do, you will be well positioned for a lifetime of challenge, growth and success. I wish you Godspeed on your journeys, and thank you for this opportunity to share some time with you. Congratulations and good luck!