In one of my first weekend MBA classes, our professor displayed a picture of a group of meerkats. They stood surrounding their home looking outwards in all directions for predators. Its intent was to symbolize how our MBA would help us get a 360-degree view of business and anticipate challenges before it was too late. Now, a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, I think this analogy still applies, but the image could include a sinkhole suddenly forming underneath the meerkat’s home and swallowing the entire group.

Prior to the pandemic, Hank’s and Nowhere, two restaurants that I own and operate with my husband Clark Deutscher and our best friend Devon Revelle, were thriving downtown Victoria eateries. Hank’s had become a staple of the Victoria food scene and enjoyed a loyal following. Nowhere, which opened in 2018, was named one of Canada’s top new restaurants in 2019 by Enroute magazine. At the end of that year, we were at the top of our game and our talented team were engaged and invested in the business. Then March 2020 hit, and the moment of elation ended with us—like that group of meerkats—at the bottom of a pandemic-sinkhole.

So, like everyone else worldwide, we asked, “What can we do?” The truth is—you do the best you can. Some of the questions I asked myself were whether we could afford our staff. How about our rent? Could we change our business model? Could we afford to build? Pay ourselves? If yes, when?

With every new idea we tried, we closely monitored its performance. We created an efficient customer feedback loop; we listened to our team’s feedback; we kept our KPIs in mind and we communicated them to our team. The new safety regulations alone forced businesses to innovate, but for the restaurant industry, we also had to change our business process, losing customer capacity and comfort.

Hank’s, a small 19-seat restaurant, was difficult to renovate for outdoor seating and was also difficult to create a plan to maintain proper social distancing. As a result, Hank’s was closed for longer than we wanted or what was required.

Because Hank’s had a loyal customer base accustomed to an ever-changing menu, they became our test lab on what would sell for take-out. Our customer support and frankness has contributed greatly to our survival. Prior to 2020, we didn’t really have any experience with take-out, and we are still learning the art of it, but isn’t that what continuous improvement is all about?

Our food, especially at Nowhere, has some intricate components (like our deconstructed lemon pie) that are not as take-out friendly as we thought. So we learned to adapt. But the one thing we were adamant about was the need to remain true to our vision—providing good food and good service.

Since we were having a hard time converting Nowhere to a take-out restaurant, a team member suggested we try a membership program. If there is anything anyone can take away from this little confession of mine, it is this: Listen to your team’s ideas! We adopted this idea and with the contribution of our excellent local suppliers, we created surprise boxes that members received every two-to-three weeks. It was successful in getting people excited again, but more importantly it was fun and reminded us why we love what we do.

Our climb out of the pandemic-sinkhole has been long and treacherous, inch by inch, sometimes up and sometimes down. So really, how has an MBA guided me this last year? What I can say is this: An MBA isn’t a rope that magically appears when you are at the bottom. It’s not that kind of tool. (Besides, who do you expect to throw you the rope? An actual meerkat?) No, what my MBA gave me was the ability to figure out how to free climb out of that sinkhole, even if it is just one inch at a time.