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Sharpen Your Tools

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EVERY DAY is an ADVENTURE

Transformative leadership lessons from the world of ultra-endurance racing

My teammates and I have learned about building world-class teams the hard way: by competing in and winning the world's toughest ultra-endurance adventure races.

From the leech-infested jungles of Borneo to the towering peaks of Tibet and Ecuador, to the frigid seas and glaciers of Patagonia and the searing desert of Namibia, we have run, paddled, mountain biked, climbed, whitewater rafted, spelunked, mountaineered, navigated and raced across the most remote places on Earth for up to 10 nonstop days and nights—all as a team.

During these races, there is no shelter, no warm food, no escape from the harshness of the uncharted terrain and no reprieve from our competitors relentlessly nipping at our blister-covered heels. If just one racer from our four-person mixed-gender team quits, we are all disqualified. So, by necessity, the journey to the unimaginably distant finish line in these 600- to 1,000-mile “eco-challenges” very quickly becomes far less a matter of athletic skill than a matter of great leadership, the human spirit and our ability to inspire our tattered teammates to continue to rise to the occasion again and again—no matter how tough the challenge, no matter how steep the climb and in the face of a consistently changing game. (It kind of sounds like your job as a leader, doesn't it?)

Is adventure racing insanity? Granted. But there is one very useful, if unintended, real-world takeaway for every finisher: an honorary PhD in teambuilding. Or as I like to call it: creating human synergy.

So how do we as leaders keep a team moving forward toward those audacious goals with one heart and one mind? Here are a few essential elements of human synergy that I've learned from the world's greatest extreme teammates:

1 Be ruled by the hope of success versus the fear of failure.

Are you consistently doing what it takes to “win” versus simply “not lose”? It's a completely different mindset, leading to vastly different outcomes. Fortune favors the bold. Great leaders are shattering the norm, changing the game and doing things that have never been done in an effort to propel their team to the next level. They are courageous; not only in terms of innovation, but in terms of perseverance: taking step after step, day after day, relentlessly pursuing excellence.

We won many a race not only by “slowing down less” than the other teams, but by coming up with some game-changing solutions. Once, in a 100-mile whitewater canoeing leg to the finish, my teammate taught me the “be ruled by the hope of success” lesson through some tough love. We were paddling our whitewater raft near the front of the race on day six, and every couple of minutes, I looked behind us to see where our closest competitors were. That is, until the teammate sitting behind me grabbed the top of my head, spun it back around to face forward, pointed down the river and said “winning is that way.” My other teammate overheard the admonishment and realized my teammate was right. We had to focus on winning versus “not losing.”

So in the next leg, when race organizers gave each team two separate inflatable canoes, my innovative teammates decided to tie our two canoes together with our climbing rope, end to end, creating one very long, rigid and fast new boat, powered by every member of the team. We also switched out our canoe paddles (single blades) for kayak paddles (double blades), which was far outside the norm for canoe travel. With those visionary changes, we caught the team that was an hour ahead of us and went on to win the race by two hours on that final leg.

In another race, the Borneo Eco-Challenge, we took the lead halfway through the race by turning a proposed “hiking leg” of the race into a swimming leg by jumping into the rising whitewater rapids generated by a recent flash flood and swimming for several hours downriver, just yards from the hiking trail, and much of it in the dark. It was extremely risky, but also cutting-edge cunning. We never looked back, and we led the race all the way from there to the finish line.

2 Offer a tow line, and most importantly, take one when needed.

Leave your ego (but not your confidence) at the start line. Ego is one the heaviest things in your pack. Over the long haul, as a leader or not, we will at some point be the strongest link and the weaker link on our team. All of us will happily offer our strength to our teammates when they need it, but how many of us are also offering our weaknesses to the team?

On our team, every racer has tow lines, made from thin bungee cords, hanging from the back of our packs. If we are feeling strong, we offer it to a struggling teammate. If we are having a low moment, we grab a tow line from someone stronger and get lightly pulled along at the faster pace until we recover—rather than forcing the team to slow down for us. The goal? To “suffer equally,” as my favorite team captain, Kiwi John Howard, used to so eloquently put it. You’ll get farther, faster if you do.

I believe that we have not used all of our strength as leaders until we have asked for and accepted help from our teammates. And if that’s tough for you (because, let’s face it: it’s tough sometimes), I’d love to offer you a unique perspective that will help. Think about accepting help as a gift to the helper. People are thrilled when they have a chance to help you. Let them do it! You create a connection and a bond every time you do. Accepting help (and sometimes even asking for it) is one of my favorite team synergy-creating tools as a leader.

3 Inspire “we” thinking.

We are all conditioned from a young age to see winning as something mutually exclusive, as in “For me to win, you must lose.” We are wired to compete at everything. And we do, sometimes to the detriment of our friendships, our colleagues, our companies and even our marriages.

What if you decided instead to see a world full of potential teammates instead of a world full of competitors when you left the house every morning? You would not only be happier; you’d be far more successful. Great leaders understand that in the quest to become the best of the best, nobody wins alone. The more difficult the challenge, the more critical the team. Leaders who think in terms of “we” capitalize on their strengths and outsource their weaknesses, consistently building and inspiring a team that is able to connect to one another for mutual gain, whether for a moment, a project or a lifetime. And they happily share that space at the top of the podium with the people who got them there.

4 Always act like a team. It’s far more important than feeling like one.

We’re not always going to feel warm and mushy about one another. We’re human! But it’s important to remember to not let emotion affect locomotion. No matter how we feel, we’re never allowed a day off from being the leader or teammate who people need and expect us to be. In other words, channel your inner great leader/teammate until the good feelings come back. And in doing so, you’ll guarantee they come back even sooner.

During the World Championships in Ecuador, my team had a major disagreement about our navigation. In fact, it caused such a rift that we didn’t speak for hours. But as we approached the media crews on our exit from that hiking leg, our team captain said something that changed the game for us: “If you want to become the world champions, you need to act like world champions.” And I’m telling you, we could have won an Academy Award for that acting performance: congratulating one another on a job well done, getting food for one another, high fives and hugs all around. It was all for the cameras, of course, but guess what happened? By the time we got new gear and moved on, we were all genuinely happy together and moving forward as team. The argument never resurfaced. We were too busy with winning. Yes, I did just suggest you fake it until the feelings come back, but it works. The same is true with love, too, by the way. Acting like you’re in love is sometimes more important than feeling like you’re in love. Try this at home. You can thank me later.

5 Put your teammates on your shoulders.

When we have the label of “leader,” we often take it to mean that we need to get out in front and show people the way. And that is occasionally part of the job. But my favorite leaders allow for leadership among team members

based on their strengths and not their titles. They “manage” the team, but allow for different leaders to emerge. And they are always focused on helping their team inspire and amaze themselves—understanding that confidence and inspiration are an inside job.

During the 1997 Eco-Challenge, the Japanese team did something that defied all logic, reason and the bounds of human endurance. They carried their injured female teammate for 18 hours, piggy-back style inside a backpack, up and over an incredibly steep, rocky, muddy, dense-jungle-covered 9,000-foot mountain in their quest to get to the finish line. When they emerged from the sugar cane fields at the base of the mountain, battered but victorious, they did something incredibly powerful: They picked up their injured teammate and put her on their shoulders. They gave her the moment to shine and symbolically gave her the credit for allowing them to succeed against the toughest of odds.

It’s my favorite adventure racing moment of all time because their performance said it all: We don’t achieve our greatest heights as leaders by stepping on our teammates’ backs to rise higher. We stand much taller as leaders when we put our teammates on our shoulders. And we don’t inspire our teammates by leading the pack and showing them how wonderful we are. We inspire them by putting them on our shoulders and showing them how amazing, smart and capable they are.

Robyn Benincasa is a two-time Adventure Racing World Champion, a two-time Guinness World Record distance kayaker, a full-time firefighter and the author of the New York Times bestseller “How Winning Works.” She was also recently named a 2014 CNN Hero for founding the Project Athena Foundation, which helps survivors of medical setbacks live an adventurous dream as part of their recovery. Benincasa is also the Closing Keynote at RFMA 2015 in San Diego.