The Extreme CEO

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Leadership and teamwork: to the North Pole and back

“With the right team you can conquer anything”
“It’s such a special place, even though you know you are not welcome because of the elements”

Can you tell our readers how your trip to the North Pole came about, was it something you had always wanted to do, and how did you prepare?

There has been a team of us in South Africa that have climbed a lot of mountains. We try to get together every 2 years or so. Personally I have climbed Everest and 5 of the 7 summits. (Editor’s note – the 7 summits are the highest mountains on each one of the 7 continents).

Sean Disney runs a company called Adventure Dynamics and we were having a chat about doing something different. Sean has been to the South Pole and was keen to do the North Pole. Once we had decided we soon had the first ever SA team ready to go to North Pole!

In terms of fitness, the team all had a good starting point; running, hiking and mountain biking. So we focused on endurance gym which involved repetitions rather than big weights. Also, exercises such as strapping a 4x4 tyre to my body with a harness and seeing how far I could pull it!

What were the highlights and the lowlights of the trip, can you tell us what is the North Pole really like?

One of the things we couldn’t prepare for was the cold, our theory was that it is similar to pain, so for example if you were to crunch and break your foot it’s extremely painful. However, if two months later someone hits your thumb with a hammer, because you have had something worse, it doesn’t make it not sore, it’s just not as bad. So we knew the North Pole was going to be hard whether we had been exposed to it or not, and we knew we just had to deal with it when it happened. The cold was definitely the hardest part for me. It’s extremely cold and it’s never warm, there’s no retreat, not even just to catch up for an hour, it’s cold all the time.

We had a really good team of people so the camaraderie was fantastic, a lot of laughs, so when the guys were tired, we shared some humour. We skied for an average of 10 hours every day. You can’t have long breaks because it is too cold, so every hour you stop, have a quick drink and snack, and carry on. I enjoyed the endurance side of it.

The first ever South African team to go to the North Pole
I would say the highlight was being on the polar ice cap, somewhere so remote, where so few people go, and just looking for miles and seeing ice, beautiful cracks and ridges. Being somewhere special so far away, even though you know you are not welcome because of the elements.

When you do these kind of things you take time out from everything and it’s quite nice to have a reset and a refresh and you come back energised and your mind’s strong and you’ve missed your family and your work, everything. I think it’s the benefit of having a good break, where you can’t get a cell-phone call, you can’t get anything, that would be my highlight.

In terms of teamwork and selecting the right team, how does that translate into what you do here at Berco?

That’s a good point, and now talking in this discussion, it comes through as quite an obvious one. There is no doubt about it if I look at the management team here then I really believe that we have the best people in each position. If we didn’t, the lesson would have to be that we have either got to put that person into the right job, or make a change.

Don’t take second best when choosing your team. If you have someone who hits a weak point, as they might for example on an expedition, if they have the right frame of mind then they will get through that, and the team will get through that. The team will want to support that person. So think carefully before you put someone in a particular position. Make sure they are a good fit, not only with technical ability, but with the right attitude. And then when they are in that position, support them 100% until you hit that path, unless the deviation is so great that it’s like a broken leg where they can’t carry on.

Can you name a person who has had a big impact on you as a leader?

There are quite a few people that I have learnt from, as I have tried to take different elements from a lot of people. We have Bernie who is the founder of this business who has great strength in keeping composure and trying to be pleasant as well as driving a very strong image. I think that has been a big influence on me too.

I have worked for people over the years that have taught me various things. Reading books is important too, for example Jack Welch has some great books. I wouldn’t say there is one particular mentor that stands out but there are many that I have tried to learn from.

What did you learn about leadership and teamwork from the trip?

I think humour, and then keeping your wits about you are very important things. We were fortunate that during the entire trip there was not a single incident of negativity between the team members. We had been warned by people who had been on polar expeditions that because of the severity of the conditions and the hard physical demand on your body and the mental challenges, best of friends could actually hate each other after a few days. We really didn’t have that. When one of the team started battling a bit people took some of his load, and that made it humorous, rather than making him feel judged. The team stuck together.

From a leadership point of view, what Sean did well was selecting people who can cope well in such an environment. It only takes one or two team members to not be like-minded, to have someone who is moaning and being negative, someone who is critical of others. That would have changed the whole dynamics of the team. Sean spent a lot of effort choosing who comes on this trip. He only chose people whom he knew well.

The lesson as a leader is to select your team very carefully as with the right team you can conquer anything.

A 90% correct team can suffer, as the other 10% will pull the rest down.

"It’s extremely cold, minus 40C and so it’s never warm, there’s no retreat, it’s cold all the time."
In Berco, where do the great ideas come from and how do you encourage creative thinking within your organization?

We have the "212: The Extra Degree" project which came about when a sales rep came forward and told me that she had read a great book, and that we should use it for the Johannesburg sales team. I read it and I said it was so good I think it could do much more for us. At 211 degrees water is very hot, but at 212 it boils. So we encourage everyone to have ideas to get us that extra one degree.

We are very happy for ideas to come from wherever, in order to create an environment that encourages people. I think you need to take people's ideas and do something with them. You can have all these policies and rules written down but if you don't act on people's ideas they will generally dry up.

There is no formal policy for communicating ideas. People can come in at any time and see me. I see shop stewards, couriers, admin staff, whoever, they'll come in and ask for a minute of my time.

We don't always get ideas from everyone, it tends to be 90/10, but at least that when the 10% do have ideas, we have open arms to them. We look to all 850 employees to have one idea, and to help us achieve that 1 extra degree from 211 to 212. That's why I went to the North Pole, we skied that last 1 degree from 89 to 90 degrees!

What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should possess?

Humility. You have got to stay humble. So when you have a few people working under you in a big business, try not to get arrogant. Always make sure that you have time for people and be genuinely interested in them. Sometimes it's just the smallest things, for example when someone walks into your office and you are busy with an email then you shouldn't talk and type at the same time, it's just small things like that which are wrong.

What is the biggest challenge facing leaders today?

I would say two things. Firstly, attracting and keeping the best people. Especially the younger generation, well qualified people, they tend to think 2 or 3 years in an organisation is enough, and then they want to move on. We must create an environment where we retain and grow that human capital. I think that's important.

Secondly, make sure that you don't get stuck behind a computer screen. Of course emails come in all the time, but you need to get out there. I make sure I don't fall into that trap by planning a diary of being out, getting in front of people. We have sites in 14 towns, and by the end of April this year I had been to everyone.

What advice would you give to someone looking to gain insight into becoming a better leader?

The obvious one is to learn from others. But perhaps something slightly different would be to allow your personality to come through. There is a wide spectrum of different personalities that can be very successful, so whether you are a Jack Welch, or someone that is very inspirational in another methodology, let that come through. That will allow your leadership team to stay for the length of time and for you to keep your energy about you. Don't ever lose that.

So for me, adventure is a big part of my life. It's very easy to not do an adventure because the timing doesn't allow for it, work, money or whatever the excuse is. But I need to make it happen as it's a big part of me, it makes me be myself.

Please tell us what is next for the "Extreme CEO"?

There are so many things I want to do, another mountain in the Himalayas, I would like to do the South Pole, I would like to finish the 7 summits. I would like to take my kids up Kilimanjaro, it depends on what the group wants to do next, but there is still lots in the pipeline.
Finally, what are you doing to ensure you continue to grow and develop as a leader?

I think from an education perspective, there are a few pillars that allow you to grow, but for me that isn’t the most important.

What is the most important is staying engaged with the staff and listening, and in that aspect, learning from people as you go. We have all got lots to learn. I don’t think there is any certain book or course that you can go on that makes you much better but it’s more about how you practice these different things.

Andy van der Velde was talking with Alan de Sousa Caires.

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