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YPO-WPO DAREDEVILS

By Sherry Whittemore

Whether it's escapism, discipline or adrenaline that drives them, chief executives are finding leadership lessons in extremes.

Driving 175 miles per hour (282 kilometers). Descending 4,123 feet (1,257 meters). Motorcycling from Alaska to Argentina. YPO and WPO chief executives push extreme limits, and there is a reason why the stakes are high.

"Leaders are willing to take risks," says industrial and organizational psychologist Veronica Harvey. "They size up the end goal, or result, or return and are willing to be on the cutting edge."

Harvey, who specializes in leadership development and talent management, identifies three characteristics common to chief executives and those who enjoy participating in extreme sports and outdoor adventuring:

- *Ability*: the mental prowess for making effective decisions while having social intelligence and adeptness,
- *Aspirations*: the drive to push oneself, raising the bar on personal standards to break through the status quo, and
- *Agility*: an openness to new experiences and the ability to learn quickly while being self-aware.

The three "A's" are characteristics that help chief executives succeed, whether racing a car, flying an airplane or leading in the boardroom.

Courage, clarity and perseverance

Cheryl Bart (WPO Greater Sydney) set several world records in her quest for a physical and mental challenge. In 2000, Bart entered The Explorers Grand Slam adventure, a journey that took her to the North and South poles and the Seven Summits: Mount Everest, Mount Kilimanjaro, Denali, Aconcagua, Vinson Massif, Mount Elbrus and Mount Kosciuszko. Bart is the first woman in Australia to complete the challenge and the 31st participant in the world to climb all seven mountains and ski to the poles. She and her daughter were also the first mother-daughter team to reach the Seven Summits.

While "being humbled, standing at some of the most spectacular and remote places on the planet," Bart, chairman of the board at Shaw of Australia, found many parallels in adventuring and managing a company. Her list includes: establishing a clear vision, focusing on the task at hand, providing feedback and being determined.



YPO Indiana Chapter members descend Mount Rainier in July 2012, after a week-long adventure to summit the largest volcanic mountain in the continental United States.



“More than that, it is setting a goal and chipping away at it bit by bit,” she says. “If you stood at the bottom of Mount Everest and looked at the summit, you might just give up because it looks impossible. But even an ‘impossible’ dream can be achieved through planning, risk assessment and mitigation, communication, teamwork, perseverance and courage.”

Bart also notes that flexibility and adapting as conditions change are crucial for success.



Harvey explains that many chief executives, like Bart, possess the ability to think strategically and look ahead. Courage, she says, is a fundamental characteristic of leadership. “Leaders face tough situations every day that constantly test their courage. Most keep pushing the envelope, never satisfied with status quo. Sometimes we see this spillover in other areas of life, like extreme sports.”

Adrenaline, resilience and absolute focus

Clinical psychologist-turned-business-psychologist Michelle Clark says chief executives who enjoy the adrenaline rush in extreme adventures have found the “right form of escapism.”

“This kind of high-risk activity requires absolute focus in the moment,” she says. “For CEOs who have 24/7 jobs and are awake at 2 a.m. worrying about the bottom line, they are forced to stop thinking about work. It is a healthy way to disengage.”

Brian King (YPO Indiana) organized a 2012 expedition to Mount Rainier in Washington state with seven peers from his chapter. The team trained for six months before climbing the largest volcanic mountain in the continental United States. The training and expedition were a forum-like experience that offered the members a break from the boardroom.

“We all work a tremendous number of hours. To be able to check out of professional life while we train is a much needed break,” King says. “Because there is an element of danger and risk calculation, our minds remain engaged and limits of risk/reward are discovered. I believe it keeps us mentally sharp, energized and more balanced professionals.”

Having motorcycled more than 70,000 miles around the world, sometimes traveling for months at a time, **Dan Moore** (WPO Cleveland) describes his sport as a challenge of endurance and discipline.

“The most important feature of these lengthy trips is that it takes you completely away and makes it difficult to keep in contact with your business,” he says. “A true adventure motorcycle trip requires full concentration.”

Moore advises any chief executive who takes up an extreme sport to “put your involvement with your company to bed.”

The mental acuity and physical endurance of adventuring are also a welcomed respite for Moore. “The man and the machine aspect of this type of travel is very appealing to me,” he says.

From the Silk Road in China, along the Continental Divide of the Americas and across Africa, Moore has experienced extreme conditions. “You typically are taking your motorcycle through very rough areas. You fall (from the bike) and have to figure out how to pick it up. It breaks down and you have to fix it on the fly. There’s the danger of injury and the danger of wild animals.”

Throughout his travels, Moore has encountered a black bear in Canada, played a game of Buzkashi in Kyrgyzstan — where he rode horseback carrying a headless goat carcass — and navigated the aftermath of an 8.8 magnitude earthquake in Chile. “There’s a sense of speed, exhilaration and freedom that is part of motorcycling,” Moore says. “To me, this truly is rejuvenating.”

Harvey notes, “In addition to laser focus, executives must be exceptionally resilient and bounce back from all types of adversity. Leadership takes the mental toughness to keep moving forward when others are crumbling.”

Checks and balances

Whether a solo endeavor or team sport, adequate planning and clear boundaries are crucial in extreme sports and adventuring.

“Establishing balance is key for chief executives,” says Harvey. “Driven people need to be cautious and ensure that they don’t push the limits too much.”

David Ducote (YPO Houston) has raced cars professionally for more than a decade. While training for heat tolerance (because the temperature climbs above 120 degrees Fahrenheit (49 degrees celsius) in the cockpit), speeding 175 miles per hour (272 kilometers) and driving for 10 consecutive hours, Ducote learned that preparation for performance is crucial and that every aspect of racing is highly organized.



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He cautions chief executives interested in extreme sports to approach a new endeavor slowly and methodically. “I would suggest taking incremental and deliberate steps so that you are prepared mentally and physically. This also creates comfort levels or exit opportunities before you find yourself in over your head,” he says. “Even extreme sports have levels. Find one that suits you.”

Many chief executives who engage in high-risk decision making on a daily basis are required to maintain a sharp focus to succeed, Clark says.

For Ducote, it is challenging to switch gears from the demands of business. He has taken several work calls from the back of a race car trailer and acknowledges the single most important factor in an extreme sport is the absolute purity of focus required. “When I hang up and put on the helmet my mind is clear.”

Ducote has competed in several Petite LeMans Races and relies on a clear game plan and team of experts for optimum performance.



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1. Ricky Arriola (YPO Miami) completed the Ironman Brazil triathlon in May 2013.

2. As the culmination of a 13-year journey to complete The Explorers Grand Slam, **Cheryl Bart** (WPO Greater Sydney) combined skiing and dog sledding to the North Pole in April 2013.

3. Dan Moore (WPO Cleveland) learned how to make fire with Namibian bushmen during a 68-day journey from Cape Town, South Africa, to Cairo in June 2012.

4. Wayne Naidoo (YPO Cape Town) and his wife Nino ran the Great Wall Marathon in China in May 2013.

5. David Ducote (YPO Houston) competed in the Petit Le Mans endurance race in Georgia in 2010.



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DETERMINED AND UNDETERRED

A uniquely personal experience: Part deux

The term “go big or go home” doesn’t apply to 2012 Youth and Family Officer Cathy Mah Leibman (spouse, YPO Emirates).

To build the ultimate family experience, Leibman planned a seven-day expedition up Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the world’s largest free-standing mountain, with four fathers and five boys ages 13-15. “Highlights included the personal challenge, bonding with our children, and admiring how our teenagers handled the climb, the ability to be responsible and their determination to summit,” she says.

But the adventure was bittersweet for Leibman, who was the only team member unable to reach the summit. On the final day of the hike, she suffered from extreme fatigue and stayed behind while the others, including her two sons, reached the peak.

Leibman says she was disappointed with herself. “As their mother, I wanted to be their role model and to share in the summit with them as a memorable family experience.”

Leibman went home feeling that she had let down her family and herself. She questioned her peers, asking what kept them going. Their response, “mind over matter” and “the impossible is possible,” prompted Leibman to follow the old adage, “If at first you don’t succeed, try again.”

Six months later, Leibman returned to Africa. “There was no doubt in my mind that I would stand on Africa’s highest peak. I had visualized this,” she says.

She trained aggressively, brought a female friend to share in the experience, and armed herself with support from her forum members who had written letters of encouragement. “I read them each night and would laugh and handwrite a reply.”

This time, Leibman reached the summit. “I can now tick this personal challenge off my bucket list.”



Cathy Mah Leibman (spouse, YPO Emirates) summited Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania in March 2013.

“Every aspect of racing is highly organized. Every car is taken apart with all critical components examined. Every scintilla of data is analyzed and reanalyzed,” he says. “Very, very rarely are things good enough. The keys to success are teamwork, preparation, judicious aggression, grit ... plus a bit of good luck.”

The strategy behind racing is consistent with what a chief executive encounters when weighing business decisions.

“You have to walk a fine line between being overly aggressive, with disastrous results, or overly timid, with anemic results,” he says.

A marathon runner of 20 years and Ironman competitor, **Ricky Arriola** (YPO Miami) sticks to a plan with his personal training. He completed the 2013 Ironman Brazil triathlon in May, following months of 13-hour weekend trainings and daily biking, swimming or running.

The triathlon, hosted on six continents, features a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride and 26.2-mile marathon (3.86, 180 and 42.1 kilometers respectively).

“Preparation for the race is the perfect parallel for an effective work life. It stresses the importance of preparation, consistency, feedback, focus and tenacity,” Arriola says. “The same holds true for being successful in business — if you develop a plan and work on executing it, regardless of the hurdles, you’re likely to be successful.”

Perseverance tests and personal bests

In the business world, the desire to win is evident in the competitive nature of many chief executives.

Clark says that while not all executives are daredevils, there is a higher percentage of risk-taking in chief executive roles. “There’s a desire to win. CEOs thrive on the game and stay up all night to strategize,” she says. “Competitiveness is not a requirement, but tends to be more of a characteristic of a CEO.”

Wayne Naidoo (YPO Cape Town) describes himself as “someone who is not an athlete.” But having turned 40 last year, along with his wife Nino, he reassessed his life. As the 2012 chapter education chair and an active forum member, Wayne also “looked at the entire chapter of people who already have just about everything they want to achieve,” and asked himself, “How do we reset certain parts of our lives for greater fulfillment?”

Nino was preparing to run the Great Wall Marathon in China and encouraged her husband to sign up. This was the impetus for Wayne’s education program theme, Forever Young.

The three-part transformational program offered a medical, physical and aesthetic makeover with a renowned team of medical and fitness professionals. Twenty-two members, spouses and partners from YPO and WPO Cape Town participated in the program to re-energize, reflect and achieve a fresh perspective on life. The experience sparked a healthy competition.

“The competitive nature was quite something to witness,” Wayne says. “Everyone took a look at themselves and our team. We reignited all kinds of passions and worked hard, but we also learned not to take ourselves too seriously. We had fun.”

Over the course of 12 weeks, the Forever Young team racked up some healthy numbers:

- 883,100 calories burned
- 117 pounds of weight lost (53 kilograms)
- 75 pounds of muscle mass built (34 kilograms)
- 4 buckets of blood, sweat and tears shed

Following the Forever Young program, Wayne and Nino were prepared for one of the world’s most difficult races. The Great Wall Marathon includes 5,164 steps over a course of 26.2 miles (42.1 kilometers).

Wayne’s competitive nature, and his wife’s encouragement, helped him complete the race when he felt it was nearly impossible.

“The biggest thing that concerned me was that I couldn’t let down my wife, or my kids or forum. I had no choice but to do it,” he says. “Now I have a new perspective: I am a normal guy who did something physically ridiculous, and I realized I can change a lot in my life.”

Soon after the Forever Young program, Wayne resigned as CEO of a large advertising firm and joined AFB, a consumer finance business committed to responsible lending in Africa. ▲

Psychologists Michelle Clark and Veronica Harvey are resources available through our international partnerships with AON Risk Solutions. Please contact David Drier (WPO St. Louis) at david.drier@aon.com to learn more about YPO-WPO’s partnership with AON.



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PERSEVERANCE WITH PURPOSE

Daredevils with far-reaching impact

André Borschberg (WPO Alpine) and **Bill Borger** (YPO Canada) have at least three things in common: a spirit of adventure, a passion for social enterprise and a penchant for setting world records.

Borschberg, an entrepreneur, pilot, mechanical engineer and CEO of Solar Impulse, works in the field of clean technologies. Together with his partner Bertrand Piccard, Borschberg is focused on flying around the world with no fuel. To achieve this ambitious goal, they built the first airplane capable of flying night and day, propelled solely by solar energy.

In 2010, Borschberg completed the first 26-hour, nonstop, solar powered flight. The Swiss duo went on to set many other records for navigating across Europe and the United States, including the first flight from Europe to Africa in a solar-powered plane. They hope to continue showcasing innovative technological solutions for today’s energy challenges and, with the first around-the-world flight without fuel in 2015, inspire other to be pioneers in their everyday lives.

“Our success will not only come from completing a round-the-world tour without fuel but will also motivate everyone to implement the necessary measures to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels,” Borschberg says.

For Borger, fortitude and philanthropy go hand in hand. Over a span of 11 years, he completed the Peak to Pond, an endurance feat of climbing Mount Everest and swimming the English Channel. Borger says he was fortunate to raise money for charity during his two major life adventures.

“The passion with which I approach life is beneficial to those around me,” he says.

Borger is the 18th Canadian and first Calgary native to swim the English Channel, and he is the first Canadian and fifth man to accomplish both feats.

Borger trained for two-and-a-half years before swimming the English Channel in 2000 and raised US\$110,000 for the Canadian Mental Health Association. It took him six weeks to climb Mt. Everest in 2011, and he raised US\$502,000 for the Calgary Handibus Association.

Read more about Borger’s adventures on his website, borgerpeakandpond.com, where he also chronicles ice and big wall climbing.

Visit solarimpulse.com to learn more about Borschberg and solar-powered aviation.

Are you a YPO-WPO daredevil? Send story suggestions to ignite@ypowpo.org.