

## *Lessons in Human Dynamics* Team Learning & Shared Leadership

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### Some Context

A few years ago, I watched the *Eco-Challenge 2000* on the Discovery Channel. This was my first experience watching such an event, the highlights of which were broadcast over five evenings. I was skeptical at first about what I would get from this broadcast, but my interest in outdoor learning and team dynamics drew me to it.

*Eco-Challenge* was created in 1995, billing itself as the world's premier expedition race. The first event was held in Utah, with subsequent ones being held in different countries. In 1996, for example, British Columbia hosted the event in Pemberton.

*Eco-Challenge 2000* was held in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. The theme was Malaysia's wildlife. Of particular significance is the very strong conservation ethic that accompanies *Eco-Challenge*. For example, participants who do not adhere to the event's strict environmental rules are forced to withdraw. As the saying goes: *Pack it in, pack it out*.

The event consisted of a brutal 500 kilometre course involving sailing, hiking, biking, swimming, scuba diving, rappelling, and canoeing in indigenous craft. People from around the world participated, for a total of 76 teams. Canada sent four teams. Each team consisted of four people, with at least two females. For a team to have officially completed the race, it must have remained together throughout. If one member withdrew (e.g., injury), the team was disqualified. This set the stage for a high level of teamwork if all of the members were to succeed.

Of the 76 teams, 44 completed the race, but of these some were disqualified for various reasons. However, they were permitted to continue in order that they could experience the 500 kilometre course.

The top finishers completed the course in six days; however, many teams took up to 12 days to reach the finish line, the last of which was a 40 kilometre open-sea canoe paddle. Of special note was the decision to allow for the first time what could be called "non-professional" teams to participate. In the past, the participants were individuals who have engaged in extreme sports, and who were "ranked" in terms of the likelihood of their winning an *Eco-Challenge*. Consequently, the mixing of neophyte and experienced teams in this event provided some illuminating contrasts and lessons.

I was amazed at what the human condition can endure in incredibly difficult circumstances. Virtually all of the participants suffered from trenchfoot, some horribly. Persistent and aggressive land leeches proved to be one of the most taxing factors contributing to the mental stress of the participants. While physical conditioning and preparation was obviously a critical factor to the

success of teams completing the course, perhaps more important was the mental stamina of the participants and how they supported one another.

This leads me to share seven key lessons that I saw emerge from *Eco-Challenge*, lessons that have direct application to the effective functioning of organizations. Here they are:

#### 1. Park your differences; focus on what needs to be done.

Those teams that ranked in the top few that completed the course in six days refused to argue among themselves, even when the stress became almost overwhelming. They parked their differences and focused on the task at hand. This contrasted with many teams, some that were new to this type of event and others with some experience. In these cases, differences of opinion or viewpoint emerged, along with interpersonal conflicts. This led to these teams wasting time arguing and bickering. For example, at the check points, the high performing teams spent only a few minutes before moving on. However, other teams sometimes spent up to several hours deciding how to proceed.

#### 2. Take time to share in the joy of your experience.

Teams that let themselves get sidetracked through in-fighting not only performed poorly (in some cases dropping out of the race) they also lost the opportunity for sharing the positives of their experience and in learning as a team.

#### 3. Don't criticize other team members behind their back.

In some cases, shown through one-on-one interviews with the participants as the race unfolded, team members criticized a particular team member. A case in point is Carlo, who constantly whined about his foot blisters (which were actually mild compared to most participants) while one of his team members became very ill for a few days. This led the three other members to ostracize Carlo and speak negatively about him. But it didn't appear that the three members made a strong effort to bring him into the team and re-orient his behaviour.

These types of incidents contributed to a high level of team disfunctioning and very hard feelings. Whatever joy and team learning that could have occurred was overcome by a high level of negativity. The team members not only had to endure the toughness of the course but also the stress caused by their behaviours.

#### 4. Commit to the team.

Although some teams were disqualified during the race (e.g., getting lost and then found, injury, and illness), many decided to complete it for both personal reasons and commitment to one another. This was for me the real learning in *Eco-Challenge*. While it was impressive to see, for example, the team from France finish in the top few, it was the novice teams that most impressed me. They refused to let the many hardships and obstacles they faced diminish their spirit. This meant carrying a team member on one's shoulders at times because their trenchfoot had become

so severe. And what is remarkable is that these teams were not attempting to rank in the race. Their shared purpose was for the entire team, all four members, to complete the course together, even if it took 12 days.

#### 5. Maintain a sense of humour, even when everything seems lost.

The teams that maintained a sense of humour were able to deal with the adverse conditions they faced. Although they suffered from dehydration, diarrhea, trenchfoot, sprains, hunger, and aggressive leeches, they maintained a sense of humour. Team members found humour in their situations, cracking jokes. Humour helped them to ease the pressure they felt, which was often overwhelming.

#### 6. Celebrate your wins, however small.

Teams celebrated their small victories along the way, such as reaching the top of a mountain after a grueling climb, or after making it through white water rapids without capsizing. Celebrating served to create the necessary energy and resolve for the team to tackle the next challenge.

#### 7. Support one another, in both good and bad times.

When a member became ill or was injured, the others on the team supported him or her, both physically (carrying extra gear) or mentally (words of encouragement). Moreover, team members hugged one another when a member was having a particularly bad day. These effective teams did not criticize the sick or injured members. Poorly functioning teams, in contrast, did not provide the necessary support to those members who needed it. The consequence was that it became much more difficult for these teams to regain their spirit, sense of shared purpose, and collective energy.

Of important note was the presence of *shared leadership* in the well functioning teams. Although each team had a designated leader, leadership was indeed shared at the appropriate times. One case in point was when one of the team leaders, a male in his fifties with many years of experience with *Eco-Challenge*, was unable to walk due to severe trenchfoot. The team's members rallied around their leader, sharing the leadership. While the team was eventually forced to withdraw from the race because of the seriousness of the leader's condition, they persevered until the end.

Leadership in a well functioning team is not a dictatorship. Leadership must be shared. And in fact, when placed under pressure it is remarkable from where leadership often emerges from a team's members.

## Final Thoughts

The lessons learned from *Eco-Challenge* have clear applications to organizations: how people learn, collaborate, share leadership, achieve results, and celebrate. The team from France, one of the top finishers in the race, could be called a *high performance team* (from Jon Katzenbach's *The Wisdom of Teams*). The members of this team were focussed through a shared purpose, well organized and prepared, committed to one another, cared for one another, and enjoyed themselves (although they were intent on winning the race).

For those teams that didn't enter the race to win but rather to have the experience of pushing themselves to their limits and to share in the joy of completing this odyssey together, *Eco-Challenge* proved to be the ultimate challenge.

## Some questions for team reflection

1. What can we do to bring *joy* back into the workplace, where laughter and smiles prevail?
2. What can we do to ingrain a deep sense of *commitment* to one another, not only in the sense of accomplishing our work but also in our learning and the fulfillment of our personal growth and development?
3. Connected to #2 is how do we begin to show a *mutual caring* for one another, especially in times of stress and crisis (a hallmark of high performing teams)?
4. How do we reestablish *what is important* in our work, with respect to value-added to citizens, and get off the treadmill of "doing" and move into the realm of "being?" And from there, how does this contribute to our achieving mastery in work-personal life balance?
5. From the above, how can we begin to translate this into team and organizational learning, and subsequently into the creation of new knowledge that is then diffused throughout our organizations?