



Lessons from a Corporate Dropout

When I became a corporate dropout, my colleagues said I would miss being part of a team, part of a learning organization. How could I possibly have stimulating and developmental experiences working from a home office and living in the mountains, 80 miles from the nearest skyscraper?

They were wrong. When it comes to organizational and team performance, my most educational experiences have come from the least expected corners of my life.

It started with my passion for adventure racing. Haven't heard of the sport? Here's a snapshot: a co-ed team of four journeys through the wilderness, sometimes for days and hundreds of miles, competing with other teams to reach a pre-determined finish line. They travel from checkpoint to checkpoint, navigating with map and compass. Sometimes they are hiking, sometimes mountain biking, sometimes paddling a boat; they might be rappelling from a cliff, crawling through a cave, riding a horse, whitewater swimming, or rollerblading. Anything the race director can dream up is fair game. The members of the team must travel together at all times or else risk disqualification, so they must figure out how to leverage the strengths and manage around the weaknesses of each teammate. They must strategize around when and where to sleep, how to transition efficiently from one discipline to the next, and how to carry enough food and water to sustain themselves. When you think about it, a better metaphor for corporate teamwork would be hard to find.

My other passion is for mountain rescue, which is a lot easier to explain to those old colleagues of mine. When I first volunteered for my local search and rescue team, at least then I could say that I was cold, miserable, hungry and tired for a good reason, rather than because I was supposedly having fun. Working for our local Sheriff's Office, we are the ones who go out in all weather conditions and sometimes in the middle of the night to find and/or rescue people who have been lost or hurt in the backcountry, including hikers, climbers, backcountry skiers, snowmobilers, horseback riders, and even hot air balloonists.

Here are some of the things I've learned from both experiences:

- Job number one of any team is to define, clarify and communicate a mission and vision. On my racing team, our mission is to finish the race as a team; our vision varies according to the competition, but it might be, for example, to finish in the top 20. On my rescue team, our mission is to safely find and evacuate the missing or injured party, and our vision is to do it as quickly and efficiently as possible. We never have to discuss these mission and vision statements anymore; they are completely internalized and unquestioned by every member of the team. They are crystal clear. There are no hallways to post them in, and we wouldn't need to post them even if there were hallways. How many corporate teams can say the same?
- Job number two is to agree on and define values and norms. A value is something the team agrees is important to the mission; a norm is a rule of behavior based on the values. On my rescue team, our top priority value is safety. If something can't be done safely, we don't do it. We have many norms that support that value, such as that we must wear rock helmets in cliff areas, or we must post an avalanche guard to watch for secondary activity after an avalanche, or we must double check each other's climbing harnesses to make sure they're properly fastened. In the workplace, teammates often have different values and have never stopped to discuss them with each other. If you don't know what values your teammate is operating by, how can the team operate with the same norms?
- Even with complete alignment around mission, vision, values and norms, there will be disagreement between teammates, especially around strategy. On my racing team, sometimes we don't agree about when and where we should sleep. My teammate Luther hates to sleep in a transition area because it's too noisy. I hate to sleep on the trail because I get too cold. Nothing makes for a better argument than a little sleep deprivation. But when we argue, we argue about the issue: the pros and cons of sleeping in a TA versus on the trail. We don't make it personal. Luther does not call me a wimp, and I don't call him a light sleeper. Teams have to learn how to face conflict by talking about how to meet each other's interests, rather than arguing about personalities or positions.
- Not only do effective teams know that conflict is inevitable, but they know it can be creative too. For that reason, they welcome diversity as a means to tap into different ideas and points of view. Most adventure

racers require teams to be co-ed, and on my team, we know that I will often bring a different perspective than my male teammates. When their adrenaline is pumping and they want to just GO, I might be the only one who takes a deep breath and thinks about the long-term consequences if we don't slow down and eat something first. Effective teams look for more than just gender diversity; they look for people with different industry backgrounds, different educational backgrounds, different cultural backgrounds. Then they listen to each other, because tapping into those diverse backgrounds will help your organization stay in tune with the changing demographics of your marketplace and generate creative solutions to serve those markets.

- Teammates need to have complimentary strengths and skill sets so they can fulfill different roles on the team. My race team needs to have, at minimum, a bike mechanic, a swiftwater expert, a navigator, and a logistics planner. My rescue team has to have communication specialists, rock climbers, rigging experts, avalanche techs, medical personnel, expert snowmobilers, incident commanders, and lots of “grunts” like me, who can travel quickly with lots of gear. If we were all good at the same things, we'd be missing some key skills. But it's not enough to have a diversity of specialists; you must also take the time to get to know each other and understand each teammate's strengths and weaknesses, so that roles are clear and tasks are assigned to the right people.
- Trust is the foundation on which the team operates. Trust is developed through getting to know one another, understanding strengths and weaknesses, knowing you have the same mission, vision and values, and believing in the competence of your teammate. If I'm hanging on a rope, I need to know that the teammate who built the anchor was someone that knows how to build anchors, is good at it, and believes in our value of safety. If I don't trust in any of these components, I'll be too focused on protecting myself to carry out whatever it is that I'm supposed to do. Lack of trust on a team leads to individual defensiveness, which is extremely unproductive.
- The willingness to embrace change is critical to a high-performance team. My racing team's strategy in the hot desert might be to sleep in caves during the day and travel through the night. But if there's a thunderstorm and the temperature drops, we must be willing to change that strategy without hesitation. Effective teams monitor the business environment, ever vigilant for changes that might dictate a change in strategy for the team. New technologies and changing demographics in

the marketplace demand new approaches from organizations.

- Great teams sink or swim together, and hold themselves mutually accountable for accomplishing the mission. When my racing team takes a three-hour detour as a result of a navigational error, no one points fingers at our navigator. We made the mistake together; we'll learn from it and correct it together. When my rescue team successfully rescues someone who might have died without our help, we celebrate that success, socializing together at the local watering hole, telling stories over and over, and savoring the media coverage.

Drawing lessons in corporate teamwork from the world of adventure is nothing new; people have been doing it for years. The reason it works so well is that on something like a rescue team, the benefits of good teamwork and the consequences of poor teamwork are clear, simple, and serious. If we do it right, we come out safely. If we do it wrong, someone gets hurt or even dies. If only the benefits and consequences could be so clear in the corporate world. And that's the first step for any team that wants to be better: define those benefits and consequences. Make them simple, clear, and serious. And then pursue them with the single-mindedness of someone whose life depends on it.