

WHETHER IN BUSINESS OR IN LIFE: PLAN FOR A MARATHON NOT A SPRINT

8 valuable lessons that your organization can learn from the Tour de France

Key Takeaways:

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go with a team.”

High performers tend to be well-prepared team players with a positive attitude and the ability to adapt well to change.

Strong leaders are humble and appreciative of others. They also recover quickly from setbacks and keep pushing toward their goals when most others would have quit.

By Blake Christian, CPA/MBT

The 104th Tour de France (TDF) bicycle race ended last month and it reminded me of numerous business (and life) lessons I have learned during my nearly four decades in the working world.

While doping scandals in recent years have tarnished the Tour’s reputation somewhat, the three-week long 2,300 mile (3,500 kilometer) bicycle race is arguably the most physically and mentally demanding sporting event on the planet—and one of the most watched. I have followed three Tours in person as well as an Italian Giro. I have also ridden over 1,500 miles of the courses (albeit at a more relaxed pace than the pros), so I have tremendous



respect for the 24 teams and the 219 riders and generally watch every stage of the race on TV or on livestream.

Some of the mountain stages in the Alps require riders to climb steadily for four hours, gaining over 13,000 feet in elevation, before descending at over 70 mph toward the finish line.

The inaugural TDF was the brainchild of Geo Lefevre and Henri Desgrange, editors of the struggling daily sports newspaper, L’Auto back

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in 1903. Desgrange, a former champion cyclist, especially loved the idea of promoting a multi-week race circumventing the country as a great way to showcase

France's many charms and to sell lots of newspapers. He was right and the event draws tens of millions of worldwide viewers each year and sells many more newspapers now than it did 114 years ago.

Over the years, undaunted riders and their teams have taught me many valuable lessons, including the importance of integrating the following attributes into your work and personal life:

1. Preparation
2. Attitude
3. Teamwork
4. Flexibility
5. Perseverance
6. Resilience
7. Humility
8. Appreciation



1. Preparation

In order to ride an average of four hours daily over three weeks, covering distances of up to 138 miles per day while gaining as much as 13,000 feet in elevation, conditioning is obviously a key to success. Each rider must put in over 10,000 miles per year in training, plus compete in multiple shorter races in order to be in acceptable shape for the TDF. This kind of training requires tremendous discipline, dedication and sacrifice. Diet and hydration also have a significant impact on each rider's performance throughout the race.

To be successful in business and to stand out among your co-workers and outside competitors, it is also necessary to be prepared with basic education, in-depth on-the-job training, a commitment to continuous learning and coming 100-percent prepared for every meeting or client/ customer interaction you have.

TDF riders cannot simply "dial-it-in" on their low-energy days and neither can those of us in business.

2. Attitude

Attitude is one of the most important qualities our firm looks for in co-workers and business partners. Since we often spend more waking hours with our co-workers than we do with our

families, life is far too short to work with people who have bad attitudes. These Debbie Downers and David Downers of the workplace can literally suck the life out of us.

You can always improve a co-worker's technical skills, but re-tooling a disgruntled worker's attitude is like winning the TDF on a flat tire. So it is critical to evaluate prospective team members carefully to avoid making a bad hire who can poison your team's and company's culture.

During your career, you will encounter many co-workers who have less than stellar attitudes.

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You will also find yourself falling into an occasional funk in which your own attitude may sag. When you find yourself in a slump like this, you need to move quickly to figure out the reason for your pessimistic outlook and how you can get back on track and even improve. While corrective measures may resolve the road block(s), if your under-performing employee's attitude is not improving over time, then you must either move him or her to a new position (or out the door). You don't have many other options as a business owner.

What's more, if you cannot improve your own attitude, then it is very likely you will have to change your environment, which might involve a job change, an updated business plan or even selling your business.

3. Teamwork

While many think of bicycle racing as an individual sport, it is actually a team sport in which the overall champion usually comes from the team providing the strongest support. As the old saying goes: ***"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go with a team."*** The TDF is the perfect laboratory to prove this theory. Each team generally anoints its lead rider (occasionally the team captain) before the race starts. The lead rider's teammates play various supporting roles, including gathering food and water, riding in a group (i.e. pace line) to protect the lead rider from wind or collisions with other riders, supporting him on demanding mountain stages, even swapping out their own bike or wheels with the lead rider's if the team's lead rider has a mechanical problem.

A team can move over 10 percent faster when riding in a single pace line. This formation allows the lead rider to conserve tremendous energy for the final miles of a stage—or for a future stage. Occasionally, teams will have a supporting rider emerging as a stronger rider the lead rider by mid-race. As you might expect in fight-

ing will occur and chaos and fiefdoms will wreak havoc on the team's morale and performance. When this occurs, victory will go to another team that is more singularly focused on its one lead rider.

The same dynamic applies to business. There need to be clear lines of authority and the top executives, the middle management team and the support staff need to understand their respective roles. If the organization's business plan is unclear, or if the firm or company leaders are not properly empowered, or if they are not communicating clearly or being respected by co-workers, then chaos will ensue and time and energy will be wasted on petty items, not on business objectives. Morale will suffer and co-workers, clients, customers and prospects will also pick up on the dysfunction within the organization and consider leaving or decide not to do business with that organization

4. Adaptability/Flexibility

Whenever employees or prospective hires ask me about the most important personal qualities I look for in an employee, I tell them **I look for flexibility—with attitude being a very close second**. An employee who has a broad array of skills and who can adapt quickly to changing company needs is invaluable to the organization as well as to clients/ customers. That's why workers should develop solid general skills and then add two or more sub-specialties as they advance within the organization. Those sub-specialties could be a combination of technical, industry or software skills.

Conversely, employees who have a limited skill set, (i.e. the one-trick-ponies), can be very frustrating to work with when multiple challenges arise. Even more frustrating are the employees who have solid capabilities, but who are unwilling to pitch in on projects that are slightly out of their job descriptions or their comfort zones. I tell co-workers that I will never ask them to

do something that I have not done in my own career—things that I will still do today if time permits.

In the TDF context, most riders have a certain specialty, but the best team members are those who have multiple riding skills such as the ability to climb challenging mountains and also ride at exceptionally high speed on flat stages. The ultimate winner of the 21-stage TDF is invariably a rider who is both a Top-10 climber and a Top-20 sprinter.

The advantage of being known as a team member with multiple skills is that when raises, promotions or even downsizing occurs, the multi-skilled employee tends to stand out and will often be among the last to be fired.

5. Perseverance

After spending 37 years in the business world and having observed hundreds of businesses ranging from fledgling start-ups to multi-national public companies, I've come to understand that the most successful organizations are those with a leadership group that has a clear vision. Regardless of the challenges thrown in their way, they find a way to push through during the tough times and to achieve the majority of their objectives.

Take Thomas Edison's development of the light bulb. **Talk about perseverance!** He had no less than 1,000 failed prototypes before he was able to design a working lightbulb. How many other great ideas have died in a lab or in a garage because the inventor ran out of time, money, patience—or self-confidence?

Of course, in business and in life you need to know when to cut your losses. So, some ideas and relationships have diminishing returns. There are times when you need to move on and bail on an idea, business or personal relationship once you have put in sufficient effort. But, that is a discussion for another article.

6. Resilience

The ability to recover from a set-back is a critical competitive necessity in both sports and in business. Psychologically, it can be extremely demoralizing to lose a sporting event, a proposal, a longstanding client, a patent application, a key supplier or even an employee.

When faced with a reversal of fortune, it's common to wallow in self-pity for a while and lose your determination to set new goals. However, winning teams and winning business owners snap out of their "pity-parties" faster than others. They quickly try to understand how an opportunity slipped away and then get on with the business of improving their team and their organization so they'll be in position for a "win" the next a big opportunity emerges.

As my wife Vicki always reminds me: "When one door closes another door opens." It's amazing how often this has proven to be true. That lost client, customer or employee can often be replaced with an even better client/customer/employee who can take your firm or company to even greater heights.

Following a tough loss, great teams find ways to come together with renewed focus and drive. The tough loss they suffered might also motivate the team's leaders to reshuffle positions, roles and responsibilities and the overall plan. This often creates a better long-term result.

The TDF riders receive only two rest days during the grueling 23-day race. The rest days are scheduled after the most demanding mountain stages, which take place in the Alps and Pyrenees. Throughout the entire 2017 Tour, only 31 of the 219 starting riders withdrew, and 12 of those 31 riders withdrew on Stage 9, one of the most demanding mountain stages held right before the first rest day. Rest days can have a remarkable recharging effect on riders recovering from earlier crashes, colds or just borderline exhaustion. But rest days can also throw some

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riders off their rhythm and actually hurt their performance on the stage following the rest day.

The bottom line here is takes time to recover, learn from the set-back, and adjust your game-plan. And when you are ready, jump back in the game with new vigor.

7. Humility

Life throws us many curveballs. NO matter how successful you think you have been in your career and personal life, a bit of humility is always healthy. Being well-liked and respected by your co-workers, clients and teammates can make a big difference in how well (or chaotically) your team will function when the going gets tough.

If you have developed a strong team that likes and respects you and your management team, then your likelihood of success will go up exponentially when faced with new challenges. However, if you have not established these solid working relationships, or if you otherwise have a dysfunctional support staff, then you end up spending more time fighting fires than you do achieving your goals. A team with a cocky and condescending leader can still get things done, but it won't achieve the same results or have the same level of team member dedication than a team with a humble servant-leader has.

8. Appreciation

Thanking team members, clients, referral sources, family members and others who have helped you on your personal and career journey can go a long way to retaining and enhancing your important relationships. None of us can do it alone. If you think you really can, then please refer to the “**Humility**” section above.

Take time to thank each team member personally as a project or event is completed. That is often the ideal forum for expressing your appreciation for their efforts. But it's also effective to praise a team member publicly during an internal meeting or client meeting. This spreads the word about the high achieving team member's contribution to a wider audience and generally motivates other team members to step-up their game in hopes of garnering similar public praise in the future.

Conclusion

Life is a marathon, not a sprint. Plan for the long haul, stay in shape both mentally and physically, build a solid team around you, learn from your mistakes and stay humble and appreciative of others.

About the Author

Blake Christian, CPA/ MBT is a Tax Partner in the Park City and Long Beach offices of California-based Top 50 CPA firm HCVT LLP. Blake has over three decades of experience and specializes in corporate and high net-worth individual income, estate and gift tax planning. Blake is a frequent speaker and author and is a thought leader in best practices for professional service firms.