Do The Impossible

While sitting in a project kick-off meeting I listened to a senior manager introduce a new project. He set the scene by telling us that we had 10 weeks to accomplish the project, that he wanted a premium result, and that any deviation from the perfect solution must be detailed in papers that explained the reasons for failure to deliver the outstanding result. It was the integration of a supplier's system with their own. This had only just been completed with another supplier who had a more advanced environment, and it had taken 18 months. The team were clear that what was being asked was not possible. The manager was clearly ignorant of how the system and business operated, and arrogant enough to believe that saying it must be so was sufficient. It was an unhealthy way to commence a project. The team did achieve significant outcomes because of lessons learned from the previous experience, but by no means the 'perfect solution', and these were driven by the team's own interest in realising the best result possible, and not this manager's erroneous pep-talk.

While the above story is based on a particular event, it is not unique. All too often project teams are placed in

2007 'The Archetypes' Oxfam Trailwalker team successfully finished

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Abstract

Using a personal experience as the basis for discussion, the factors that enable significant ("impossible") things to be achieved are introduced.

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situations where they swallow the bitter pill of stressful time-frames, unrealistic expectations, and unnecessary pressure. They judge their management as out of touch with the reality of their organisation and as having failed to take early action in what was an obvious, prudent and timely fashion, and who then speak platitudes in an attempt to solve their own ineptitude. From the outset of such projects there is already an environment of distrust, conflict and blame which undermines the natural desire and motivation of people to perform their work in a satisfactory and fulfilling manner. Compare this "normal but unsatisfactory" environment with the following experience.

In March 2007 I did the impossible, or so I had been told by a number of people who knew me, successfully walking 100km (62 miles) in 25 hours 4 minutes as part of the Oxfam Trailwalker Challenge. For years (at least 20 years) I was a desk potato. I sat behind my desk, worked on my computer, and "prided" myself in having a body that mostly did what I needed without any maintenance. Over time its

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capacity diminished due to my lack of fitness apparent through tiredness, shortness of breath, and unresponsive, easily injured muscles.

Six months earlier I first heard of the Challenge. Within 60 seconds I had volunteered myself on to the four person team. I was more than surprised at my decision. Something unfamiliar within me took over. Time for a change.

I was part of an endeavour with others relying on me. Though a team event it was not a relay. We all had to complete the entire distance together, and I was the weakest link. My team mates included a marathon runner, an actively competing cyclist, and a mountaineer. On electing to participate one of them made the comment: "You know your own body." Never a falser word spoken. I had no clue about my body, but something had called me and I felt compelled to answer.

My busy schedule, always too full previously for exercise, suddenly changed. Training was undertaken. I struggled with 3–5 kilometre walks, pulling muscles on a regular basis. Anger and frustration were common feelings. My body did not perform as I demanded. It rebelled. Then I started to listen to it, dialogue opened up, and I sought outside advice. New shoes were tried. I defined regular training routes, distance goals, and I partnered with my body so we better supported each other. After a month I walked over 10km and I felt totally wiped out by the effort.

At just under three months, the week of Christmas, I achieved a goal of exceeding 70 km within one week, including a 20km walk. A month later I walked a marathon. Serious pronation required specialist shoes. Blisters halfway through a 40km walk took 4 weeks to heal – wrong specialist shoes. My knees gave out under the strain of carrying me the distances being asked. However, I got to the event with the issues resolved and in the best shape I had been in since I was a teenager. As a team we ran over the finish line together. I felt a wonderful sense of accomplishment.

What got me through? Irrational belief in myself, determination and commitment, and an incredibly supportive team. I am sure there were times when they felt major concern about the overall success of the team because everything that could go wrong for me with my body seemed to. My result would impact them, yet they persisted, worked with me, encouraged me, and at the end of the event we did cross the line together.

It was a potent experience. I did achieve what health professionals and others had said I could not do in the time I had available. The event was not easy. It did pose its challenges, but I always knew I would succeed, and fortunately did not have to deal with lessons associated with failure.

The contrast between the unfortunately common project environment and my experience in the 100km walk is quite stark from which I draw the following. The "impossible" can be achieved when you foster within yourself and your team:

- Unreasonable belief in your capacity to succeed
- Desire and intention focused on the outcome
- Commitment, dedication and the intelligent application of hard work
- A great support network
- Ownership and responsibility individually for actions and collectively for results
- A genuine belief that success is possible even if it does require extraordinary effort
- Resilience to setbacks; they become failure when we succumb
- Inspiration and motivation based on genuine desires, interests and beliefs shared by participants

So what seemingly impossible endeavour or insurmountable problem are you engaged in or going to be?

- What resources can you draw upon (people, knowledge, techniques, tools) that can make a positive difference?
- What negative elements can you offload so they do not hold you back?
- How can you communicate objectives, seek commitment and garner support that builds on and extends a shared concept of success, value and possibility across the stakeholders?

Success comes from knowing what you want, committing to it, and always getting back up. Getting back up is motivated by finding reason to. A leader builds ownership of the reason among their team and stakeholders. Together the impossible may become possible. Personally and with your team, make a commitment, honour the commitment, and DO IT. Do something impossible.

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