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Chapter

**SWIMMING TO THE STRATEGIC VISION:
LESSONS FROM TRIUMPHING OVER ADVERSITY TO
MANAGING CYBER CRISES**

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents lessons for those preparing themselves or others for having the assured capability and capacity to ensure achievement of strategic delivery in crisis management. The kind of situation that – for example, characterises the unfolding and aftermath phases of a cyber-attack. The demands of such situations on the physical, emotional, psychological and other systems of employees will be intense. Sustaining effort will not be easy – and preparation needs to occur well in advance of an actual incident.

By drawing on my experience of preparing for (and succeeding at) swimming the English Channel, I demonstrate the critical role played in resilience by culture and just how important it is that emotional and other support is available at key moments to those charged with delivering strategic main effort. Consequently, readers are invited to consider how they will enable and protect the holistic well-being of those charged with incident management.

Keywords: Strategic, Mental, Physical, Elite, Ethos

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INTRODUCTION

‘Nothing Great is easy!’ Capt. Mathew Webb, 1875.

Why is the strategic goal important at every level of the organization – and particularly so in the heat of a protracted and / or intense crisis? What does it matter whether or not the strategic goal is consciously known by all, so long as the individual is servicing their particular responsibilities? Actually, from the theatre of battle we know that getting everyone to align to the main effort is absolutely critical. General Stanley McCrystal demonstrated this when he created the US Joint Special Operations Command Team of Teams (JSOC-ToT) in Iraq: the brutal truth was that if your action didn’t help towards the main strategic goal, then it wasn’t authorized and resources were not allotted to it.

Now McCrystal was fighting a war - but can the same process be incorporated into business, specifically when that business is planning for reacting to unprecedented crisis? If everyone knows the desired strategic end state, does this improve efficiency and productivity and, in turn, profitability? When overlaid with a proven ethos can an *average* organization become an *elite* organization? Can ethos and strategic understanding help promote and instill a more resilient culture especially in the physical and cyber space? I believe that the answer to all of those questions is a resounding ‘yes’.

This chapter seeks – through the prism of my experience in swimming the English Channel – to provide useful concepts and provoke thoughts that could aid any organization in considering how it expects its decision-makers (and those that service them) to sustain main effort towards the strategic goal under challenging circumstances.

WHY SWIM THE ENGLISH CHANNEL?

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Before I go any further I think it's important to note that I'm no elite athlete! I swam as a child for my local swim club, I've run to maintain cardiovascular fitness through my adult life and I've always enjoyed a long bike ride - but I wanted my challenge to take me to the next level: what could I do that would stand out? I needed something that would take planning and be a mental as well as physical challenge. I wanted to prove to myself that I could set a strategic end state and then build a team to plan, refine, execute and assess to that desired end state. Not everyone knows this, but whereas just one person swims the 'Channel - there is a boat and shore-based team that pilots the swimmer in the most efficient route, that provisions the swimmer and motivates them - whilst on shore, friends and family offer encouragement and support that is relayed to swimmer and followers further afield.

As my training developed, I started to wonder if I could define a blueprint for success that could be adopted by businesses.

I'd decided to swim the English Channel, the stretch of water that separates the United Kingdom from France. It is the busiest shipping lane in the world and, even in the height of summer, the water temperature rarely gets above 17c. For the swim to be officially recognized, the swimmer can only wear swimming trunks or 'jammers', silicone swim hat and goggles. A barrier cream can be used to prevent skin sores from the thousands of arm rotations the swimmer makes, but absolutely no neoprene is allowed! The Channel has strong tides that can be unpredictable and offer no assistance to the swimmer. As this is a cross-tide swim, the waters move you up and down the Channel - but not towards France.

This 22.5 mile stretch of water is known lovingly and respectfully in the endurance swimming community as the 'Mount Everest of swimming' - as less people have swum it than have summited to the roof of the world (at the time of writing, 1426 solos since Capt Webb's first crossing in 1875).

BEYOND PHYSICAL FITNESS

I'd allowed myself 6 months to get swim-fit and acclimatized to cold water, but it quickly became evident that this crossing wasn't just going to be a test of physical strength and technique but more a mental journey. I have a military background, and the unit that I served in had an ethos that has been the guide rail for my military life – and which now also became the guide rail for the task ahead. Our ethos is comprised of the following:

1. The unrelenting pursuit of excellence
2. A classless society
3. Self-discipline
4. Humility and humour

The pursuit of excellence is in all of us. Humans are competitive; we all want to be the best in our chosen fields, to win the race or have achievements credited to us that others don't receive. I believe this is driven by the human need for recognition from our families, friends, peers, contemporaries and strangers. It makes us feel **good** that we are recognized for doing a feat / task that others think is beyond them. It was my motivator.

Importantly, I wanted people to know and acknowledge that I was a Channel Swimmer! I also wanted to be part of small band of people who have achieved such a colossal feat. This was the same kind of ethos held the Spartans who aspired to be the elite of their generation and to be recognized as the best through their individual achievements. This produces a positive mental attitude: in other words, 'I can succeed and I will not fail'. Elitism can be viewed at many different levels and, from an individual perspective, you don't have to *win* the marathon to be in the elite group. By finishing the marathon and overcoming your own adversity, trials and tribulations you join the club - it isn't a physical act, it's a mental one.

Classless society – In the military this notion has formed around the idea that even the most junior soldier (having seen a problem or task at hand) could have

the best answer and should have the ability to voice those thoughts within the group. Rank or position allows you the privilege to make decisions that others follow - and bear the consequences of that - but it doesn't always guarantee the right outcome! The ancient Greeks believed that 'Aristocracy' wasn't about birth-right but that any person could achieve and should achieve success in life based on his personal merit, hard work and achievement.

I found in the small community of endurance swimmers that I joined shared this same mentality. I wasn't a threat: they'd all swum the Channel, but they listened to my concerns, worries and fears and gave advice freely and happily. They wanted me to succeed, and my success would not be a loss to them. There's a self-confidence and special trait in people who have achieved, and been recognized for that achievement, that they then very much want others to take the same journey and enjoy it. I believe that for most people in these elite groups this drive for achievement isn't fuelled by ego or the desire of star status, but the realization of the need for change in their lives for the better and wanting this for others.

Self-discipline – This is the easiest part of the ethos to explain in words but the hardest to live up to! Only I could do it; no-one else was going to get up at 6am with me to go and swim in a lake for an hour. No-one was going to count for me the laps of the pool for me or get in the plunge pool with me for 15 minutes to share the pain of being cold. Self-discipline is easy until you want a day off, or you don't want to swim the extra 50 laps, when you want the junk food but know that the high protein shake would be more beneficial. This is about mental strength and attitude: that intrinsic motivation to perform and take personal responsibility for your actions to reach the goal. It's what gets you through when it matters or the chips are down.

When, 10 hours into my swim and with only 4 miles left before landing in France, the tide changed: tough shit! Now the self-discipline from the previous 6 months training and a career in the military kicked in because I wasn't going to

give in: I was ready. Because of my self-discipline and my military attitude of 'Train Hard, Fight Easy' I knew that I could physically do it, I knew I could stand the cold; this was going to be a mental war but did I want to win it?

Humility and humour - Do these traits really reside in elite groups and are they necessary? Absolutely Yes! I would not have got to Shakespeare's beach in Dover, Kent on the morning of my swim without them. Humble because, to be the best, to achieve the goal, is to acknowledge that you're always learning - and to learn you have to have a mindset that accepts that you can always be and do better. Humour allows you to deal with setbacks, to endure and to sustain your positivity.

14 hours into my swim and having not got any closer to France in the preceding 4 hours, my stress levels were starting to show. Then, it was one of my support crew who turned the mental tide for me. I was tired, lonely, emotional and depressed. The euphoria of seeing France for the first time had dissipated and I knew I was starting to lose the fight against the tide. But at this point, I'd also started to question my own ability to get the job done. Having swum close to the boat so the team could throw me a carbohydrate feed - he quickly shouted "come on mate, can you smell the onions?" The tension inside me evaporated as I swam away from the boat and I had to seriously concentrate on breathing through my laughter! But in one of the most desperate moments of my life - a small, childish joke had done the trick, I was back in the mental game and I was going to complete the task.

Communication was important and this is a component in many businesses that is recognized after exercises and real life situations to never be as good as it should be: but why not? We verbalise from birth and verbal communication is the way most of communicate when we are in crisis - so why do we recognize all so often that we are bad at it? The ability to talk to your workforce and communicate your vision is key, PowerPoint is an aid not the answer. Personality and charisma are important to inspire the force to the strategic end. If we can find the ways to

unlock additional resources in, say, demoralized staff caught up in a seemingly intractable crisis – there is the potential for great competitive advantage as well as very beneficial impact in terms of fulfilled organizational and personal commitments to duty of care..

10% PHYSICAL, 90% MENTAL!

Out there on the water, it was important that I succeeded. I'd recently set up a consultancy and I didn't want the first thing it promoted to be a disaster! Everyone in the crew knew that the mission was important, I'd briefed them before the start that, however painful it got, I had to reach the goal: this was the start of something new and success was paramount, it was setting the tone for the future.

The crew all had their own responsibilities and I'd been clear what they were and what their individual boundaries and permissions were, I had to as I couldn't give direction from the water! The military call it 'Mission Command' but as managers we should call it good practice! I then had to TRUST them to complete their tasks, I couldn't micro-manage, straightforward when the task is easy but what about the decision to pull me from the water if I was failing to swim quickly enough? I'd prepared all the crew for these moments by giving clear direction, guidance and policy.

I swam the English Channel. 17 hours and 8 minutes later - I am officially a 'Channel Swimmer'. I landed in France at 10.30pm, it was pitch black and rocky! Having swum there, I had 2 minutes to savour the moment before I swam back to the boat and we returned to Dover, as French customs only allow Channel Swimmers to have 15 minutes on French soil as you haven't officially been through immigration!

After the initial euphoria of success - the reality is this; I completed the task because I approached it with a solid and proven ethos to life, a positive mental attitude and on the day of the swim an amazing support team who relieved a lot of

the administrative pressure and allowed me to just swim. I knew I'd empowered them to make decisions on my behalf and they all knew my strategic end state.

CONCLUSIONS

Obstacles are there to be overcome. Sure I trained and I conditioned my body but could I have done it with less training? Was it the training I did that made the difference or my mental capacity to succeed that won the day? I knew my part in the strategic picture and I completed it. This is the same for your staff, they will perform better and be more productive when they know what you want from them and what you are trying to achieve.

Well-trained, motivated and empowered to make decisions - your workforce have the ability to perform and achieve far more than you'd normally expect. But the key is they have to have the strategic end state in mind, it's been stated to them and they have had their detailed part of the plan given to them. I believe that this is key in the production of any successful business outcome, organizational change or managing a successful response to an unexpected or unconventional cyber attack.

Your people are the key component to your success, no hardware or software can beat, replace or improve on that. This chapter sets out how I managed to overcome adversity to achieve my strategic objective – acknowledging that although the individual completes that task: this is not achievable without considerable training, specific ethos and the correct blend of support staff able to understand and deliver to emotional, physiological and other needs at key moments of operation. It is up to each business to establish how these elements can be tailored for their specific needs for a cyber-crisis (or other acute or existential event) – but I hope that my story provides some inspiration.

'Pain doesn't last, achievement is forever!'