

Will Your Business Sink or Swim? Marathon Swimmers May Have the Answer

At 6:00am on Saturday morning June 6, while most New Yorkers were sleeping soundly, swimmers, kayakers and boat crews were assembling in Battery Park for the Manhattan Island Marathon Swim. Kayakers typically accompany marathon swimmers for safety and other reasons during their 28.5 mile counter-clockwise journey around the island of Manhattan. The organization NYC Swim is the sponsor for this premier swim event in the New York region. I had the opportunity to kayak as a volunteer for this event and couldn't help reflecting on the ordeal of the marathoners as I performed my volunteer duties.

After a year of planning and training, the swimmers jumped into the cold Hudson at 7am to begin their journey. It was amazing to so closely observe the skill and determination of the swimmers as they navigated the three rivers that circle New York City (the Hudson, the Harlem, and the East River) and as they passed under 20 bridges. It occurred to me that these marathoners were displaying many of the same traits required of business executives today. No one wants their business to go "belly up" and we all want to do more than tread water. So it behooves us to learn the lessons these athletes can teach us.

SET INTERMEDIATE GOALS: Swimmers possess one goal (finish first) two skills (speed and endurance) and two strategies (compete and complete). Twenty eight and a half miles is a long distance to swim but the swimmers don't think about the whole distance. Instead they break the larger task into shorter distances by saying, "I want to reach the Williamsburg Bridge in one hour, then the Queensboro Bridge in the next hour, the Triborough Bridge by the third hour and Yankee Stadium (the half-way point) by the fourth hour". Most big goals are accomplished this way by breaking the larger goal into many smaller measurable tasks and completing them one after another. This tactic is beneficial in many ways. It helps in measuring progress and in carefully spending precious resources. It is also smart psychology for ourselves (or team members!) since longer term goals can seem daunting.

CAREFULLY ALIGN SHORT AND LONG TERM GOALS: Swimming the shortest distance possible is essential and maintaining a clear line of sight is necessary to avoid drifting off path. Similarly, this clear line of sight is necessary for businesses to avoid misaligned goals. Beginning with forecasting, planning and risk management it is essential to identify potential obstacles. By identifying business uncertainties, risks, and hazards we can minimize their impact and keep our eyes on the end goal.

KNOW YOUR ROLE AS A BUSINESS LEADER: You can't be a doer and a visionary at the same time. The swimmers are concentrating on their strokes and can't simultaneously watch where they are headed. One of the tasks of the kayaker-volunteers in the water is to continually point the swimmers in a direct line. Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, wrote "Human beings are wired to do only one thing at a time with excellence". Some people have a clear vision and others can implement vision well but few are good at both vision and implementation.

STAY FOCUSED: I noticed that avoiding distractions is a concern for the support team. It is difficult to resist admiring the many sights of the city during such an event, the buildings, the parks and the people, as you paddle around one of the most interesting islands in the world! Attention must be paid to the main task. So too in business, be aware of everything but focus on the most important thing. It is

essential to prioritize among our many tasks and avoid distractions. Mentally, swimmers have their own risk management plans. Dealing with adverse conditions and overcoming obstacles are important for swimmers. Flotsam, jetsam and other distractions are prevalent in the water. There are many small inconveniences that swimmers and kayakers learn to ignore. In business too, we have small things that get in the way. It is critical for executives to separate the facts from the flotsam and ignore the factors that don't materially affect performance.

KEEP MOVING FORWARD: During the marathon there are many environmental factors to contend with: currents, the ebb and flow of the tide, wave action etc, all of which can affect performance. Treading water isn't an option. Similarly, in business today the choice amounts to "sink or swim ". We need a strong bias towards action. In this current environment many businesses are putting plans on hold, waiting for the economy to improve. They run the risk of others passing them by.

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING: All of the swimmers appeared confident, positive and prepared. If anyone had misgivings they hid it well, which was probably a healthy thing given the task in front of them. In this environment, companies too must be confident, prepared and in shape. That means a strong Balance Sheet with good cash flow and a good business plan. Discuss the plan with your team to ensure they are well informed and as confident as possible. In addition to the overall goal, set a series of small goals which allows everyone to measure ongoing progress and celebrate success during the journey.

In hindsight this marathon was a real learning experience for all of us who had the privilege of observing these phenomenal athletes in action. Their discipline, hard work, and positive attitudes, along with the planning and training that must have occurred well before the event, were thought provoking and inspirational.

Steve McCarthy

www.mccarthystrategies.com

