



Training for the race

OCT 22, 2023

Whether you're running a race or running a business, put these five tips into practice and you may be surprised at how far they can take you.

Tennis star Billie Jean King once said, "Sport teaches you character, it teaches you to play by the rules, it teaches you to know what it feels like to win and lose. It teaches you about life."

Perhaps like one or two of you reading this, during the COVID lockdown, I let myself get a bit sedentary. I had little motivation to stay fit and healthy, and what I looked forward to most was just getting through the workday so I could enjoy a beverage on the back porch with my wife and colleague, Lisa. After about a year of working hard at that lifestyle, we had enough. My wife gave me an ultimatum – sign up for a race and set a goal, or else! Coincidentally, the same day she put down the hammer, a close friend texted me about doing an Olympic-distance triathlon. I had retired from age-group triathlons and road bike races about 20 years earlier, but hearing from my wife and my friend on the same day, I simply didn't have a choice but to get back in the game.

I completed my comeback race on Memorial Day of 2022 and decided to step up to an Ironman 70.3 (they used to be called half-Ironmans) that I completed in June of 2023. When I got back to training, a little heavier and a lot wiser than I was 20 years ago, my approach was different. When I look back on my career, I see my leadership approach has also changed – certainly because I'm wiser today than I was back then.

- So I offer five tips that apply to anyone who wants to grow as a leader, or perhaps take on an endurance race like a triathlon.
- + **Get a coach.** Twenty years ago, I was a self-coached triathlete and office manager. Even when I started and ran a successful environmental firm, I learned through doing – sometimes I was successful and other times I wasn't. Sometimes I handled situations and people well, and other times I didn't. I tried to learn from my mistakes, but didn't have someone to guide me or help me see my blind spots. Coaches can be a great asset. Coaches are like good friends – they tell us what we need to hear, not necessarily what we want to hear. They often push us to do the hard work, not letting us take what – in the short-term – seems to be the easy way out. So whether you want to grow as a leader or take on an endurance race, think about investing in a coach.
- + **Make a plan.** Endurance sports carry that name for a reason. We have to endure for a while: they are not sprints. For a longer race, our training plan may last four to six months, and it's important to have a base level of training even before then. Leading an organization requires a long-term view, so develop a plan. And I don't mean a "business plan" that lists a whole bunch of clients we hope to work for. I mean an actionable and informed plan that lays out how you are going to identify markets and clients, how you will market, win, and execute work. or something similar. The key is that it's actionable, not a wish list.
- + **Assess performance against the plan regularly.** My current triathlon coach (and plan) have me doing performance tests to gauge my progress or fitness improvement over time. And if necessary, we can modify the plan. Our business plans should also be living documents that we actually refer to: a guide that keeps us focused on our long-term objectives. If we are not reaching the milestones we set out to reach, dig in to the issue to reveal the causes and get to work on them. And if necessary, reevaluate your goals or objectives.
- + **Have a support structure or team.** Training for a longer-distance race can require several hours of training a week. It's not uncommon for age-group triathletes to put in eight to 12 hours a week for a mid-distance race. Especially for those of us with families, it's important that we have their support, as we may need to adjust schedules or renegotiate home or child-raising duties. In business, you have to have a strong team that is trusting and supportive of one another, one where team members hold each other accountable to do the hard work necessary to meet the long-term goals that we are all striving for, a team that looks out for and supports the success of its members, as that will lead to team success.
- + **Be adaptable to changing conditions.** So after putting in months of disciplined training, race day finally arrives. And the conditions on the course are terrible. We could despair and come up with an excuse to pull out of the race: or we can soldier through it, knowing that we put in the work. We embrace the suck, and come out better and stronger after the finish. The same goes with our business. Especially in today's rapidly evolving world and industry, we need to be agile. We need to be able to pivot when we see market conditions changing or key people leaving our firms. While having a plan is important so we are not chasing the next shiny object, being flexible is the name of the game today.

Many before me have rightly claimed that sport can teach us life lessons: sport can also teach us vital lessons about running a business. So whatever your "race" may be, try putting these tips into practice, you may be surprised at how far they can take you.

Eduardo Smith, P.E. is senior vice president of client success at SCS Engineers. Contact him at esmith@scsengineers.com.