



Living to extremes

Rob Lewis shows how learning and development can make a real difference to teamworking in the most extreme conditions

The Volvo Ocean Race (VOR) began on November 5th last year, when seven 70ft carbon fibre racing yachts left Vigo in Spain on their sprint around the globe. Not only are the multi-million-pound yachts the most advanced on the water, the crews are too. Many have circumnavigated at least once before, and several have competed at Olympic level in sailing. The skippers are simply the best there are, and command huge respect in the sailing industry.

The yachts themselves can be best described as ocean-going greyhounds, capable of sustained speeds of over 30 knots. This equates to nearly 40mph and will result in new records being set. Being hit in the face by a wave at over 30 knots will be more akin to falling off a high-speed ferry than anything else, so crews will need to be more agile and smarter than ever before.

Ensuring that the race runs like clockwork is the responsibility of a 40-strong team, based in Hampshire and led by VOR's CEO and ex-Olympian, Glenn Bourke. Split into a travelling and non-travelling team, they are responsible for every aspect of the race, from 24-hour communication support of the yachts whilst at sea, to website

content, to ensuring several tonnes of equipment arrive in the correct ports around the world. Perfect coordination and teamwork are essential to achieving optimum performance.

When Volvo approached my company Mission Performance in the summer of 2005, it had identified several challenges that needed resolving in time for the start. Many of them had arisen from the 2001/2 Volvo Ocean Race, and Bourke and his teams were keen to learn from past experience in order to improve their performance further this time around.

My colleagues and I had been working with teams in business and sport for the last six years. We have prepared five Global Challenge teams for the 2000 and 2004

round-the-world yacht races, and have prepared and supported 38 teams competing in the annual Polar Challenge to the magnetic North Pole. Programmes are run by men and women who have 'been there and done it', including ocean-racing skippers, adventure racers and mountaineers. Everyone has had considerable experience of building, leading or being part of

The Volvo Ocean Race 2005-2006

The historic race, which takes place every four years, sees a fleet of yachts race 32,700 miles around the world in nine legs. The seven boats began their global gallop in November 2005, when they set off on leg one from Spain, through the legendary doldrums to Cape Town. The course then takes them to Melbourne, Wellington, Rio de Janeiro, Baltimore, New York, Portsmouth, Rotterdam and on to the finish line in Gothenburg.



teams. Critically, they are all able to transfer the lessons from their experiences to those of teams competing in the corporate and sporting environments.

Bourke wanted a team-development programme that would enable his VOR support team to work better in support of the yacht racing crews. He was very keen to learn from the lessons and mistakes made in the last race in 2000/01.

In previous years the support team had ticked a few team-building boxes in the preparation for earlier races, but the fundamental skills, knowledge and attitudes required to be an effective team in such a high-intensity environment had not really been addressed. Prior programmes, while enjoyable, left no lasting impact.

Bourke wanted to take a different approach, an approach that focused on the underlying reasons for effective teamwork. In Mission's experience, designing an effective team development programme requires the same rigour as for any other training intervention.

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Experience tells us that poor questioning during the design phases, and poorly managed expectations between client and consultant, lead to ineffective solutions; solutions that focus on the symptoms rather than the root causes. As a result, no fundamental changes in attitude, levels of skill, knowledge or process occur because the programme design has not gone far enough.

To avoid wasting time, Mission employs the same questioning process in all training design activities with its clients, based upon the right intent, supported by the correct technique. The questions we ask peel away the superficial layers to focus specifically on the need for Mission's services. This process demands that for each issue there is clear evidence, with a clearly defined outcome.

This began with a historical examination of the last race, beginning with a simple review of what went well and what went badly. Then the operational factors were considered, how many teams were involved, locations, interdependent teams, who had to work with whom, and with what outcomes. Then the areas of conflict and stress, and the causal factors behind each of the problem areas defined by the last race were discussed. Each area was examined, together with the evidence to support it (anecdotal-qualitative-quantative), its impact upon the team, and ability to help them deliver their mission.

The key area of focus for the programme was identified as being the conflict between the headquarters and travelling teams. The travelling team would travel around the world and make the race happen in each specific geographical location. The non-travelling team, based in a nondescript business park off the M27 near Portsmouth, would support these teams remotely in the delivery of their briefs and coordinate all resources including

all operational, financial, media, safety and logistics. Using Mission's philosophy of building high-performance teams based on the three cornerstones of clarity, culture and interdependence, it was clear that each team would have to work very interdependently to get the job done; working in any other way was simply not an option. In the last race, no effort was made to build relationships between these two distinct but very important, mutually supportive teams. We were tasked with developing a one-day programme, with ongoing support that would help the entire team build better working relationships.

Our company was recommended to Bourke by an existing employee, who had previously worked with us in building a team for the BT Global Challenge – where they race 'the wrong way' around the world, against the prevailing winds and currents. It was this initial recommendation, combined with Mission's core leadership philosophy, associate experience and knowledge of the Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) that were instrumental in Mission's selection.

Mission's core leadership philosophy begins with the premise that, in order to be an effective leader, you have to be aware of yourself and

The aims

In order to run a more effective and efficient race, Bourke wanted to address these issues and reduce the interference that had held previous teams back. He specifically wanted to gain more knowledge of the following areas.

- Why conflict occurred within and between teams
- What sent specific individuals into conflict
- What motivated specific people to excel in their roles in teams
- How he could understand and lead them more effectively
- How he could communicate more effectively with his team.



how your personal style impacts on those people around you; in other words, your emotional literacy. This central philosophy was used as a basis for the programme. Bourke was keen to discover how his team, and the individuals within it, were motivated. He was also keen to assess the impact of his personal style on those around him.

Mission Performance employs a variety of skipper/associates who have first-hand knowledge of the environment that the support teams were going to be working in. This was another key selection criterion from Bourke. The people on the programme had to have real empathy and understanding for the environment the support team would be working in. The need to understand the organisational context of the programme was crucial. Failure to appreciate the cultural fit and operational imperatives would lessen the training impact considerably.

Mission first discovered the SDI through its work with the retailer John Lewis. The inventory aligned perfectly with Glenn's objectives and Mission's core leadership philosophy. The key advantage of the tool was its simplicity as a colour-coded guide to navigate the complexities of human motivation. The inventory tool gives you insight into what motivates you, and the people you lead in two states of being: when things are going well and when there is opposition and conflict. Here, in a very simple self-assessed survey, you could begin to glimpse the very essence of what makes you and other people tick.

Crucial to success is to ask for feedback in a format that you can do something with. The ease



with which course content can be applied back in the workplace is one of the critical success factors Mission uses to assess the viability of the tools and models it facilitates with its clients.

With this in mind I quickly became accredited and began developing a leadership variant with Simon Gallon. This variant would build upon the SDI but would position it firmly in the leadership context. The programme was used to shape the modules to be delivered on the programme.

The programme was designed following extensive consultation with the leadership team. The solution in overview would be achieved in three consecutive parts. The first part involved an analysis of team composition and working routines.



The second part used this information to shape a one-day experiential programme, which utilised the SDI tool, operational case studies and an exercise involving the Royal Navy's firefighting unit based at Whale Island. The third part involved one-to-one support to integrate the SDI philosophy and feedback into normal working routines.

One of the critical success factors would be the ability to relate abstract theory to the challenges that each team would face on the race. This challenge was met through the utilisation of case study examples drawn from the last race. Together with the VOR's human resources team, Mission Performance designed three case studies based on areas of conflict taken directly from the 2001 Race.



The plan was to raise their understanding of relationship theory and conflict management through a version of the Leadership SDI curriculum. Once the team had a common vocabulary and a better understanding, we could go on to discuss how we could apply the theory to these real case study examples.

Split into their Motivational Value System (MVS) groups, each discussed the same case studies as a group and then presented back in main plenary. This exercise proved the essence of the programme, which was that people see the same thing differently, based upon how they see the world through their own MVS. This was a fascinating exercise for all, as it underpinned and reinforced why specific people

behaved in the ways they did.

Realising why people behave in the ways they do drastically increases the understanding within groups and between team members. More significantly, it is this understanding that provides the key to unlocking greater behavioural choice, flexibility and effective communication.

To reinforce this exercise, action plans were drawn up around each of the case studies. These became policy in the management of those situations for the 2005/06 race. Additionally, each member of the team completed a motivational 'dashboard', which summarised their key motivators and conflict triggers. These dashboards were created and then distributed to each team member, and were designed to serve as a point of reference for all future interactions on the race. Bourke had over 40 dashboards saved on his laptop for reference.

The next step was to 'exercise' the theory in a live situation. This meant travelling to the Royal Navy's firefighting school in Portsmouth, where the team spent three hours fighting real fires in simulated ship compartments.

Following the off-site programme, key members of the leadership team met with Mission to analyse the motivational composition of their teams. The dashboards created after the programme would serve to underpin the way the teams operated from that point forward. As important as 'man overboard' drills, the dashboards were laminated and placed alongside the operational manuals.

As I write this article, the race is still underway and has been gripped by a series of technical problems since the start. However, the one consistent factor through all of these challenges has been the resolve and commitment of the support team. Faced with huge obstacles, and working under high pressure, the team is still working more effectively than ever. ■

Summary lessons

1. Treat teamworking as seriously as operational processes and apply the same ROI criteria as you would to any other financial and time investment
2. In the design phase, ask the right questions not to gain agreement but to achieve mutual understanding
3. Use tools to underpin team development interventions in order to leave a legacy of language and process
4. Utilise jointly created operational specific case studies to test/exercise the theory
5. Enforce and commit to actions immediately beyond the programme
6. Turn key actions into processes and make key people accountable
7. Achieve CEO support and sponsorship for serious team-development projects by presenting the business case for teams working effectively.

Rob Lewis (MD of Mission Performance) and **Simon Gallon** (MD of Personal Strengths Publishing UK) will be presenting at the TJ Conference on 29th June, at the City Inn, Westminster London. To find out more or to book a place, visit www.trainingjournal.com/conference. Rob Lewis can be contacted at lewis@missionperformance.com or visit www.missionperformance.com. For information on the SDI and SDI qualification programmes, please visit www.personalstrengths.co.uk. The Strength Deployment Inventory® (SDI) is protected by worldwide copyright and is registered to Personal Strengths Publishing Inc.