

Racing Across America

What the World's Toughest Bike Race can Teach us About Business

Pedal 4,800 km. Climb 53,340 meters. Conquer three major mountain ranges. And cross 12 U.S. states.

No stages. No designated rest periods for food and sleep. It's a nonstop race pedaling from coast to coast. The Race Across America (RAAM) is the world's toughest ultra-distance cycling race in the world.

Peter Smeets is a lawyer, entrepreneur and ultra cyclist. He is also the CEO of Officebricks, an acoustic pod retailer who recently partnered with Steelcase to answer the need for privacy in the workplace. Smeets talked with 360 about pushing the body past exhaustion and how four lessons he learns on the trail translate to the office.

Leadership

It's about balance. The balance between hierarchy and holarchy — the swing of the pendulum from top-down leadership to no bosses or titles at all. "You need a certain type of leadership, people need to feel comfortable," says Smeets. "The leader also manages strengths and weaknesses in the best way so that the overall result is as good as possible."

Similarly, open communication and trust between leaders and direct reports is the key to success for any team in the workplace. When employees feel empowered to take risks, believe their opinions are truly valued and think their unique strengths are being utilized, that's when the boundaries of creativity and innovation are pushed. RAAM teams can ride up to 22 hours a day. A team without strong leadership fails.

Teamwork

Smeets competed in the Ironman triathlon for 20 years. The biggest difference between Ironman and RAAM? Teamwork. "Ironman is, I would say, the perfect example of an ego-driven sport. You train by yourself, you do the competition for yourself," explains Smeets. "The RAAM is completely different because you need a team of 20 people who harmonize like a clock while you sit on the bike, day-and-night. Otherwise, you fail." With laser focus and little to no sleep, supporting team members who manage things like navigation and nutrition are vital to every rider's success.

Fluid collaboration is as needed in business as it is in the RAAM. Building community fosters trust between team members when projects get tough, and it's common knowledge that creative ideas don't happen in a vacuum — they require a team of people who support and push each other to succeed.

The power of project management

Lack of clarity, unforeseen costs and missed deadlines — the curses of project teams that lack clear processes and project management. Take it from Smeets; project managers can make or break a project, making it an enjoyable team effort or a stressful assignment. “The RAAM is a one-year project, and if you are able to fine-tune each and every detail, then you will be successful. If not, you can have the greatest legs on earth, but they will not help you because you have to have thousands of details under control. If you don’t have great management, forget it.”

Eyes on the prize

Along with a friend and two world-class pros, Karl Platt and Tim Böhme, Smeets hopes his team, the Gentlemen of Speed, rank among the top three teams in the 2019 race. To cross the finish line, the race requires tunnel vision on the end goal throughout the entire race.

Long-lasting projects can be exhausting for many workers, emotionally, cognitively and physically. But, Smeets stresses the importance of focusing on the end-game when times get tough. “Conditions get rough. You don’t have any privacy at all throughout this week because you sit together in two RVs. It’s extremely hot and you’re not sleeping enough. You really have to perform at your top level, and permanently think about the success of the project, not how you could improve your personal situation. This is the same at work, conditions can get tough when working on new products and ideas, but focusing on the future success of the project helps.”

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