

Life Lessons from Marathon Running

N Shekhar recently ran his first half-marathon, and feels on top of the world

“Our way of thinking creates good or bad outcomes”

– Stephen Richards

“Life begins at the end of your comfort zone”

– Neale Donald Walsch

Before I started training for marathon running, I had imagined that it would be a simple exercise that anyone could do. That was, of course, until I ran my first timed 10-km stretch.

It all began on a lazy Sunday afternoon when I was browsing through an issue of Harvard Business Review. I chanced upon an article that sought to demystify how some people manage their time much better than others. It turns out that what they manage is their energies rather than their time. Time is finite, but energy is not – so some people achieve more than others in the same 24 hours by managing their energies better. The author goes on to explain that energy can be managed in four dimensions – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual – with the most important being physical energy. It is obvious that a fit person is likely to get much more done than one who is not. This moment of truth was when my fitness journey began.

Like most people, I began with diet control. I scoured the Net for a good health app and started tracking what I ate.

Soon, I figured that it was more important to eat right than to eat light. I also tried to hit the gym at least 4 to 5 days a week. But none of this gave me that instant nirvana I was looking for. The weight loss was slow and frustrating. I craved for even one person to come up to me and tell me that I had lost weight.

Then one day, my wife introduced me to a running group called Gurgaon Road Runners. She even registered me for the 10-km ‘ICICI Gurgaon Starry Night Marathon’ without asking me. And thus began my experiment.

Running, in my view, taps into all dimensions of energy, though it is only the physical aspect that is apparent. It is as taxing on one’s mental energy as it is on the physical. Sometimes you keep pushing ahead only because of your mental strength. Since sprinting releases just about all the ‘happiness’ hormones in your body – dopamine, oestrogen, serotonin and endorphins – your emotional energy gets enhanced. And finally, it is possible to find some part of your life’s purpose (spiritual energy) in enlisting more people to choose health, in the form of running, as a route to happiness.

Running and management: some parallels

When I looked back at my professional journey, I found to my fascination that I could draw several management parallels with marathon running. Let me try and put down some that I could relate to.

Believe in yourself

One of the most humbling experiences I have had was to watch a bunch of visually



impaired children from IBSA participate in Juniorun, a marathon meant for children below the age of 18. While there were volunteers running with these special children and holding their hands, it was decidedly only their self-belief that could have brought them to the venue in the first place.

Self-belief is imperative to embark on any difficult journey. It is what will help you see clearly your opportunities, as well as solutions to possible obstacles. Since other people also play an important role in achieving your goals, you would notice that the responses of other people will be in direct proportion to your own conviction of your beliefs.

Get up, dress up and show up!

One of the most difficult parts of any exercise regimen is dragging yourself out of the snug comfort of your bed on an icy winter morning. When given a choice, living beings are biologically designed to choose a state of wellbeing or comfort. Did you know that, while the human brain is only 2 per cent of the average body weight, it uses almost 20 per cent of all calories consumed? Hence, one part of the brain will always try to tell you to conserve energy.

I realised that I was better off getting out and feeling energised for the entire day than staying in my comfort zone that particular moment and then feeling guilty thereafter. In our professional life, too, most of us would have regrets about the 1-2 challenging opportunities that we did not take, either due to a lack of courage, or simply because of plain laziness about moving out of our comfort zone. The regret is greater when someone else has seized the opportunity and done well for themselves.

Get out of your comfort zone. Try new things with a positive frame of mind. Put your best foot forward. The chances of success are high. Even if you lose the game, you always gain invaluable life lessons. The less travelled road may hold treasures untold!

Set a grand goal, but have a clear executable plan to achieve it

Before I ran my first 10 km, I was intimidated by the thought. I had never

done something like this before, and even on the treadmill, I had only run shorter durations. Then I told myself 5 things:

1. I CAN do this
2. I MUST complete it in 80 minutes (the requirement was 90 minutes)
3. I will not stop for the first 3 km
4. At no point must I take more than 8 minutes for each kilometre
5. Pace yourself evenly, and review the pace on your timer every 2 km

While I had targeted 80 minutes, I completed it in 82 – though this was still 8 minutes better than the minimum requirement. And I did achieve almost all the mini targets I had set myself to keep going: ‘Don’t slow down till the next hydration point’; ‘Keep going till that traffic cone’; ‘Overtake the person in the blue cap’.

All of this is pretty much like our work life. We make executable plans. We have an overall goal but also set a personal stretch target. Usually, we break our targets into smaller monthly and quarterly milestones. We also try to get a good start without burning out, so that the ‘asking rate’ never become intimidating towards the end. Finally, we review our performance regularly to make necessary course corrections where applicable.

Runners draw energy from each other

Running is an Individual sport, but it also has an inexplicable team spirit. As they say, ‘You run alone, but you win together.’ In my first 21-km half-marathon, I was so exhausted after 18 km that I was willing to give up and die. Well almost. I could not feel my legs, though I could make out that there were two wobbly limbs that were toiling to get me to the finish line. Just then, one of my co-runners, probably sensing my weak state, clapped and cheered ‘C’mon! C’mon! Well done! Just 3 more to go! You can do it!’ She was a complete stranger, but her encouragement worked like magic. A warm rush of adrenaline spread out to my aching joints, and I moved forward with renewed vigour.

In the work environment too, positive affirmations drive people to achieve more. The lesson here is to learn to appreciate often and sincerely, and surround yourself

“ Goals without plans are just dreams ”

– Anonymous

“ Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see the shadow ”

– Helen Keller

“ Be so busy improving yourself that you do not have time to criticise others ”

– Anon

“ What you do speaks louder than what you say ”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

“ All our dreams can come true if we have the courage to pursue them. ”

– Walt Disney

with people who have a positive attitude. For every ten naysayers, there will always be two who will tell you how you can make the impossible possible. Try and be with the second kind. Positivity begets positivity.

Compete with yourself. Work on self-improvement

One of the nice things about marathon running is that you are under no pressure to compete with anyone but yourself. You only try and improve on your personal best. In doing so, it may just happen that you are better than someone else. Sergei Bubka held the pole vault world record for 21 long years, breaking his own record 14 times.

It is good to know your own strengths, but more importantly your weaknesses. When I began running, I used to develop a pain in the muscle just behind the knee. I had to frequently stop to get the pain to ease. I discovered then that my biceps femoris muscle was weak, so I learnt some exercises to strengthen it. Just as important, you need dedicated training to build strength, both physical and mental. Rome was not built in a day.

In our professional lives, we may not be strong in every element of our function. While we may choose to manage this by depending on team members and fellow workers who have complementary skills, we also need to work on continuous self-improvement. Read up. Be updated to be upgraded. Finally, work on your soft skills, because as you go higher, your human-resource management skills will need to play out better than your technical skills.

Pacers lead by example

Seasoned marathoners run as ‘Pacers’. A new entrant in the running circuit may be flummoxed about how to pace him- or herself so as to complete the goal in a specific timeframe. A good option is to choose the pacer with the relevant ‘time flag’ to run with.

Pacers guide the newbies, helping them plan the utilisation of their energy reserves in an even spread: when to slow down, when to speed up, when to hydrate. This helps them achieve the target without burnout or injury.

In the work environment, real leaders lead by example. As leaders, we must

- A) Demonstrate involvement by leading from the front.
- B) Provide the necessary strategic direction to move in
- C) Help in resource planning and structuring
- D) Provide the appropriate impetus and breaks
- E) Embody the importance of endurance over speed
- F) Boost team morale with encouragement from time to time

Never Give Up

When running long distances, there will be moments when you will want to give up out of sheer physical fatigue. You will feel that you have been plain stupid to have taken up the activity in the first place. This usually happens with me when more than two-thirds of the distance has been covered. This is where you push forward with ONLY the strength of your mind.

This also holds good at work, especially when we have taken up a challenging assignment. Most people who have given up would be surprised to know just how close they were to success. Never give up! Never give up! Never give up!

Co-relating the personal and the professional

Now, I will let you in on a little secret: Try and regularly do some form of outdoor sport with your spouse or significant other. It might be walking, running, yoga, working out, or even a game of badminton. It is even better if you can include the kids and do the activity as a family. Don’t ask me how, but it makes a dramatic improvement to your domestic peace and positivity – and it is no secret that that promotes productivity on the professional front!

Finally, whether it is running a marathon or managing a team, enjoy yourself. Have fun along the way. Show gratitude. Celebrate small successes. It is a short life – enjoy it while you can. ■



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