



Letter from London

Lessons in risk management for professional partnerships from the world's toughest yacht race

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When I signed up for the race and committed time and money for the venture, I had no idea where it would lead me. I was prepared to be cold, dirty and seasick on the way round the world, but I had no concept of what else was involved.

On 3 October 2004, I set off from Portsmouth in the world's toughest yacht race with a crew I hardly knew, but who eventually were convincing winners of the Princess Royal Trophy. This was a race between 12 identical yachts where difference was made by the performance of the crew.

What has this got to do with running a lawyer's or any other professional practice in 2006? The answer is 'lots'. I was fortunate in that the sponsors of our yacht, BG Group plc, were supportive and interested in how lessons learned in the race might impact on their business. This was of interest to me, as I had been the senior partner in a law firm which had grown from a single office to a national one with several offices and hundreds of employees in a relatively short space of time.

There are many similarities between racing a 72-foot yacht the wrong way round the world and managing a professional partnership. All the crew, with the exception of the skipper, had invested a hefty chunk of their own money in the venture. All the crew, including the skipper, were investing nine months of their lives in the race

and all were clearly stakeholders in the business of racing around the world.

The race was not without risk. At times we were so far from land that the nearest human beings to us were the astronauts aboard the space station! We had to anticipate all eventualities and plan for them. We had to ensure that all foreseeable risks were kept to a minimum.

How I wished I had raced round the world earlier in my professional life.

So what did I learn? There were many lessons but following are a few.

At the start, everyone had their own reasons for entering the race. For some, winning was very important; others simply wanted an adventure, to participate and be safe. You can see the similarities with a professional partnership, high flyers (those who want big profits — winners) and others who want a more balanced lifestyle but who are important to the business in their own way.

The crew spent two weekends discussing objectives. We worked in syndicates and as a group until we agreed on a set of key points and objectives which were acceptable to everyone.

One of our early attempts at a mission statement was this: 'We would race every day having learned from the day before, maintaining the highest standards of safety and professionalism, through meticulous preparation, helping and supporting

each other and creating a fun and enjoyable environment in which we could all achieve our goals', We eventually omitted the word 'win' in our overall objective, as we decided that if we worked to our maximum capabilities and sailed as fast as we could all the time, we would achieve success. Not bad from a crew who ranged in age from 27 to 59, including 14 men and four women, and coming from very different backgrounds.

Our team-building weekends were expertly facilitated by BG Group's HR department, but we made the decisions. We found that if a team sets its own objectives, it has a greater incentive to achieve them.

A professional partnership could learn much from this approach of consensus. We were all happy with our objectives and could read into them our individual ambitions, while at the same time we had committed ourselves to the overall plan. The high priority we gave to safety could easily translate to 'risk management' in the business world. We revisited our objectives regularly during the race and reminded ourselves what we had committed to.

There was no formal appraisal system aboard the yacht, but on some legs when the going got tough our skipper would make time for a private talk with each member of the crew. This was an opportunity to raise matters of concern and to discuss potential problems and their solutions, which could not be done in the busy environment of a yacht racing. This was an enormous task for the skipper, who had more than enough to do, but it was valuable and helped diffuse potential conflicts before they surfaced.

At the end of each leg of the race the crew had a full day of debriefing. These debriefs were again facilitated by a representative of BG's HR department. Prior to each meeting the crew was given the opportunity of a confidential discussion with a member of BG's HR department. We were encouraged to open up and talk about the previous leg, our failures and successes, our niggles and anything personal that we wanted to get off our chests. Information from

those discussions was skilfully distilled into the agenda for our debrief day without any individual crew being identified as the source of an issue.

At the start there was some reluctance to take part in these discussions and even suspicion as to their purpose. However, by the time we reached Cape Town the crew generally looked forward to their chance to open up, and regarded it as a valuable process to constant team improvement.

The approach of the debrief day was always positive. We concentrated on our successes and looked at areas for future improvement. We revisited our original objectives and reminded ourselves what we had agreed to do. At the end of each debrief, we had all taken responsibility for the future and individuals had agreed upon specific roles and tasks to help the team to achieve even more in the next leg of the race. We were reminded of what we had agreed to before we set sail again.

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Finally, we also undertook exercises which made us open up and be honest about each of our fellow crew members. The objective was to be positive, but being open and honest face-to-face with each other was an interesting experience and one which I suspect few partners in a professional practice achieve without conflict.

When we left Portsmouth in October 2004, very few of the crew had extensive ocean sailing experience, let alone ocean racing experience. We had agreed at the outset that we would have an open learning-coaching culture. We had agreed that we would not regard any question as stupid and that we would all pass on our knowledge to others. We quickly found that this was easier to say than to achieve.

The most fundamental discovery was that a coaching culture involves a two-way street — if you want to learn, you

have to ask questions. It was important to pick the right moment to ask a question and sometimes it was necessary to wait for a full explanation. Criticism was often justified but could also be destructive. Constructive criticism with an explanation of what was wrong was helpful and well received, even if the explanation had to wait until the problem was rectified. On the other hand, negative or general criticism without any explanation could lower morale and drop heads very quickly

Learning was ongoing to the end of the race, and that is why our performance improved all the time.

Apart from our end-of-leg debriefs, we learned to analyse our mistakes and learn from them as we went. A slow sail change would involve the foredeck crew discussing what had gone wrong and how that situation could be resolved in the future. This might involve a total change in what

appeared to be good system. If the change of practice worked, it was passed on to the opposite watch to assist them. All new knowledge was shared. No procedures were written in stone. 'If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got ...'

This willingness to change translates well into the office environment. Just because something has always been done in a certain way, doesn't mean it can't be done better. Everyone, not just the partners, should be encouraged to question how and why things are done in a particular way. There needs to be a culture of 'there are no silly ideas' so that the creativity of the whole team can be exploited.

Sixteen of our crew completed the whole race, but on each leg two new faces joined the team (leggers). We were fortunate in that we knew most of

our leggers, as they were employees of our sponsor, BG Group plc. They had done some training with us, some had a good deal of sailing experience and they had all gone through a rigorous selection process to take part.

However, in spite of us knowing them and the fact that they were aware of our objectives, it became increasingly difficult to integrate the leggers into our team. The difficulty of integration was noticeably more difficult towards the end of the race, when two new leggers were introduced whom we had not met before and who had little idea of our culture.

As we progressed in the race, and we were getting better, we developed a spirit between us. Introducing an

not only from winning, but even from finishing the course.

It may seem obvious in a sailing race that losing a sail or sails will damage performance. To avoid this happening, the skipper and watch leaders had to evaluate the weather and sea state continuously so that the appropriate sails were used at all times. There was always a balance to be struck between maximum speed and safety.

Before we left the pontoon at the start of every leg of the race, we made sure we were the best prepared yacht in the fleet, and it paid off.

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outsider, even one with lots of relevant experience, became more difficult. But we found that the more time we invested in the new crew, the quicker they became part of the team. We also found it useful to give them a job as soon as they arrived, so that they felt useful. That job did not need to be technical, but once they had ownership of it they started to be part of us.

There was no doubt that the more time we invested in them, the more quickly we received our dividend.

Sometimes newcomers to the team felt left out, even when the racing started, and we had to spend time to explain our culture, our aspirations and everything else that we had taken for granted as a team.

There must be lessons here for any firm when bringing in new staff and, even more importantly, when bringing in lateral hires and new teams. You need to get them onboard and integrated into your culture before you even begin to think of long-term benefits. If recruits become proper team members, there is more chance that they will stay.

A yacht race is fraught with potential dangers which might prevent a team

changes in the external environment, the loss of a high-achieving partner together with his or her team and valuable clients, failure to plan for the early retirement or illness of a valuable senior partner, and failure to deal with a difficult or disruptive partner or senior employee. The list is endless. Is your partnership the best prepared business on the block?

We found that openness was very important but sometimes had to be managed. We did this by talking a lot and taking the opportunity to be open at debriefs. I found this enlightening and I said things to people I would never have said before — not always praise, but never negative.

At the end of the day, there is a current theme that is essential in any successful team or business — communication is essential at all levels. ●



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