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Researching the Vision

Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.

Uli Steck, mountaineer (died on Everest, April 2017)

In this chapter we look at **preparation**, the place where all good leadership begins:

- *OPERA*. Ordinary People Extraordinary Results Achieved.
- *Successful failures*. Why it is important to try first and, if you do fail, to learn from it, bounce back, and move forwards.
- *How to learn from failures the Royal Marines way*.
- *‘Train hard, fight easy’*. Training evolutions explained.
- *The ‘Concept, Detail, Results, and Recommendations’ model*.
- *Dynamic Planning Mission Debriefs* to pass on the knowledge.



Explain

*Victory awaits him, who has everything in order – luck we call it.
Defeat is definitely due for him, who has neglected to take the
necessary precautions – bad luck.*

Roald Amundsen

In March 2000, I led a team of four Royal Marines to attempt to be the first British team to walk unsupported from the Canadian coastline to the Geographic North Pole (GNP), a trek of around 500 nautical miles ‘against the drift’.

This trek (hereafter referred to by its military handle, ‘Team Polar 2000’ (**TP2K**)) forms a constant theme throughout this book, examining the different aspects of leadership from the start (the planning stage) to the finish (completion) and beyond (educating future leaders). It is written in chronological order, using my diary extracts and interview transcripts, to illustrate the specific leadership topic being discussed.

Alan's TP2K Diary (i.e. the March 2000 Unsupported Expedition to the North Pole)

After a successful failure in 1998, I did not see the next attempt as a challenge but as an opportunity. An opportunity to put the records straight, but, more importantly, to prove what high performance and well-structured teamwork could achieve when combined with strong true leadership; leadership that would set a precedent, hopefully for future adventurers and businesses world-wide; leadership that would show the world what could be achieved both physically and mentally against all odds.

We had only a one per cent chance of success as judged by the critics. They say a man who lives out his dreams is a scary man. I scared myself – but it was my choice. Life holds a certain risk; the more alive you are, the more the risk. It seemed natural to me to re-plan meticulously for the millennium walk.

I spent the next two years searching for approval to go. I begged, stole and borrowed equipment, and had the daunting task of procuring all the capital finance within three weeks. I researched the last 25 years of failed attempts for the reason why they failed. I then calculated, or programmed, a solution to their failures into my master plan.

OPERA: Ordinary People Extraordinary Results Achieved

I firmly believe that anybody can achieve extraordinary things with the right preparation, a positive mindset and unswerving passion.

Up until my **2000 North Pole expedition (TP2K)**, I had spent every holiday for five years living in Canada with the local

Nunavut Inuit, learning about snow, ice, survival techniques, and polar weather conditions. I immersed myself in their environment so that I could learn my limits, whilst being as comfortable and confident in this extreme environment as possible.

Although I did not succeed in my **1998 attempt** (see ‘Section The Importance of “Successful Failures”’), this was because of a combination of bad luck and poor team dynamics, not due to any lack of ‘polar confidence’ or technical ability. Consequently, when I returned in 2000 to try again, I was able to build upon this base of excellent preparation, which in turn gave me the confidence to push myself to my limits and beyond, knowing that my mental and physical preparation had been top-class.

In ‘Researching the Vision’, it is **OPERA** which breeds confidence, and which, in turn, attracts success.

The Importance of ‘Successful Failures’

In 1998, I failed to reach the North Pole during my first attempt in a two-man team. A number of things went wrong during this expedition, a great many things in fact, from equipment failure to a breakdown in team dynamics, but this only strengthened my resolve to return and try again, which I did successfully in 2000 (**TP2K**). However, I only succeeded with my team the second time around, against all the odds, by being brutally honest with myself in assessing what had gone wrong in 1998.

This meant testing out new procedures, innovating with state-of-the-art equipment, embracing innovation, and accepting that I did not need to do things in the same way as everybody else. We trained harder and smarter, and I put together a group of individuals whom I’d been able to test under severe pressure until I was confident they would be able to withstand the physical and mental pressures of an extreme polar expedition, one that had never been successfully completed before. It had certainly been attempted many times – including by myself – but it had never been achieved.

It also meant being very honest with myself as to why I had failed the first time round, something which was not always easy for a proud person who had never previously failed to achieve his goals. Luckily, I had kept a diary at the time recording my thoughts and emotions, so was able to look back with a degree of clarity which is often obscured by hindsight. Taking personal responsibility for the intended outcome and potential success of the expedition was absolutely key.

Friendship and Teamwork are Not Always the Same Thing

Between 1995 and early March 1998, our two-man team had persuaded the gods that we could make a serious attempt to walk to the Geographic North Pole from Canada unsupported, and claim to be the first British team to do so.

We thought we had covered every angle of planning and, after knowing each other for some 10 years, the question about compatibility and cohesion was foolishly dismissed. Why? Because we were to set off on what I believed was a venture forged by joint beliefs, aims, convictions and finally goals. How wrong could I be?

Alan's 1998 North Pole Diary

I thought I knew the person I would be walking with, having served with him for 10 years, but friendship does not equate to shared aims and goals. I was incredibly driven and extremely passionate about this expedition; I had wanted to achieve something new and groundbreaking, both for myself and in honour of the great polar explorers who had gone before me. This was more than just a long cold walk to me, it was a lifelong ambition. Unfortunately, I had failed to confirm that my companion shared my ambitions and was as committed to and passionate about the venture as I was.

Factor in equipment malfunction with a large dose of bad luck in spite of meticulous planning, and you have many of the ingredients in place for failure.

Fuel Spillage

Since we set off from Ward Hunt Island 13 days ago on this joint dream, we had encountered quite a few alarming equipment problems, especially at such an early stage of the expedition. The most horrifying had been the loss of fuel within the sledges, which had not only contaminated the food supplies, but also forced us to utilise our contingency plan from almost the outset of our journey.

The fuel was swilling around inside our sledges, covering all that it came into contact with. Not only was our food reeking with fuel, but our sleeping bags were soaking with white gas and the fumes would linger during the night, giving the tired and weary adventurer one hell of a headache.

It is at these points, when things are going against you, that team unity is vital. This is when a common sense of purpose will help to drive you forwards and enable you to overcome seemingly unsurmountable obstacles. With a **shared will and teamwork** we could have continued, but we were no longer a team, we no longer shared the same values, and the decision to abort had now been taken out of my hands.

Walking into the Void

With all the will and desire in the world and with all the inner passion and drive to succeed, it is food that carries us forward. Food that fuels our success, food that in turn keeps us from going mad.

After ten hours of hauling a 200-pound sledge over ice boulders, you have only two things to look forward to: food and sleep.

With the abundance of our food supply contaminated, and already divided in our true and inner aims, the expedition was always going to be twice as tough. Then a second fuel spillage meant we had to really contemplate our position. What with our entire power supply of lithium batteries also having failed, we needed to seriously reconsider our next move. Our initial conversation contemplating failure was not a great success for many reasons, and I had soon buried my head in my diary to recalculate what serviceable food and fuel we had left and how we could reconfigure the master plan so we could keep walking. Admittedly it would have had to be on a supported basis after a re-supply, but we could still have re-planned and still carried on. We could have kept walking.

I had already lost faith in the overall planning, the big scheme of things, a few months before departing England. So, to reassess and choose whether to push on was something I needed to come to terms with in my own way, in my own mind, trusting only myself and relying on my own sanity as my sole advocate.

I learnt, first-hand, the importance of **mental strength**, something I would come to appreciate on my TP2K expedition, allowing me to become a more understanding leader in the process.

When the Mind Fails, the Body Shuts Down Soon after ...

This will fuel, with focused rage, what will be my next move ... another attempt to the North Pole but with a determined, passionate and befitting team.

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Once the decision, as selfish as it is, has been taken to abort the walk, your body immediately starts to feel the cold, pains and aches it would normally reject because of the inner drive and centred passion that would push it through these mental and physical barriers. Now completely dejected and depressed with the thought of an early return, any form of exertion is ten times as difficult.

I also learned how to cope with adversity and setbacks, to recalibrate myself, to ‘control the controllable’ and then deal with the rest, with whatever nature had to throw at us. This was vital on the 1998 expedition, when our emergency airlift was unable to land, forcing us into an emergency haul back to the very place where we had begun our expedition almost two weeks previously, back on Ward Hunt Island.

Walking Back to Safety

We had enough food and fuel to last us three days. It had just taken us two weeks to reach the point where we stood and camped now.

Three days’ food? Let’s hope the rescue plane can land and extract a team that now has a divide the width of the Red Sea in the midst of it. A divide that can never be bridged again.

There is a fine line between determination and stubbornness. Knowing myself, I sit smack bang on a seat in the middle. I have no choice: no options, no contingency, and now no faith in the nucleus of people back home called a team. I know my stubbornness will get me back to base camp and, in turn, back to normal work, but I also know deep down my determination must turn this adversity around, and pull out every drop of positive feedback from this awful plight.

Walking Backwards to Survive

The dreaded words arrive, crackling over the radio, words I will never forget. To fail a task, to have to live and breathe an ocean of excuses to the sponsors and friends was daunting enough. I am a firm believer that once the mind weakens, the body will crumble. We have come to terms with the fact that, in a short temporary way, this was the end. Now all we need to do is get on the plane and face the flak. If only it was that easy!

Those frightful words boomed from the radio set.

'I am so sorry guys we cannot land, I say again we cannot land ...'

I never thought my heart could sink any further; to prolong this agony was the equivalent to torture.

The next voice over the radio was the co-pilot:

'Polar North, Polar North, we do not have enough fuel left to land in an alternative landing site. You must return to Ward Hunt Island where we will pick you up in 48 hours. There is a strong weather front approaching and if you do not make it to Ward Hunt Island in time it could be up to two weeks until our next fly over'.

It has taken us thirteen days to reach this point and we now had only 48 hours to return over some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world.

Most of the decisions have already been made for us because of our lack of food, however we still have some life-saving decisions to make as a team. Our best move now is to abandon the majority of the equipment and make the sledges lighter and more manageable. Our hearts and souls are not really in the trip anymore and it is more a case of safety and the chance of survival, than genuine teamwork and collaboration.

Looking back at these diary entries paints a bleak picture. Ultimately though, all these setbacks contributed to making me a better leader for the future. Having tasted failure once, I never wanted to experience it again, certainly not when I believed it could have been avoided in the first place. I vowed that never again would I allow selfishness and self-interest to undermine my team's common goal.

The End of the Beginning ...

I made a silent promise to return to this forbidden place, a promise to try and turn the failure and adversity around to work in my favour, a promise to make the impossible possible next time.

To be inspired by failure and defeat takes special qualities. Qualities of strong character and judgement. Self-motivation was driving me to want to return, to deposit myself back in hell ...

When I finally returned for the TP2K expedition, we all had our own personal motivational quotes pasted on the rear of our sledges, quotes which we had chosen to reflect our own beliefs, and which would inspire the person walking directly behind.

My chosen quote, born out of this failed 1998 expedition, was taken from a Latin proverb '*Aut viam inveniam aut faciam*', used by the great leader Hannibal in response to his generals who had protested that it would be impossible to cross the Alps with elephants:

I shall either find a way or make one.

Demonstrate

I have often marvelled at the thin line which separates success from failure.

Sir Ernest Shackleton

The importance of research can be seen in all walks of life, from polar expeditions to everyday business. Research is vital to businesses – it allows you to determine what your business does well, and what you could do better. Research shapes your strategy and branding, and therefore drives long-term profitability.

The Bentley Case Study (later on in this chapter) illustrates just how vital research is for delivering a vision.

Learning from the Polar Explorers of Yesteryear

The polar explorers before me were always striving to push the boundaries of what was possible. Sometimes they failed and, such were the extremes they were operating in, the price for that failure in those days was often the ultimate price – death.

James Ross was the first person to reach the Magnetic North Pole in 1831. He then voyaged south to explore Antarctica, accompanied by a certain Captain Sir John Franklin. In 1845, the roles were reversed and Ross accompanied Franklin on his ill-fated expedition to discover the Northwest Passage over the top of Canada. Both Ross and Franklin perished, along with 129 naval officers, when their ship became trapped in the ice.

Sir Ernest Shackleton accompanied Robert Scott on his *Discovery* expedition to the Antarctic between 1901 and 1904, and used what he learned there for his subsequent *Nimrod* expedition in 1908. This, in turn, provided the data for Scott's ill-fated *Terra Nova* expedition, 1910–1913. However, the point is that these explorers were always modifying their approaches, testing, and refining new equipment and procedures, always seeking for a better way, a quicker way of reaching their goals.

In today's environment, with modern technology, we are able to mitigate the risks that the polar explorers of yesteryear had to face. However, it remains our responsibility to advance common knowledge, to learn from the past and to keep reinventing bigger goals, always stretching ourselves as individuals and as a team.

The Royal Marines Mission Debrief

As I've already highlighted, the military is a hierarchical organisation. It is also very structured, with a great deal of emphasis placed upon 'continuous learning'.

Hence, there is always a debrief, a post-expedition review drawn up by the expedition leader. This provides details of the whole setup: research planning, training, execution, and an overall review of the expedition. As TP2K (Team Polar 2000: the unsupported trek from Canada to the North Pole) was conducted from within the Royal Marines, this was written as a military document using the following model:

- **Concept**
- **Detail**
- **Results and Recommendations**

The 'Concept, Detail, Results, and Recommendations' model translates into an 'unemotional' style of writing, where successes and failures are recognised equally, along with recommendations for future improvements. The intention is that future polar adventurers and expeditions can use this document, copying what went well and changing what did not.

To provide a feel for this debrief document, I have reproduced excerpts from the 'Training' section:

Training – Concept *'To walk 472 nautical miles dragging 250 pounds of stores per man requires both great mental and physical fitness plus stamina. With a firm base line already achieved through troop physical training, the team were already quite fit. It was my aim to build the individual members into a disciplined and highly motivated team, partly through our training programme.'*

Training – Detail (This section was originally three pages long in the debrief document, so I won't reproduce it in its entirety here, but the sub-categories were as follows.)

- *Physical training programme.* Dealing with organisation and logistics.
- *Exercise regime.* A week-by-week breakdown of specific exercises undertaken + comments.
- *Wales training package.* A review of training undertaken on Mt. Snowdon in extreme cold, with suitability for Public Relations commitments.
- *Scotland training package.* A review of training carried out in Rothiermurchus, with gorge and river crossing practice.

Training – Results and Recommendations *'From our own personal experiences, the training packages in Wales and Scotland were essential and longer periods should have been spent in both of the aforementioned areas. This would have required further funding to stay for longer periods of time.*

Some aspects of the physical training programme were purposefully omitted because we wanted to peak at our top level of fitness on week four of the expedition. This was due to the fact we did not want to over-train and burn out at the earlier stages, rather than the latter stages on the pack ice.

On reflection, the training programme was an excellent guide for the team to train against. Individual exercises were allocated for direct work on specific muscle groups that would be constantly in use for 15 hours a day, over 10 weeks.

A possible solution to team training would have been to mirror either a ML2 [Mountain Leader Class 2] North Wales package or use the infrastructure of a Novice ski survival course in Norway to construct winter pre-training.'

By constantly evaluating and updating the training material in this manner, a library of knowledge is built up for any future polar explorers.

This ongoing documentation process is just as important in the corporate world – possibly even more so given the more frequent changes in personnel, either between departments or when leaving the company. If there are no written records, then the library of knowledge which has been built up by an individual over the years can easily be lost at a stroke.

Train Hard, Fight Easy

‘Train hard, fight easy’ is a well-known saying we have in the Royal Marines, but it applies equally well to other walks of life; from top-level sport to business and commerce. The more prepared you are, the harder you train, the more confident and capable you will be when the time comes.

Each training camp is called an ‘evolution’. I prefer to have two evolutions per expedition, each in a different setting, to give me a chance to evaluate the team under a range of conditions. The advantages of evolutions are:

- *Team bonding.* You are sharing space and routines with strangers. Get used to it – it’ll be a lot more cramped in a tent when it’s minus 60°C outside. Interestingly, in the Mission Debriefs (carried out post-expedition), it is often remarked that the emotional team dynamics are harder to cope with than the physical hardships.
- *Commitment.* It is an inconvenience; you might have to put a date in your diary a year in advance and make sacrifices to be there. That shows you that you care.
- *Adaptability under pressure.* These are alien places and environments, often uncomfortable and scary. Far better though to face up to your fears and weaknesses in a safe environment.

Here's a typical evolution, held over a weekend in Dartmoor, late November:

Day 1: Friday Afternoon

Meet up. This could be the first time the team has ever met up together. We'll spend a bit of time socialising, then a couple of hours discussing the trip in a classroom-type environment. Hopes and fears, managing people's expectations, eliminating any shock which helps build confidence and helps me as a leader observe individuals and be able to blend the team.

Breaking down barriers. I'll issue training harnesses and Land Rover tyres and we'll go 'hauling' for two to three hours in the cold and wet. There will be different characters mingling with different fitness levels – that's when you first start to see differences come to the fore. This is a key area for me to observe.

Listen as a leader. The social bit. Over dinner, with wine and with conversations flowing, I'll be observing the team dynamics; who's loud? Who's helpful? Who will serve the dinner without asking? The team think it's just dinner, but I have to begin to know who can I rely upon out on the ice.

Day 2: Saturday

Pre-breakfast haul. We put on wet boots and undertake another two-hour haul as dawn is breaking, come rain or shine.

Breakfast respect. You do not come straight into breakfast in your dirty clothes. It's important to get dried and changed first – you'll need mutual respect and discipline when you are going to be spending many hours in a tent together.

EDI. This is technical discussions on equipment, clothing, routines, cookers ... etc., with lots of Q&A. I'll use the EDI technique as described earlier in the book: Explain | Demonstrate | Imitate. So, we'll be putting up tents,

practising cooking, loading, and unloading sleds – getting used to the routines we'll be using out on the ice. Again, this serves to eradicate surprises and build confidence.

New perspectives. I bring in somebody from a previous expedition to talk to the team; maybe a businessperson who had not skied before but who made it to the North Pole. He or she may be able to relate to people in a different way, so it's not just 'Alan on transmit'.

'*Bag rations*'. This is not a farmhouse lunch, but a packed lunch of 'bag rations' as we call it in the Marines; fuel-efficient but not particularly tasty.

Brain games. The team think they are going for another post-lunch haul, but it's time to engage the brain. I'll take them down to the river, where there's an old sledge filled with 100 kg of stones, one harness, and a set of poles. I tell them they have to get all that to the top of *Yes Tor*, about 2 km away as the crow flies, but uphill and with the River Dart in the way. This is a really important shift in mindset – it goes from an individual pulling a tyre to thinking as a unit, accepting change, working to the strengths of the team, taking a sense of pride in a common achievement.

'*Look for a way round the obvious*'. If they take a minute and go looking first, they'll see that 800 m to the left, just out of sight, are a series of stepping stones. They can get themselves and the sled across the river without getting wet. However, not many notice this until on the return journey, when they have already seen me remain bone dry and work out I didn't have to go through the river. This way of thinking will help them on the ice when the route is not straightforward, and looking for options to benefit the team, not just the individual, will be a huge advantage, especially at minus 40°C.

Teamwork. Some people will not be able to pull the heavy sledge at all, so they'll need a routine – who's going to take charge? The Tor is full of horrible, prickly gorse, so they'll need to

look for the clear sections of grass – will they be able to spot this? I have no input whatsoever – I am observing how the team can plan and resolve problems together.

Specialist knowledge. This is a couple of hours at supper, round the fire with a few bottles of red wine and talks from an expert – a dietician or a doctor. Lots of Q&A – how does this work? Who's going to sleep with whom? What happens if?

Day 3: Sunday

Pre-breakfast haul. Same routine; haul before breakfast.

Create a team charter. At brunch, the team sit down together to create and sign their own charter. This could be one page, it could be five pages; basically, how do you want your trip to run and feel? I act as a facilitator, not as a leader, during this discussion. It's the chance for everybody to buy-in, to input, to set the tone for the whole expedition, so that when they are finally out on the ice, they can say: '*Remember how we said we'd help out if somebody was struggling...well that time is now!*' You can see how, over the course of a weekend, the team bonds together, and creates a unity of purpose. Remember what I said earlier: nine out of ten expeditions which fail, do so because of team dynamics.

I can assess the characters and I can spot the shirkers. I'll make sure I push the shirkers so the whole team sees what I can see; you cannot carry everyone, so why should you carry a shirker? Train hard, fight easy. A serious expedition, with a common purpose but an uncertain outcome, cannot afford to carry bystanders. The same can be said for any business trying to succeed in a competitive landscape.

Evolution Benefits I rarely have the luxury of much time to spend when training a team for an expedition. However, a three-day evolution breaking down barriers, exploring peoples hidden drivers and motivators gives me a unique chance to assess the individuals I will be leading, to see how they react when under pressure, both from a personal and a team perspective.

Corporate Away Days are the business world's equivalent of my evolutions, albeit without the physical hardship – they are about taking people out of their normal environment and seeing how they react to new challenges and new pressures. In fact, we look at the benefits of Corporate Away Days 'done well' in a Case Study by Phil Clarke in Chapter 9: 'Taking People Outside Their Natural Environment'.

Learning from Experience

Finding out where people failed is an essential part of my preparation.

Everybody likes to blame their equipment, or clothing, or the weather, but nine out of ten times in my experience, an expedition fails because the team dynamics break down.

I returned from my 14th trek to the North Pole in April 2017. This closed a chapter of my life which began 16 years earlier when I first recommended a one-lunged cancer survivor called Sean Swarner be put forward for a sponsorship award.

Sean accompanied me on the April 2017 trek, which marked the last leg of his Explorers' Grand Slam. The Explorers' Grand Slam involves conquering the highest summits on seven continents, as well as walking to the south and north poles, so he was overjoyed at having fulfilled such a huge and life-long ambition. I, however, wasn't all that pleased with how the trek went, as there were events that happened which could have been avoided. So, I count those as learning experiences on my part – you can't simply repeat what has worked in the past and trust it will keep on working; it all depends upon the individuals. As with all my expeditions, I sit down afterwards and write a full mission debrief (see Section the 'CONCEPT | DETAIL | RESULTS and RECOMMENDATIONS' model) to see what I could improve upon next time.

I won't reproduce the whole document, but here are two of my key concluding remarks:

What went well this time

Specialist ski bindings for the camera crew who were filming the expedition. This enabled them to get their skis on and off more quickly and effectively to save time. More importantly, it reduced the risk of anybody turning an ankle and allowed them to do their job more professionally.

What we could have done better

Have the team commit to two pre-project training evolutions. This had not proved possible owing to the team members being spread over the globe, plus the presence of an American camera crew. But I should have insisted.

By putting all the team members under intense and prolonged pressure in an uncomfortable environment, I would have identified any weaknesses far sooner.

Case Studies: Preparation – 'A Byword for Excellence'

When I am not leading expeditions, I am lucky enough to be involved with many fantastic companies, giving keynote speeches and presentations to their staff, recounting my exploits in the hope that it will serve as motivation for them. I travel the globe each year speaking over 100 times annually to a wide variety of industry sectors spanning business, sport, and the military.

Bentley has become a byword for automotive excellence, always pushing the boundaries of what is possible from a customer experience point of view, both inside and outside the car. I can closely identify with their attention to detail, and with the amount of research that goes on behind every sale to make each customer proud to own a Bentley.

I would like to hope that the people I lead would also recognise the planning and attention to detail that underpins all my

expeditions, as evidenced by the heartfelt ‘Thank you’ note from my former commander, Paul Mansell (see ‘Introduction’).

The following Case Study illustrates exactly how much research goes into a Bentley sale:

CASE STUDY: PREPARATION – Mark Brown, Head of HR Owen, Mayfair – Bentley Dealership

Background – Our Involvement with Alan

In Mark’s words:

*We invited Alan to be our spokesperson for the launch of the new **Bentayga Diesel in March 17**. The Bentayga is the first diesel ever produced by Bentley, noted for its innovative 4×4 styling. The aim was to take the brand into a new arena and to appeal to a whole new range of potential customers. Hence, we wanted somebody who was known for going above and beyond the norm, somebody who broke new ground and pushed expectations to the limit.*

That was why we chose Alan – his background fitted perfectly; he was inspirational, he was innovative and he was daring. The launch event in front of 120 Bentley owners was a resounding success – all of them were completely blown away by Alan’s stories and by his outlook on life.

Dynamic Problem-solving

Bentley has become a byword for doing everything in an exceptional way – every potential issue, no matter how small, is analysed, examined, and addressed to ensure an exceptional experience for the customer.

Alan's outlook on life impressed us so much. At the Launch Event, he recounted the story of his groundbreaking, unsupported trek to the North Pole in 2000 ... and raised a few laughs in the process about Charlie, his colleague on the trip, and his various mishaps – broken skis here, frostbite there, and so on! The serious point to all of this, though, was the way in which Alan looked at all these setbacks as minor blips and concentrated solely on how to fix the problem and move forwards towards the end goal, that of reaching the North Pole.

Bentley's Planning and Attention to Detail

All our handovers are personally tailored to our guests – we pride ourselves on the planning which goes on beforehand.

We go to great lengths to research our customers; their preferences, hobbies, their likes and dislikes. For example, for a recent handover we knew our client was writing a book and so left a Bentley monogrammed notebook and pen on the driver's seat for him. We packed his wife's favourite flowers in the boot. During our previous conversations, we had discovered they both loved walking and so left them day rucksacks and umbrellas on the back seat. When they picked up the car, we presented them with a personalised drawing of the car, complete with its registration. So, we make sure the whole buying experience is memorable, but it doesn't just stop there.

After the handover, we phone our customers to make sure they've arrived home safely and enquire whether there were any little niggles along the way. All our customers are then invited back for a 'second handover' a week later to go through any issues and uncertainties, or simply to offer advice. In short, our customers become part of our family, and it is this level of service which generates referral business for us. So, our success ultimately depends upon our planning ability.

Likewise, there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to the issue of leadership at Bentley – just as their cars are completely bespoke, so too is their approach to staff training. Just as was outlined in the Introduction, the Commando Spirit has come to define the team ethos in the Marines, and in Bentley the brand image has come to define the values expected of its employees.

This top-down approach is not prescriptive – it encourages individuality, but with a common purpose in mind – the good of the company. The term ‘brand ambassadors’ sums this up perfectly for me, as this is what I want from my team members – to become ambassadors for the expedition, to be able to see the bigger picture over individual achievement.

CASE STUDY: PREPARATION – Mark Brown, Bentley Mayfair Dealership Manager

How to lead a team devoted to excellence

At Bentley, we’re selling more than just a car – we’re providing an experience. My team is devoted to delivering the best possible service – it’s no different in that respect to a 5-star hotel or a 3-star Michelin restaurant. For example, we have a set way in which we present water or coffee, on slate plates together with accompaniments – that’s how it has to look every time. And I need to ensure that my staff deliver this level of excellence to every customer.

All my staff are first and foremost individuals – we don’t want our customers to deal with robots who stick to a script. They all understand exactly what is expected of them as brand ambassadors. It’s my job to communicate these values, but it’s their job to interpret these values according to the customer’s preferences and needs.

A ‘coaching’ style of leadership

Consequently, I’ve learnt how to adopt a ‘coaching’ style of management. I always look at the individual first, to understand how they operate, and adapt my management style accordingly to suit that particular individual. I analyse everything that they do, and learn which way they need to be coached. It’s a traditional people-orientated business, but with modern data to back-up that gut feeling.

I spend a lot of time training my team on how to tailor their presentations to the individual customer. The experience and the product must go hand-in-hand as far as our cars are concerned; the experience can’t be less than one would expect the car to be, but it can’t be more either – the two must match.

Imitate

The time to prepare for your next expedition is when you have just returned from a successful trip.

Robert Peary

Any successful business or venture starts with a plan; the better researched the plan, the more scenarios you will have considered, and the more confidence you will have in its eventual outcome.

However, being able to adapt that plan according to the changing circumstances is the mark of leadership.

Researching the Vision: Three Actions to Practise

- *Visualise what success looks like for your business.* Write it down. Be specific, using the ‘Mission Debrief’ style outlined in this chapter, and then work backwards and check that you have the right elements in place to be successful.

- *Learn from experience.* Recognise both your successes and your failures. Debrief when things go right, not just when they go wrong.
- *Use a leadership style appropriate to your vision.* If you are running a team undertaking high-value sales (see Bentley Case Study), then a different style of leadership will be needed than for high-volume sales: one size does not fit all.