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Leading from the Back of the Pack

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Abstract

Can a project be considered a success even if you do not necessarily meet the goals you had originally established for the project? The beginning of any project is filled with optimism and excitement for the possibilities of the future and the potential outcome. Through the course of the past 13 weeks I saw success, but not necessarily in the quantifiable areas in which I had thought I would be successful. However, the impact of this project will be felt hopefully for years to come and for myself, the lessons learned will certainly stay with me as I prepare for future projects. And I can state with confidence that I experienced personal growth in many areas including leadership, determination and tenacity.

Introduction to your Capstone Project

The project I have been working on for the past 13 weeks, was to train for and run the Tucson Marathon in order to raise awareness and money for Soldier's Best Friend, which is an organization that serves the community by rescuing stray and homeless dogs and training them to be service and companion animals to veterans with PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury. It is a project that I was absolutely passionate about because I could see the potential for my own self improvement as well as the potential ripple effect that a project like this could have on the community.

Section 1: Innovative Approach

I started my journey to find a project that would accomplish two things: first, motivate me to get back into better physical shape and second, do something to benefit my community. I have run marathons and frankly many different race events in the past and I know that having an event on the calendar to train for and participate in always helps me to stay motivated to get myself into shape physically both through exercise and eating healthy. When I am taking care of my physical health and well-being, I am emotionally more grounded and mentally more astute, making me an all around better person as a wife, mother, employee and friend. Unfortunately, the drawback to returning to school to finish my degree is that I have not had time to maintain my physical fitness as well as I would have liked over the past two years. Because I do have a career that supports my family and young children to raise as well as additional obligations within my church and community, there were simply not enough hours in the day to add "full time student" to that list without something suffering. Thus, time that would have been spent running or training and working out, instead became dedicated to school assignments and

studying. Choosing to run a marathon for my capstone ensured that I would be able to make the time for training and fitness because it would now be part of my grade. But how to turn running a marathon into a project that would have beneficial impact on the community was the next question.

I remembered that my cousin, Randy, had run a marathon the past few years in order to raise money and awareness for Multiple Sclerosis, which is the illness that had claimed the life of his only sister two decades earlier when she was still in her twenties. I needed to determine several things at this point, most importantly what type of organization or charity did I want to promote awareness and support for? Because of my own personal experiences with my nephew, J.J., who suffered a traumatic brain injury at the age of 13 months old, and seeing the benefit that a trained service dog made in his condition, and knowing how very expensive it is to train a service dog, I wanted to support an organization that was helping to provide service animals to people who have a traumatic brain injury or other condition where it has been indicated that a service animal would be beneficial. When I did the research and discovered Soldier's Best Friend right here in town, I knew immediately I wanted to do what I could to support their mission and vision. Soldier's Best Friend is a unique organization because they positively impact the community in several ways. They rescue stray and homeless animals, thereby getting them off the streets and provide all of the necessary training for the dogs to become certified service dogs for veterans suffering from PTSD and TBI. When I spoke with the administrator at Soldier's Best Friend, he told me that no one had ever run a marathon to raise money and funds for their organization and he gladly gave us permission to make their organization the beneficiary of whatever support we should happen to raise.

Section 2: Emotional Intelligence

My project of running a marathon to raise awareness for Soldier's Best Friend indicated a lot of self-awareness, and also awareness to those around us. I had 13 weeks from the inception of this project until I needed to be ready to run the marathon and I knew myself well enough to know that I could train for and successfully complete a marathon within that time frame. I knew that it wouldn't be easy because training for and running a marathon is never easy, but having successfully completed marathons in the past, I knew that I was capable. I knew that I would need to be aware of my physical needs and limitations, and more than that, I knew that for my own mental and emotional well-being, I needed to start paying more attention to my physical fitness. Wanting to raise awareness for an organization that provides such a great service to the community demonstrates that I am aware of the needs of others. The basis of the project is about bringing more people to understanding and knowledge of an organization whose mission is benefit the entire community and specifically a population of veterans who are the most vulnerable and the most in need of support from their community.

Raising awareness for the mission and vision of Soldier's Best Friend allows their impact on the community to be even greater. I am planning to continue my association with and support for Soldier's Best Friend long after this particular project has ended. The project particulars may change over time and we may choose to do different things to raise money and awareness for this worthy cause, but we know that whatever contributions we make to supporting this cause, the impact will be felt throughout the community as Soldier's Best Friend puts our donations and the donations of those we introduce to them, to work. That may someday include building

additional facilities, paying for their trainers, or eventually expanding into new areas throughout the region. Soldier's Best Friend provides a valuable service by rescuing stray and homeless dogs from a life on the street thus relieving some of that burden from the community, as well as ensuring that veterans who need a trained service animal always have one without themselves or their family having to shoulder the heavy cost.

Section 3: Creative Thinking

I may have borrowed the idea of running a marathon to raise awareness from other people who have done something similar, but my framework included bringing together a team of people to lead in the successful accomplishment of this project. This included bringing together people who could train and run with me on race day, as well as people who would be able to provide skills and abilities that are not in my own repertoire. By the end of the project, I had a team of 4 people, two of whom were located here in Arizona, one from Utah and one from Virginia. We trained together, virtually anyway, for more than three months.

I seem to have very few gifts, but one of my unique talents that I have discovered over the years has proved to be the ability to bring people together. I was blessed not only to bring together experienced runners to complete this marathon, but also novices who were training for their first race event, and people who could help us design logos for hats and shirts, and people who had previous experience with social media and fundraising. My approach was unique because I brought together people from disparate backgrounds and with different goals when it is highly unlikely that any of these people who have crossed paths if it had not been for me.

“Leaders foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships,” explain Kouzes and

Posner in their widely read book, “The Leadership Challenge.” (Kouzes and Posner. 2017. Pg. 17). Having a team chat and facebook page, allowed everyone to communicate directly with the entire team and support each other on good days and bad, as well as present new ideas or solutions for problems or challenges that arose. By the last few weeks we had daily contact with one another as we drew closer to the event. It was fantastic to see that many of the people I brought together intend to stay in touch and continue to work together in the future.

Section 4: Your Innovative Solution

As mentioned in the previous section, one of my greatest accomplishments with this project was in bringing together a lot of different “team members” who have learned to work well together and intend, in future, to continue working together on various projects to benefit the community. We managed to raise a modest amount of money for the organization which they can use however will have the most benefit to them. And we were able to introduce many people to the Soldier's Best Friend and their mission. People who otherwise had never heard of the organization and who will in the future continue to donate to the vision and mission of Soldier's Best Friend.

I suppose there were many things I could have done differently. I could simply have started a fundraising drive without the component of running a marathon. I could have arranged my own race event and invited others to participate with me. I could have gone door to door and solicited donations. But I wanted to incorporate the service that I was providing for the organization with my own personal health and wellness goals.

The director of Soldier's Best Friend was honest with us that no one had ever run a race

event to bring awareness to their cause before. He seemed flattered and surprised. By running a marathon, I was able to reach an entire community of runners and athletes who might never have heard of the organization prior to this event. And in this solution I was also able to reap the personal benefits of working toward the health and wellness goals I had for myself.

Section 5: Results

The project raised just short of \$500 to be donated to Soldier's Best Friend. It was not as much as I had initially hoped we would raise, but it is money from donors who had not previously been aware of Soldier's Best Friend or their mission, and thus it is money that they would not otherwise have had. And it is money that can be used however they most need it at the moment whether that is to pay for their dog trainers, or in the maintenance of their facilities, or for some other purpose. And let's not forget that the community benefits from the service provided by the organization, because they are rescuing dogs that are otherwise homeless or stay and getting them off of the streets. And by providing the training to make them service animals, the recipient veterans receive the animals they need at no charge to them and it is one less service the rest of the community must figure out how to provide and pay for to support the veterans. As far as the personal benefits to myself and my family, I can say after having spent the last 13 weeks getting back to training and preparing to run a marathon, I have felt better and been getting more adequate rest, which has made me a better person for everyone to be around. Although I did not get the promotion I put in for several weeks ago, I did have a lot of positive feedback during and after the interview and started to feel more confident in my career path

moving forward. “Human skills are knowledge about and ability to work with people.”

(Northouse. 2019. Pg. 44). I was able to expand my “human skills” as Northouse calls them by learning to trust in my team and delegate to individuals when things became difficult. This was amazing growth for me because I have never been good at delegating or trusting other people with work where I knew that I was ultimately responsible.

Part of me feels very accomplished. As if I can do anything I set my mind to. But it’s bigger than just this Capstone project. I feel accomplished for having finally reached this culmination of all my hard work to earn my Bachelor’s Degree. It has taken me 25 years and a lot of stopping and starting to get to this point. I got sick with a head cold three days before the marathon. Thursday night I went to bed with a fever and chills, cough and head congestion. I probably should not have even attempted it but I could not let 3 months of training and my final grade on this project go without at least trying to run the marquee event. I started the race Saturday morning with very little hope of finishing and as my pace slowed and my confidence waned, I looked for a race official to tell them I was done. Truthfully, I am not sure how I kept going. It was not until mile 24 when I saw a race official, and by that time, I was so close to the end, she agreed to let me finish, despite me being well over the time limit and feeling so crummy. By that time I knew I could do hard things and I gritted my teeth and despite the pain pushed on. Interestingly, I am not as sore from the marathon as I thought I would be, I guess all of my training really did pay off in the end, but I am most uncomfortable from the lingering effects of running that far with a head cold.

Section 6: Different Approaches

If I had wanted to throw together my own running event specifically with Soldier's Best Friend as the intended beneficiary of any proceeds, I probably could have made more money, but it would have taken more time to pull off and I would have had to do a lot more work with getting waivers and permits and figuring out a course and swag and prizes to attract runners and participants. I still think that creating and directing my own even in partnership with Soldier's Best Friend is something that I would love to do one day, but for the sake of this project, I do not think I would have been even as modestly successful as this project was. But having met a few people at the event on Saturday and working with my team over the course of this project, I know that I have resources and people I can turn to now to assist me in making that happen someday.

Well no. I had hoped to raise more money and I had hoped to set a new personal best during the marathon, but based on how sick I feel, I am honestly grateful even to have finished it myself. My team members all finished far ahead of me, and when I crossed the finish line as the second to last finisher, more than thirty minutes outside of the course time limit, I felt lucky just to have been allowed to finish and make it the entire distance. I think had I been healthy, I would have been much faster and would not have spent the hours after the race curled up in the hotel bathroom running the shower to make the room like a sauna just to try and open my airways so I could breathe again.

Ideally, I would have raised at least \$2,000.00 to donate to Soldier's Best Friend and I would have set a personal best time at the marathon of less than 4 hours and 45 minutes to complete the 26.2 mile course. And naturally, I would not have come down with a head cold

only days before the event so that I could have felt better following the event and been able to truly celebrate the accomplishment.

Section 7: Conclusion

Yesterday morning at mile marker 18 of the marathon I seriously considered sitting down and giving up. I was done. Physically I was so worn out from the cough and cold that I just wanted to go crawl back under the covers. I doubted my own ability to take even one more step. I was truly at my breaking point. I learned through this project that I can power through hard things. I did not sit down and stop even though I badly wanted to, because I knew that if I stopped, I would never get started again.

And that is the greatest lesson from this entire experience, that I am not going to stop. I am not going to stop physically taking care of myself and training my body to withstand hard things, and I am not going to stop my association with and passion for raising awareness for Soldier's Best Friend. I also learned that I can trust my team and I learned how to listen to them and be more open to their ideas than I had been previously, because I knew I was in a situation where I needed their assistance and could do it all on my own. Riel and Martin taught us that "Empathy is a powerful thing. It is the act of experiencing things as if we were in another person's shoes." (Riel and Martin. 2017. Pg. 48).

I benefitted by learning I could do hard things. Soldier's Best Friend benefitted by what money we did raise as well as putting their organization into the consciousness of dozens of people who had never previously supported them before, but will from this point forward. And I will continue to support them. In future efforts and in the way I share the vision of their mission with the world. And the community continues to benefit from the services provided by Soldier's

Best Friend. The way I see it, there was not a loser in the entire scenario. Next time, I just hope I stay healthy!

References

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