

THE MYTH OF THE 20-MILE MARCH – WHAT PRODUCTIVITY GURUS DON'T TELL YOU.

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You can't read much about management or productivity without running into the story of "The 20-Mile March." Jim Collin's take on the classic tale in his book *Great by Choice* has been latched onto and spun far and wide.

Just in case you haven't read it, I'll give you a quick recap. It's the story of the race to the South Pole between Swedish explorer Roald Amundsen and the British Navy Captain Robert Scott.

Amundsen (*spoiler alert: the winner!*) had his men travel by one degree of latitude every day, in all conditions. Scott traveled as far as possible in good weather, and slowed down or stayed put on rough days. Amundsen planted his flag first, and returned safely with his team to international accolades and undying fame.

Scott and his last 2 teammates got dug out of a snow bank eight months later, and buried on the spot.

This gruesome tidbit is meant to illustrate the importance of goal setting, consistency and long-term commitment. You set a daily progress goal and finish it. Every day, no matter what. Even if a competitor seems to be pulling ahead in the short-term, your regular incremental progress will get you to your goal quicker and more reliably than making hay while the sun shines and conserving your energy when chaos hits. Collins calls it "fanatic discipline."

Sort of "The Tortoise and the Hare" meets *Game of Thrones*.

HISTORY TELLS IT DIFFERENTLY

There are some important facts that usually get left out of the story, and that means a lot of people get exactly the wrong takeaway from it.

If you've been practicing "fanatic discipline" but winding up with your project dead in a snow bank (or your team turning on each other like hungry sled dogs), take a closer look at the differences between Amundsen's success and Scott's brutal failure.

Right off the bat, Amundsen was focused on a single objective: get to the Pole and return safely. He built his team for that purpose, and kept it small: an expedition party of 19, with only five members tapped for the final push to the Pole itself. Scott had an elaborate agenda of scientific observations and experiments, specimen-gathering, fundraising, and political payback. His group sprawled to 65 (two of whom bought their way in), with a polar team of 16.

For transport, Amundsen used a well-tested, low-input, multifunctional system: sled dogs. They are bred to run on snow, dig their own shelter, and can eat nearly anything, including each other. If they don't work out for transport, they can be lunch.

Scott set up a complicated, multi-stage high-maintenance system combining horses, a few dogs, and motorized sleds. Trying to make them work consumed time and resources. Their failure left him depleted and behind schedule. Without a fallback, his men had no option but to hand-haul their equipment for the next two months.

For supplies, Amundsen calculated a large margin of error, and doubled it. He brought enough food for the journey that he could have missed every way station and continued another 100 miles before resorting to any desperate measures. Altogether, three tons for five men.

Scott brought one ton for 16 men. No margin of error. Things got desperate real quick.

Finally, that consistent daily distance? One degree of latitude is approximately 15 nautical miles. They could cover it in five or six hours in good weather and have plenty of time to make camp and rest. If the day went badly, it was still a manageable distance. Because they tracked their progress by degrees of latitude instead of time or surface distance, they stayed on track relative to each way stop and the final destination. Slow progress or forced detours didn't distort their perceptions.

Scott's approach was to travel each day as far as physically possible, pushing his team harder and harder with no set rest point to look forward to. Each day's goal was, "go until I tell you to stop." Some days they'd trudge nine or 10 hours. It was exhausting and demoralizing. With no fixed milestones or absolute frame of reference, maintaining mission-focus hung on each person's sense of self-preservation rather than a larger shared vision.

You see, **consistency** is the "B" storyline in the tale of "Amundsen Takes the Pole." The real driving force here is **resilience**.

THINKING BEYOND THE POLE

Amundsen set a goal that went beyond the achievement and recognition of being the first to reach the Pole. His goal was to *return safely with his team*. Because of that mindset, he achieved both.

His process could absorb multiple levels of failure without jeopardizing the mission. He made sure his team had access to ample provisions, and he carried a spare for everything. He respected the size of his undertaking and the extreme conditions he'd face, and left space in his schedule and resources for the unexpected.

He kept his team oriented to a sequence of goals with absolute external measures. Every day had to begin and end with the 10,000-foot view of where they were going

and how far they'd come, by the very nature of measuring latitude. He set reasonable, firm, and transparent expectations so his team could succeed every day on their way to ultimate success.

His "fanatic discipline" wasn't fanatical about pushing harder. It was fanatical about preparation, process, and conserving his team's energy.

FANATIC RESILIENCE

If you want your next project to wind up like Amundsen, not Scott, think about ways to build resilience into your process and your team.

When you set your initial objective, make sure "bring 'em back alive" is at the top of the list, and be explicit about that with your team members. Retaining talent, developing healthy group dynamics, and building institutional knowledge let you build on past success instead of starting from scratch.

Project management is all about dealing with the unexpected and juggling multiple deadlines. What fixed, external markers can you refer to as your own "degrees of latitude?" When your regular check-ins and progress updates automatically tie into that larger view, you give your team a reliable guide for self-measures and self-management.

Have you broken your objective down into regular, reasonable parts? Are you setting your team up for a daily sense of accomplishment, without feeling the need to push themselves to the limits every moment? When the going gets really rough, that margin of conserved energy will carry them through.

Will your next big project be a successful – even record-breaking achievement? Or will it be a white-knuckle adventure, fraught with peril? As Roald Amundsen himself said, "Adventure is just bad planning."

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