

Rivers of Ice Case Study

Mental Toughness and Resilience

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'All gone very wrong' – Tarka's opening words to me shortly after conditions had deteriorated to the point that helped them make the decision to get off the ice. He reported winds in the region of 120-130 kmph and 4.5m total snowfall which had shredded and



crushed the tent, so 'we are in survival situation, if we can get down to the vegetation level we have enough fuel and food to last.' They have managed to make a survival shelter from the remains of their tent to give them enough space to huddle together in a very small space waiting for the weather to clear. Whilst they can help keep each other warm, and are on full food rations, the very confined and cold conditions mean they are suffering from cramps.

Tarka reported being stuck 'between a little rock and a small hard place' as in order to get out they still have to cross the crevasse field to get down the glacier. The use of 'little' is a good indication of Tarka's perspective on this, for him this is still not a major problem. He is maintaining his ability to think rationally, analyse the options available and make the best decisions to ensure they get off the ice cap safely.

Katie reported 'I got completely in a mess yesterday (24 September), it was looking like we weren't going to make it and I got really upset about failing and what people would think.' This is consistent with Katie's expressive and passionate personality style and her need for recognition from others. On the upside this gives her great enthusiasm and energy and on the downside she can become very upset and frustrated when things don't go her way or she has concerns about what people will think about her. Whilst Katie has been trying to rationalise with herself about being the first woman and the first British team to attempt the crossing, this is little consolation as she was still feeling they failed as their goal had been to complete the crossing. This is consistent with her need to achieve personality characteristic.

However when I spoke with Katie (25th September) she reported 'this morning I was terrified and today we are fighting for our lives and the end doesn't matter anymore, the weather is beating us up every time you go outside, I just don't want to move at the moment.' Although she feels safe cocooned in the survival shelter, she knows that to survive they will have to move on as soon as weather permits.

Psychologically they appear to be surprisingly strong at the moment, and are focussing their energy on doing what needs to be done to get themselves out. Katie reported 'yesterday I felt the world was over and given the situation today we're feeling pretty positive. We are 100% going to come back and do it next year, fitter, fatter and faster.'

Katie and Tarka have shown amazing resilience and mental toughness.

Mental toughness is defined as having high self awareness and the ability to regulate thoughts, feelings, emotions and behaviours in a way that delivers sustained performance and success across a wide range of situations. They have demonstrated the four pillars of 'Mental Toughness' identified by Jones & Moorhouse (2008)

1. They've kept their head in very stressful and challenging conditions – enabling them to make well thought through decisions.
2. They've stayed strong in their self-belief to achieve - whilst they have not achieved their goal this time, the very fact that they are already talking about another attempt next year, shows very strong belief in their ability to achieve this goal.
3. They've made motivation work for them – they've used their goal focussed determination to overcome the setbacks (e.g. weather, food rationing, blisters, etc) in very challenging conditions and still have the motivation for another attempt.
4. They've focused on the things that matter – they've kept focussed on how they achieve their bigger goal through focussing on the day to things (e.g. how best to look after themselves and each other, making the right decisions, being well informed) that will help them make progress towards achieving the big goal.

Resilience refers to the ability to absorb stress, pressure, unwelcome feedback, or personal challenge from others without being affected, or deflected from one's own purpose. It means "bouncing back" and even "bouncing forward" from challenging experiences. It is thought that resilience is a mixture of behaviours, thoughts, and actions that anyone can develop (i.e. it is not something that people either have or do not have).

Tarka and Katie have demonstrated the 3 C's OF RESLIENCE:

CONTROL – COMMITMENT – CHALLENGE (Maddi and Koshaba, 2005)

- Control: they have been very clear with their expectations as to who or what is responsible for what happens. For example whilst they have no control over the weather, terrain, etc, they have had control over their planning and preparation, the decisions they make and the actions they have taken as the expedition has progressed.
- Commitment: they have had a clear sense of self and purpose – staying on course, even when the going gets tough! Commitment requires having clear and stretching goals, planning for the 'what if' scenarios, using effective coping strategies and knowing when to ask for help.
- Challenge: They enjoy rising to and overcoming challenges and are comfortable and confident in changing, uncertain situations.

"Courage is resilience to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear" Mark Twain

References:

Jones, G. & Moorhouse, A. (2008). *Developing Mental Toughness: Gold Medal Strategies for Transforming Your Business Performance*. Spring Hill.

Maddi, S. & Koshaba, D. (2005). *Resilience at work: how to succeed no matter what life throws at you*. AMACOM Div American Mgmt Assn.