

“Victory awaits him who has everything in order, luck some people call it. Defeat is certain for him who has neglected to take necessary precautions in time; this is called bad luck.”

- Roald Amundsen

This quote, from Roald Amundsen, opened Chapter 2 in Jim Collin’s latest book, *Great By Choice*. Jim is the author of *Built To Last*, *Good To Great* and *How The Mighty Fall*, all books I have read over the years. In this book, Jim Collins and coauthor Morten T. Hansen attempt to define why some companies—even when faced with uncertainty, chaos, and economic instability still thrive, while similar companies facing the same challenges fail.

In their book, Collins and Hansen highlight two explorers’, Roald Amundsen and Robert Scott, their shared quest to reach the South Pole and the results of their endeavor. One leader led his team to victory and the other led his team to defeat and an untimely death. The authors looked at what separated these two men, and what could be learned from their approach to meeting their objective.

Roald Amundsen, in his early twenties, had to travel from his home country of Norway to Spain for a two-month sailing trip to earn his mater’s certificate. It was nearly a two thousand mile journey from Norway to Spain. True to his nature Roald made the decision to do it by bicycle to test his endurance and self-discipline. While on his sailing trip, Roald Amundsen experimented with eating raw dolphin to determine if it was a useful energy source. Before his arctic exploration, he made several trips to apprentice with Eskimos to study how they managed their environment, trained their dogs, chose the clothes they wore and moved in the snow. Roald believed in practical experiences as a test of what actually worked. He was not a great innovator but a student of best practice. His philosophy: You don’t wait until you’re in an unexpected storm to discover you need more strength, you don’t wait to be shipwrecked to determine if raw dolphin is good for you, you don’t wait until you’re on an Arctic expedition to become a superb cross-country skier and dog handler. You train with intensity, you draw from a deep reservoir of strength to get through the tough times and equally you prepare for when conditions are good so you can take advantage of situations when they arise.

Robert Falcon Scott was a different person. Scott didn’t train to be a superb skier or take a thousand mile bike ride. Scott didn’t spend time with the Eskimos, or he might have seen the difference between using dogs and ponies for his trek to the Pole. Scott saw himself more of an innovator and opted for ‘motorized sleds’ even though they weren’t fully field-tested. Scott made decisions at the onset of his journey which later led to his ultimate ending. If he practiced more with skies his team might have made better time. If he worked more with dogs he would have realized that ponies tend to sweat which freezes on their hides, and that ponies struggle in deep snow, require large amounts of food which needs to be hauled on the journey. If Scott field tested his motorized sleds in the harsh arctic conditions, he would have realized that that the engines froze quickly and cracked thus rendering them useless leaving him and his team to manually haul sleds of supplies and equipment over the snow covered landscape.

Amundsen was a strategic planner who built buffers for unforeseen events. When arranging his supply depots he marked them with black pennants on tall bamboo poles, a black marker that would stand out

against the snow background. He staggered 20 of these markers in precise increments for miles along either side of his supply depots, allowing for a margin of error. It was more work but energy well spent. He marked his forward progress with used packing-cases and other remnants with the idea these markers would help him expedite his journey back from the South Pole to his base camp. Roald stored three tons of food for five men, and carried enough supplies on each leg of the trip to support his team if they missed one of the depot stops along way. To minimize risk, Amundsen carried four thermometers for a key altitude measuring device. Roald made the decisions to cover a certain amount of ground each day no matter what the weather was, it was his bench in which he based his journey on.

In contrast, Robert Falcon Scott placed one marker on his primary supply depot and left no other markers. He had one ton of food for seventeen men at the start of his trip. Scott ran everything dangerously close and carried just enough to make it to each depot along way, and he brought only one thermometer for high-altitude measurement... and it broke. On good days, Scott drove his team hard pushing them to near exhaustion, and when the weather was poor they held up in tents losing precious time. In his journal, Scott would often blame poor conditions for his lack of progress and bad luck for equipment malfunctions.

Roald Amundsen didn't totally know what lay ahead of him but he designed the journey systematically to reduce the role of big forces and chance events. He planned for both the good days and any bad days that he might encounter. He was facing multiple factors he could not predict, in an environment which could change in a minutes notice, and he had do this with limited supplies and technology. This should sound familiar to us in education.

On Dec 15, 1911, Roald Amundsen reached the South Pole, erected a tent, planted the Norwegian Flag, and left a letter for Scott in the event that Roald's team didn't make it back. Roald had no idea that Scott's team was 360 miles away from the Pole. Robert Falcon Scott's team reached the Pole on January 17, 1912, only to find the small tent and wind whipped Norwegian flag left by Amundsen. Roald's team reached their home base in good shape on January 25, the day he penned into his original plan, Scott's team stalled in mid-March, and eight months later a British reconnaissance party found the frozen bodies of Scott and two companions in a small snow-drifted tent ten miles short of his supply depot.

How does this story fit into a book which is examining successful businesses and why relate this to our roles as educators. Roald Amundsen understood he was facing continuous uncertainty: weather conditions were constantly changing, an unknown landscape, and it was impossible to predict with any accuracy significant aspects of the world around him. While in the planning stages he did the best he could to plan for mishaps; he examined and incorporated best practices; he trained physically to meet the challenges of environment; and he had the self-discipline to make a plan and see it through with fidelity. Roald could have made excuses for the weather, gear malfunctions, lack of technology and other unknown factors which would ultimately arise but chose to reject the idea of luck, good or bad, having an impact on his journey. Roald accepted responsibility for his outcome and any short falls along the way were his due to poor planning. Roald Amundsen accepted no excuses.

As educators we find ourselves in a similar environment. The educational landscape is forever changing, and today more than ever our environment is in constant flux. State and federal mandates, the increasing social and emotional needs of our students, the transient nature of our population, and the uncertain fiscal budget we operate under create the environmental chaos. Add to this environment the public sentiment toward public education, the cry for restructuring, and the constant voice which is becoming louder, "You need to change this system" which provides the uncertainty to the environment.

What can we learn from Roald Amundsen? We need to think and plan strategically. The attention to detail before the journey is more important than the journey itself. Be disciplined enough to execute a plan with fidelity and stick to the plan. You may find yourself in a situation which requires you to be creative and make adjustments to the plan- but you don't stray from the plan's original goals and benchmarks. Look for best practices which already exist and make them fit the uniqueness of your journey. Set a bench mark and move toward that bench mark every day no matter what the environment throws at you. Plan for worst case scenarios, and don't expect your journey will be trouble free.

In summary, this is not easy work but success doesn't just happen. Focus your finite energies on things you can control, plan properly, be disciplined, be creative based on the needs of the situation, a small amount of paranoia keeps you honest and temper your ambitions with common sense.

Dave