

Chapter Two

Run Your Own Race

*“Running Your Own Race Is Also About Knowing
What Motivates You”*



Know Your Strengths and Development Needs and Plan Accordingly

The Army Physical Training (PT) test was always a challenge for me. The test consisted of push-ups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run, and we had to qualify twice a year. All segments were timed, and we had to meet or exceed their minimum standards. I was fine with the push-ups and sit-ups, but the two-mile run was another story. There was a reason I favored the 100-yard dash in high school. It wasn't so much that I favored running of any type—rather that I could quickly finish the 100-yard dash and be on to something else more interesting. I never would have signed up for long-distance running—in my mind, two miles was long-distance, even if not considered so by others.

A whole group of us began together at the starting line. Everybody was hyped up and wanted to run their fastest and best. I could feel the tension and the adrenaline rush. On your mark, get set, GO! As soon as the word was said, people flew from that start line like a herd of gazelles being chased by a cheetah. Because I was not a very good or strong runner, I had to train myself to ignore all that speed and energy and focus on running my own race. I already knew that if I moved too fast at the start, I'd likely get a cramp in my calf and have problems on the back end. The key to success was to pace myself.

It took a lot of discipline to ignore the temptation to fly out of that starting gate with everyone else. Instead, I let them leave me in the dust and I started my race at a slower tempo with the idea that I would gradually increase speed and get to what I called my “training zone.” I stayed in that relatively fast training zone for most of the race and then sped up at the end to get the

benefit of that old high school 100-yard dash. By the time I got to the last 100 yards, my muscles were warmed up and ready to go. Using this strategy, I finished within the standards and was home free for the next six months.

Starting the race at a slower pace allowed me to get my body ready for the journey. By the time I reached my training zone, I was moving with ease at a pretty good clip and each increase in speed was easier. Eyes straight ahead, focused on my destination, and paying attention to my breathing, I sailed down the track. Along the way I saw lots of other soldiers, the same ones who flew out of the gate at breakneck speed, stopped along the way with cramps or out of breath. A tortoise at the beginning, I was now passing the hares. Seeing them on the sidelines only served to confirm once again that I was running the race in the way that worked best for me.

To focus on my own race and do the opposite of what others were doing was not easy. I had to see them and not be thrown off by what I saw. I had to remember that there was a good reason for what I was doing and that it did work. I had to focus more on myself than on what others were doing. I kept that in the forefront and them in the periphery. They were running the race that was best for them, but what was best for them was not necessarily best for me.

You also have your own unique pattern of talents and gifts, and in those areas where you are less strong, you may have to operate differently from others just to get to the finish line. Likewise, for your signature strengths, you may be a hare racing past the rest. The bottom line is to know yourself and your abilities as a leader and to operate with that knowledge squarely in focus.

In the Biblical account, David the shepherd boy knew he could kill Goliath because he had previously killed lions and bears in the course of protecting his father's sheep. King Saul, a seasoned warrior, had killed many enemies using his spear and coat of armor. Wanting to help David, Saul gave him his

equipment. David quickly realized that though these worked for Saul, this was not how he knew to fight, so he removed Saul's armor in favor of his lighter clothing and equipment. Most soldiers would not have gone to the battlefield so bare as David, nor would they have taken a slingshot to use against the enemy's more sophisticated weaponry, yet David used what worked for him (I Samuel 17:32-40).

In business, you will also make many choices about what is best for you and your company. You will have to modify some strategies you see or hear about to best fit your unique strengths, abilities, and challenges.

One of my clients, a senior leader in the healthcare field, is often sought out by other institutions that want to recruit him to lead their operations. Most of these "opportunities" turn out not to be the right fit for my client. As he peels back the layers of the institutional and leadership culture, he learns that the institution really wants a safe pair of hands to maintain the status quo. My client is a change agent, so these opportunities feel constraining to him. In his case, to best run his own race, he chooses to stay on his current track where he can continue to bring in rewards and victories. Had he not taken the time to know himself, what he likes, and how he works best, he may have been sidetracked into a less fulfilling lane less suited to his unique skills and abilities. Sometimes the grass is not greener on the other side, and a promotion is not a promotion if it doesn't get you where you need to go.

Popular is Not Always Better

Knowing your own race is learned over time and through many experiences. I had done enough PT tests to know what worked for me. In many situations, you will first get it wrong and then make a course correction. I vividly remember one situation where I had to learn the hard way. In the Army, one of the most difficult, challenging, and physically demanding activities is the twelve-mile forced road march with full field gear weighing about eighty pounds. The road march must be completed within

three hours and the whole time you are wearing the uniform with combat boots and carrying an eighty-pound duffle bag on your back. At the time I was 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighed about 130 pounds, so this was no easy feat. To make the time commitment, I had to essentially run the entire race. Since you already know that I consider two miles of running long distance, twelve miles was truly a marathon.

I listened to other soldiers who had been through this before, and they all swore by the virtues of Gatorade to get through this grueling challenge. The key was to keep your electrolytes in balance and Gatorade was supposed to help with this objective. Although I had been an avowed water person for most of my life in all previous physical challenges, I had not yet experienced anything like this. On the day of the road march, I had plenty of Gatorade to get me through the three-hour trial.

The road march is difficult and challenging no matter the circumstances. About three-fourths of the way into the race, I knew I was in trouble. I found that I had tired of the taste of Gatorade and something about it was not agreeing with my body. It was now too late, I couldn't drink enough water to make up for the deficit. Within a hundred yards from the finish line with lots of people cheering on the sidelines, my body could not get the speed needed to move any faster. I nearly collapsed over the finish line thirty seconds too late to make the time. Wow, what a disappointment. It was a hard lesson to learn.

The next time I had to do the same road march, I knew that Gatorade was not the answer for me. I powered up on water and drank only water for the entire march. That time, I didn't experience the same physical collapse near the end of the race. My body had its preferred sustenance for the journey, and I was victorious within the time limit—with some to spare. In fact, I was able to be a part of the sideline crowd cheering on the last runners. This is not a slam against Gatorade, as many of my fellow soldiers did well with Gatorade—it just didn't work for me. I didn't know what was best for me with the first road

march, though I learned from the first that this option, so popular with others, was not for me.

You too will find that what is very popular with others may not be what works for you. Life is about learning and adjusting so that you still ultimately run your own race. For example, many companies are growing through mergers and acquisitions. This can be a great way to bring in new skills, competencies, and capabilities to better serve your customers. If it's the right merger or acquisition at the right time then this strategy can be very effective if the gaining organization has thought through the cultural assimilation pieces and determined how to make the merger or acquisition work. In other cases, the cultures may be too different or the timing may not be right or there may be a better way to grow. Each company has to do their own analysis to see if the strategy will work for them. Jumping on the popular bandwagon can cause harm if it's not the right bandwagon for you.

Turn No to Yes

Earlier in graduate school, when I had to make the decision about taking a job to finish my academic program, one of my major advisors was vehemently opposed to my working fulltime. Back in those days, you had to have agreement from your dissertation committee to work fulltime. My major advisor was fine with the decision; another advisor, though not thrilled, was OK with it. The third one was the hold-up. Although I was finished with my coursework and comprehensive exams and only had my research left, he felt that working would be a distraction to completing the program. We argued about the matter up one side and down the other.

“Look, I am here to complete this program and to become a psychologist,” I said.

“Yes, I know, but this is not the best way,” he replied.

“Well exactly what do you propose I do? The school has already said there is no funding available for this year, and my

parents are not a source of financial support. So, as I see it, I have two choices: I can quit and not finish, or I can take this campus job that has been offered to me and continue my education. I'd rather continue than quit, and I can't believe you don't see the value of the choice I am making."

My advisor was silent. Finally, I said, "Tell me about when you were in graduate school. How did you make it?"

"I was married, and I had three children," he said.

I was stunned by this information. "How did you fund your education and take care of your family?"

"I worked fulltime. My parents weren't able to help me either."

"OK, so you worked fulltime and that's how you got through graduate school. Then you know it's possible to do."

"It was very difficult."

"Yes, I am sure it was difficult, and the bottom line is that you did it. Now I am just asking for my opportunity to do the same. Everything in my life has been difficult, but I still did it. You of all people should understand, given your history. Unlike some of my colleagues here, I come from a family of modest means. Not working may be an option for them, but it isn't for me. Also, in my case, I am almost finished."

Finally, he relented and approved the request for me to work. Although this was not the typical path, it was the next step in my race—in my own set of circumstances not necessarily parallel to others.

As a leader you will run into many circumstances where the answer is "no" or the door is closed. "No" is not the last word. You will have to advocate for yourself and for your people. One of my clients was the global operations manager for an upscale, niche, retail business. His company was looking for ways to be more profitable and to create worldwide synergies across the company. In an effort to standardize operations, the executive

team announced some new policies. The executives had made their decisions without considering the impact on my client's business, and they had not sought his input.

In the long term, the proposed change in procedures would have destroyed the upscale niche business that the global manager and his team had worked so hard to create and make successful. Although the changes may have been beneficial for the routine clients of the business, he was certain that the distinctive approach he had created over the years was essential to retaining his high-end customer base. Loss of this line of business would likely result in significant financial loss, the very outcome the company wanted to prevent.

We showed the global operations manager how to reposition himself as a strategic thought leader with relevant information and input. Since the decisions had already been made and announced by corporate, he initially believed the situation was hopeless. Nevertheless, he created and presented a business case that showed the financial, cultural, and historical information relevant to retaining and growing his line of business and the risks of failing to continue what was working well

The executive team immediately implemented the global manager's recommendations for the high-end niche business. Both he and his team were retained in the company as valuable assets. When we first met, he'd thought his only option was to quit and find another job outside of the company and to help his people successfully land on their feet elsewhere.

This case shows that influence can happen at all stages and that leaders at all levels of the business have unique expertise that may need to be heard. With creativity and possibility thinking, leaders can make a difference even when it seems the doors are all closed. We showed this leader how to access that possibility thinking more quickly and then to execute in a way that got favorable results. This leader turned "no" to "yes."

It's Not Just About You—Others Are Watching

Running your own race is also about knowing what motivates you. When I was taking longer than my peers to complete my PhD, one of my colleagues started talking to me about how more than 50 percent of those who start PhDs do not finish them—and lots of other depressing statistics. My colleague didn't know my backstory and the steps I'd already taken to get this far. My colleague didn't know that my grandmother was already saying, "OK baby, when are you going to finish that book?"—Her term for my dissertation. "Make sure you finish it before I die." I too wanted my grandmother to see me finish my PhD.

It was a beautiful sunny day in Connecticut when my family and I traveled to the university for my graduation. I almost didn't attend, as many don't come back once they leave school and I could just as easily have received my degree in the mail. Although not the focus of this chapter, let me say that celebration is a very important part of the leadership equation. When your people have worked long and hard to achieve something, take the time to celebrate. Well, this was my time to celebrate after having worked long and hard.

My mother, my father, my grandmother, my two brothers, and my sister were all there for the occasion. It was a ceremony for all the master's and PhD recipients at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. As I scanned the audience, I saw many African-American students and their families there for master's degrees; however, I didn't see even one other African-American graduating with a doctorate.

The African-American families who were there also became members of my extended family. All day long, people I didn't know came to shake my hand.

"Congratulations. We are so proud of you," they'd say. It was the most amazing day imaginable with so much "extended family."

The joy and presence of these people forever solidified in me another key motivation that I have always had, though now it was made clearer than ever. That motivation was to do well not only for myself and my family, but also for those watching—others who might be inspired to pursue their own visions for the future. I became keenly aware of the responsibility and benefit of being part of a group that will celebrate with you, even though they don't know you, because on some level they too are you. My achievement is not mine alone, but theirs. You are leading even when you don't know it. People are watching you and drawing inspiration from what you do.

One of my clients is a senior executive in an academic setting. Although the academic setting can be informal with respect to dress, my client made a conscious effort to wear business attire to work most days and business casual on other days. What he didn't know was the extent to which the young male graduate students were both watching and emulating him as a role model for the work places they would enter upon graduation. As my client kept getting feedback about the extent to which the young males saw him as a role model, he became even more conscious and deliberate about his choices. They were watching him, and he wanted to give his best.

Lessons Learned

1. Run your own race.
2. Focus on your own destination.
3. Know your strengths and development needs, and create strategies for your best success.

Questions to Ask Yourself

1. When have I had to run my own race in a way that differed from others? What did I learn?

2. When have I mistakenly gone the way of the masses when my own journey was unique? What were the prices/consequences to be paid?
3. What's happening right now for me personally or the organization I lead that requires a unique race? What might I need to implement and how will I stay focused?