

EPISODE 196: KURT MATZLER – LESSONS FROM THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST BIKE RACE

Kurt Matzler

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Female Speaker

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Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Outdoor magazine calls it the toughest sporting event in the world. It's the Race Across America, a 3000-mile bike race from Oceanside, California, to Annapolis, Maryland, completed by cyclists in under twelve days. Last June, 34 cyclists began the race, 14 finished. After cycling 300 miles each day, Kurt Matzler was among the top finishers. Matzler is a strategy professor at the University of Innsbruck in Austria. While competing in the race, he saw a number of parallels between his experience racing across America and leadership. His new book, the High Performance Mindset: What We Can Learn from the World's Toughest Bicycle Race, has just been released in German. The English version is expected in the US later this year. He spoke to our MBA students recently, and today he joins us to talk about the race, his experience, and how it generated leadership lessons. Here's our conversation with Kurt Matzler.

Ken White

Well, Kurt, it's great to see you again. Thanks very much for joining us.

Kurt Matzler

Thanks for the invitation. It's a great pleasure.

Ken White

So Race Across America. What an interesting athletic event. How did you get involved with it?

Kurt Matzler

Well, I'm a Rotarian, and I'm a cyclist. And a few years ago, Bob McKenzie from Tulsa, Oklahoma, founded the team Rotary Rams Polio. His idea was to combine the passion for cycling with racing donations to eradicate Polio. And so I became part of the team.

Ken White

Yeah, but in this particular race, you raced solo. Why did you make that decision versus racing it as a part of a team?

Kurt Matzler

Yeah, so we did it four times on a team of four, and I'm really a passionate cyclist. And Race Across America is the greatest thing and the most difficult and toughest bike race you can do. And so I got fascinated by the idea, and so one day, I decided to do it solo.

Ken White

Wow. I think one of the things in having heard you share your experiences before, one of the things that really struck me among many was the fact that you slept very little as you competed. In fact, 2 hours a day. Most people can't even fathom that. How did you come to that conclusion to do that?

Kurt Matzler

You have to do that because you have a maximum of twelve days to cross the continent, 3000 miles. So you cannot sleep more than two or 3 hours per day. You have to be on the bike for the rest of the day. For the rest of the day. And it took me eleven days and 5 hours to finish the race.

Ken White

What about the training for it? How long did you train to get ready?

Kurt Matzler

You need about five years to train, and five years means a lot of training. Overall, it was about 60,000 miles of cycling in the last five years. So between 15 and 30 hours of training a week for five years.

Ken White

We've had so many CEOs and leaders and people just like you on the podcast, and so many of them are dedicated to working out every morning. They know that's a major key to success. When were your workouts? How did you do them?

Kurt Matzler

I did it mostly in the morning during the week. So between one to 3 hours per day during the week. And on the weekends I had my long training rides. And long means up to seven or 8 hours per day.

Ken White

Yeah. Wow. And it obviously paid off. And, of course, you had a terrific support team. Can you tell us about the group that was with you?

Kurt Matzler

Yes, you need a great team first, support team. And you need a lot of people because it's very tough for them to support you. I had four cars, four follow vehicles. They have to defeat you. They have to support you. They have to give you water. You need a physician with you, a physiotherapist. And basically, everything you need is your responsibility because there is nothing provided by the organizers of the race.

Ken White

Wow. And you had a heck of a team. Yeah. When you look back at the race, what state in the United States or what region of the country was the most difficult as you were racing?

Kurt Matzler

For me, it was the desert in Arizona because it is it was very hot, 120 degrees for almost two days. That was very hard. Rocky Mountains, of course. And then a mental challenge was Kansas, Missouri, the Great Plain.

Ken White

Why were those two states such a challenge?

Kurt Matzler

Because it's just flat, you paddle and paddle, and you think you don't make any progress because the landscape does not change, and there is a lot of crosswinds and headwinds. So it's basically a mental challenge there.

Ken White

Yeah. Having heard the talk that you presented to our students, it seems like doing this race is a lot like running a company or leading an organization. And as a result, you've created some leadership lessons from this experience. And I thought our audience would enjoy walking through them, and you have five in particular. Actually, you can have more, but you have five that you always like to share. And the first one is know the why. Can you explain that?

Kurt Matzler

Exactly. It's a very hard race and it gets really hard. And when it gets hard, you really need to know why you are doing this. And hard means you are sleep deprived. You are physically exhausted. Especially the Rocky Mountains. It was hard for me climbing the Wolf Creek Pass. It was raining, it was cold at night. And there I started to think, why am I doing this? Why am I here? And then we have a motto we are raising donations to eradicate Polio. And then a thought came to my mind. Children that have Polio, they cannot quit. They are in for life. And our motto is we ride so that others can walk. If you have such a great purpose, this is where the motivation comes from. And there is a very good book about purpose written by Viktor Frankl, who has survived four concentration camps in Nazi Germany. And there, he made an interesting observation. Those prisoners who still had a project to finish or a why to live, they had a higher chance of survival. And so he framed the following quote those who have a why to live can bear with almost any how. If you have a good why, you can really go through the hardest sufferings and hardships.

Ken White

Yeah. Wow. Fascinating. Number two, use the power of visualization.

Kurt Matzler

Yes. That separates the top athletes from average athletes. And that also can be traced back to Viktor Frankl I just mentioned. Because those prisoners who, when they went in those concentration camps when they went through all the sufferings and hardships, they all visualized the outcome of the outcome. How will it be when I see my family again, my friends again? So they visualize this and this is what top athletes do as well. How will it be when I reach my big goal? And that visualization must be very concrete. You must feel it. You must smell it. You must even feel the emotion. So when you think about it, about this big goal, when you achieve it, it must cause a goosebumps. So that's the power of visualization. That is where your motivation comes from when it's hard. But I have also learned never think how far you still have to go. When you start thinking in Kansas, still 2000 miles, that leads to frustration. Instead, define small wins that give you a sense of achievement, little progress. And for me, it was the next crossing, the next village, et cetera. So define many small wins along the way that give you the sense of achievement.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Kurt Matzler in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. The world is changing like we've never seen before. And that means change for business and your role in it. You can sit on the sidelines and watch things evolve, or you could be a part of creating the future if you want the tools and education needed to succeed in the years ahead. We invite you to consider the MBA program at William & Mary. Wherever you happen to be in your career, William & Mary has an MBA program for you. The full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA all taught by the number one ranked MBA faculty in America. Take charge of your future. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now back to our conversation on leadership lessons from the world's toughest bike race with Kurt Matzler.

Ken White

Number three reframe problems into positive challenges.

Kurt Matzler

Yes, that was one of my mental trainings I did before the race. You know, there is a lot, a lot of difficulties. It is the heat in the desert. It is a sleep deprivation. It is pain, horrible knee ache, for example, physical exhaustion. So what I did is I tried to reframe those difficulties into positive challenges. So what I tried was see these difficulties as challenges I have to overcome. And that went so well that I really was looking forward to be in the heat of the desert because I knew once I'm there and once I have that overcome, I have accomplished a very big thing. And then I was looking forward to be in the Rocky Mountains because I knew once I have accomplished this, it's another milestone. And that is a very simple mental technique. And it's also known in psychology. There are many studies, for example, that have shown that students who see test anxiety as something positive are found to do better on tests. So reframe problems into positive challenges. In every difficulty, there is a positive side. So emphasize the positive side.

Ken White

Number four adopt or adapt rather a different strategy. What do you mean by that?

Kurt Matzler

Yes, for such a race, you need a strategy that is clear. And I'm a professor. I'm 53 years old. I'm not a professional cyclist, but I was on the podium of this race, and I was among the world's best ultra cyclists. And when I thought about the strategy, I, of course, analyzed how others do the strategy. And there is one strategy that is adopted by almost everyone. It's the winner strategy. Strategy of Christoph Strasser, who set the world record and has won the race six times. So he sleeps less than 1 hour per day. That's almost nothing. His first sleep break is after 36 hours. He has a motor home where he

sleeps, and he sleeps. If he sleeps, he sleeps at night. And everyone copies this strategy. There is a finisher ratio of 50%. The finisher ratio of rookie is less than 30%. And it's in my belief because everyone tries to copy the strategy of the champion, which does not work because it works for him. It works for his objective. He has optimized this strategy. It's based on his unique skills and competencies. And I adopted a totally different strategy. My first sleep break was after 20 hours. So I knew I will fall behind because the other racers will go on. I stopped for 4 hours per day, two to 3 hours of sleep break. I had my sleep break at noon when it was so hot. And I did not have an RV, I had a hotel. So I did it totally different. So my lesson was, as an underdog, you can be among the champion, but not if you copy their strategy. You have to find your own way. And sometimes, it needs an outsider to see what makes sense and what does not make sense. And sometimes, it needs an outsider to have the courage to do it differently. It was not my intention to win the race. It was to finish the race. And it worked very well. So don't copy the winner, don't copy the champions. You need to find your own strategy based on your own goals and based on your own strengths.

Ken White

Yeah. Terrific, terrific advice. And finally, number five, the team is more than the sum of its parts.

Kurt Matzler

Exactly. This is also very hard for the crew. I had twelve crew members. It's not a vacation in the United States. They also suffer from a sleep deprivation. It's very hard work. And when I assembled the team, I did not what most companies do, most companies, when they recruit employees, they hire for skills and train for attitudes, which in my view, usually does not work because you cannot change attitudes or values of people. So what I did was I recruited for attitudes and trained for skills. So hire for attitude and train for skills. And what I was looking for was, first, how well do people get along with others? That is extremely important in such extreme situations. Second, how optimistic are they? Because you depend on the crew, you depend on their motivation because they have to motivate you. They're extremely important. And then skills are important as well. But my lesson was hire for skills and then train for attitudes. And this creates a world-class team because if you have such a team that shares the passion for the big goal for the project and if they share the value, they will do more than 100%.

Ken White

Yeah, the whole thing is fascinating. The race in itself is fascinating. But the leadership lessons that you've created. What kind of a response do you get from leaders and executives, and companies when you share these? What are their reactions?

Kurt Matzler

There are so many executives that love sports, and now when you talk about leadership in such a context, it's much more accessible to them first. And second, some of the lessons are a bit surprising, others are maybe not that surprising. But when they hear it from this perspective or this context, they are much better received.

Ken White

Do they seem to be more interested in the race part of the story or the lesson part of your story?

Kurt Matzler

Actually more the race part of the story, but that is storytelling in education. You always need to tell stories, and then in these stories, in an ideal world, in each story, there is a lesson. So they might remember the story and hopefully also the lesson that comes with it.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Kurt Matzler, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program, offered in four formats the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. If you're ready to take charge of your future, check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Kurt Matzler, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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