

# Running on Resilience

On this exceptionally sunny Singapore day we are excited to have with us William Thomas, who has been studying and practicing leadership in complex environments for three decades. Let's find out more about William's story and his take on leadership development.

**Andrew: Will, thank you for carving out time to meet with us and welcome to Singapore again, I know you visit us very often!**

I do! I lived in Singapore before – teaching as a Fulbright Scholar at NTU during 2008-2009, and again while working as a consultant in 2012-2015 – and even though I am now based in Manila, I still get back here a lot. Most of my work still seems to be here, plus a visit to Singapore means I get to run with my old running club.

**Andrew: We first met at the tail end of last year and we spoke about personal experiences and all things leadership, but there was one thing in particular that captured our imagination – your sporting achievements and various marathons that you ran.**

Could you tell us more please and what led you to make a change in your life and start running?

Believe me, if you knew me as a kid, the word “sporting” would never cross your mind. Even during my career as US Air Force officer, when I took my annual physical fitness test, my attitude was, “If the minimum wasn't good enough, it wouldn't be the minimum!” Now, I'm one of a very small group of people who have completed The Marathon Grand Slam, which involves running a marathon on all 7 continents and the North Pole. It's been a big change.

The spark came when I deployed to Afghanistan. When we returned to our base camp every evening there was nothing to do but work out in a makeshift gym, and I started noticing some positive changes in my fitness. That led me to want to do more. We often think the motivation for change comes from failure, but it can also come from success.

So at age 42 I took up running and set a goal of running a marathon nine months later in my home of Washington DC. I prepared for that race pretty extensively, and it went so well that I decided to keep doing it. Six weeks later I happened to be here, and ran the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon. I was hooked!



Fast-forward a year, and with a couple more marathons done I set a new goal of completing The Marathon Grand Slam by the time I was 50. I had already run in North America and Asia, so as I continued to run 2-3 marathons per year I included races in Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, and Sydney, to finish off the “normal” continents. In November 2014 I flew to a glacier about 1,000km from the South Pole to run the Antarctic Ice Marathon, and in April 2016 I finished my journey by completing the North Pole Marathon.

**Andrew: It is one thing to start running, but it's another to go from not running at all to running marathons, some of them were exceptionally unique. Why did you set that as your goal?**

I wanted to make a change, but I also knew I was likely to get bored and quit. That's the same reason gyms are really busy in January, then start to empty out in February. In order to stay focused, I needed a specific goal. If I had simply said, “I want to be in better shape,” how would I

know when I had achieved that? There would not be an obvious point where I could declare success, so it would be hard to stay motivated.

Of course, once I completed a marathon, I had achieved my goal, and I worried that without a new one I would get distracted and lose interest, especially since so many changes were going on in the rest of my life. That's what led to the Grand Slam; by setting a major goal that would take a few years, I knew I would stay focused and make the changes I needed to be successful.

That last point is the practical utility of a specific goal: it's easier to plan for. Knowing that my goal was to run 42.195km, I could work backward from that to figure out what I needed to do differently to make it happen. Once I set the Grand Slam goal, I changed not only my fitness and nutrition habits, but also improved my time management and personal finance skills, as well as being proactive about keeping a good work-life balance so I could actually fly around the world and run these races. If you don't know what your destination is, it's hard to know how to get there.

**Andrew: How did you keep from giving up in the months leading up to your first race?**

I crossed the Finish Line because I was well-prepared, but I only made it to the Starting Line because of my friend Ethan. He was the one who first said, "Why don't you sign up for a marathon next fall, and..." – and this was an important part – "...tell everyone you're going to do it." Once you tell people about your goal, it's hard to back out. On those days I didn't feel like getting up at 4:30am to run, I would remember that I had posted on Facebook that I would run a marathon, and once it's on Facebook, you can't quit! It also helped that Ethan was waiting for me at our running trail; when someone is waiting on you to show up, you show up.

You build a lot of resilience when you are accountable to others. Find people whom you don't want to disappoint – family, friends, a respected boss – and you will do everything in your power not to disappoint them.



**Andrew: The preparation sounds intense, but the act of actually running 42 kilometers is no picnic, either. How do you get inspiration mid-race? From the crowd or from something internal? What's it like to finish a marathon?**

My first marathon, the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington DC, is a hugely popular event. Hundreds of thousands of people come out to watch and cheer, and I drew a lot of strength from that. My next race, the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon, was the exact opposite: almost nobody was out there. Marathons are really not a spectator sport in Singapore! I learned the importance of internal motivation that day; you need to want to do well in order to do well, without relying on a pat on the back.

Since then I have also learned a helpful visualization technique. A study found that within a week after a marathon, runners said the experience was not as tough as they had said it was when asked right after the Finish Line. Now, when I'm at the point where my body is really starting to hurt, I tell myself that in a week this won't seem so bad, so I should pull that feeling forward to now and show myself this is not as rough as it feels. If you can convince yourself things are not as bad as they seem, you can increase your resilience and keep on going through the challenges.

Crossing the Finish Line feels amazing each and every time. No matter how much pain I was in, one of my first thoughts is

what I'm going to do the next time. Before I start a race I already know what my next race will be, so I always have another goal ahead of me. A big factor in continuous improvement is to always keep another objective beyond the one you're pursuing now.

**Andrew: You've touched on a very interesting topic – resilience, in fact we are currently working on APAC specific research to develop insights and solutions that companies can use to increase employee resilience.**

Resilience is a critical element in an organizational culture today, whether it's about making it through bad times or working hard to take advantage of new opportunities. Companies can build resilience into their corporate DNA.

One suggestion is to help employees build confidence by achieving intermediate goals and seeing how successful they can be. I didn't start by running a marathon; instead, I ran shorter races and saw what I was capable of, and that gave me the confidence to go farther next time. Setting smaller objectives along the way to a big change can boost employees' confidence.



It also helps to focus more on self-improvement and less on competition with others in the company. In 26 marathons I have never felt like I'm competing against others; I'm simply competing against my own past performance. Obviously, that's been enough to keep me pushing forward. Internal motivation can be a powerful driver, and it can lead to greater collaboration and less backstabbing and internal politics.

Finally, companies can take steps to improve people's willingness to ask questions. So many people hesitate to admit they don't know something, but the only way to learn is to first acknowledge what you don't know and then ask. If senior leaders would be willing to ask junior employees for advice, then everyone would see that it's ok. Moving beyond obstacles allows you to keep moving forward, so you need to be comfortable asking for help when you need it.

**Andrew: Certain psychological traits are developed, challenged, and improved by running. How do you think we could use lessons learnt from running and apply them at work?**

Building endurance, especially mental endurance, is one benefit from running that is so valuable professionally. Being able to push through the difficult times and continue to the objective is one of the most important things I have learned.

Adapting to different environments is another crucial running skill that has a lot of value at work. While most runners won't go from 30C in Singapore to -30C in Antarctica and the North Pole, even being able to go from heat to rain, or from sidewalk to park trail, teaches you to prepare for multiple situations.

Lastly, learning to accept failure is something every marathoner faces, and it is an important part of innovation and change at work. I have had two races where I ended up in the medical tent after finishing, and I try very hard not to repeat the circumstances that led to that, but I don't let fear stop me. Failure is not a reason to be ashamed, but instead is a sign you are stretching yourself. I wish more people understood that.

**Andrew: Change seems to be the only thing that is constant these days. What can you do to make it easier to navigate through a new situation?**

As I found when I started running, setting a specific goal and creating some accountability helped me through all the changes. Don't just say, "We are going to change," but instead make it very clear what you want the end result to look like.

Try to pace yourself. If you make too many changes too quickly, you create a very unstable environment, with no one knowing what's coming next. That kind of uncertainty reduces performance and can lead to retention problems, so do not try to change everything at once.

Focus on the changes you can control, not on what you can't. At the North Pole the ice cracked open and wrecked our runway, so we were there for 4 days instead of the expected 36 hours. I could not control the ice or rebuild the runway – fortunately, the camp staff could – so I put on my running gear and practiced for the race, because that was something I could control. You have a finite amount of time, so use it wisely.

Finally, know what really matters, and be open to adapting your goals. My original plan was to run the North Pole in 2015, so I would be done before turning 50, but I had started a new business and faced a lot of uncertainty, so I decided to wait a year. It was a tough call, but what really mattered was doing it, not doing it by a certain date. Circumstances change, and you have to be willing to change with them.

**Andrew: What would your advice be to someone who is looking to be more a resilient in life?**

The key is to take on new challenges. Life is so much more interesting when you try new things, and as you purposely push yourself out of your comfort zone, you make yourself better able to handle the unexpected changes, too. Look for a new project at work, go back to school, start playing the piano...just do something new.

While I do believe in looking to others for advice and support, try not to listen too much to the negative people out there. Many people have no desire to push themselves, and they will often advise you not to, either. If someone has a good reason for saying "You shouldn't do that," then listen and decide for yourself, but if they simply tell you that you're too old to change – something I heard plenty of times – feel free to ignore them.

Lastly, share lessons between your personal and professional lives. Things you learn at work can help in your personal life, and vice-versa. The conventional wisdom is that 70% of professional learning comes on the job, but much of that learning can come from your personal experiences, too. Being more resilient will affect all aspects of your life, so use the lessons no matter where you learn them.

**Andrew: William, thank you for spending time with us today and sharing your experiences, truly inspirational.**

If you would like to find out how AchieveForum could help leaders build resilience, click here to download an infographic.

Stay tuned for more insights from people that we work with in different parts of the Asia Pacific region!

If you would like to know more about William's professional experience, please click here to visit his profile on LinkedIn. To learn more about the lessons from his running experiences, his book *CROSS THE LINES: A Journey to Complete The Marathon Grand Slam* is available on Amazon and Book Depository.

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