XTREME TEAMS

IN THE NEW WORLD OF BUSINESS, ALL WORK IS TEAMWORK— BUT VERY FEW TEAMS WORK ALL THAT WELL. HOW DO GROUPS OF ORDINARY PEOPLE ACHIEVE EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS? LEARN FROM THESE EXTREME TEAMS: DIGITAL-EFFECTS WIZARDS, ADVENTURE RACERS, ROCKET SCIENTISTS. YOUR TEAM MAY NEVER WORK THE SAME AGAIN.

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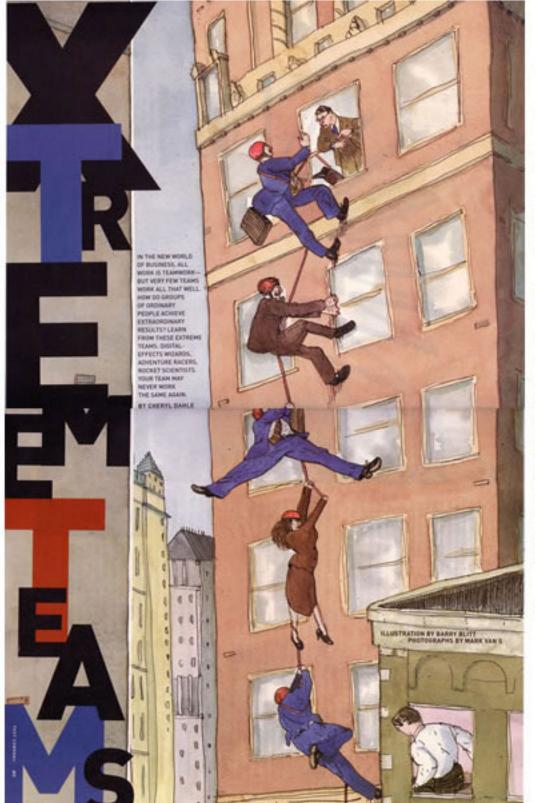
EXTREME PRESSURE

Here's Team EcoInternet's idea of fun: Hop on a plane bound for another country. Hike 45 miles through the jungle, carrying 8 days' worth of food, water, and other supplies on your back. Jump into a kayak, and paddle 35 miles through white-water rapids. Rappel down the side of a cliff. Ride a mountain bike through a valley. Cover 235 miles in 8 days, getting no more than a total of 10 hours of sleep. And throw in leeches, saltwater crocodiles, and poisonous snakes—just to keep things interesting.

Welcome to the sport of adventure racing, a world in which extremity borders on insanity. Adventure racing combines hiking, biking, paddling, climbing, and running through wilderness. There is no official course. Teams of four or five athletes race across, say, the Australian outback or the Sahara Desert, with no more than a compass, a map, and their experience and wits to guide them.

To win such a race, you must be fast and strong. But

you must also be part of a complete team. If your team loses even just one member during the race, you lose.

Some of the world's most physically qualified teams have lost races because they lack the particular brand of teamwork that adventure racing demands. While most events draw teams of Navy SEALs or Army Rangers, no military team has ever placed in either of the top two slots at any major adventure race. Why not? "In the military, showing weakness is itself a weakness," says Robert Nagle, 41, one of EcoInternet's founders. "But in racing, we practice asking for help. We're all really good athletes in our own right, and we've had long, successful careers. But we're all able to make that switch and say, 'Right now, I'm the weakest person on the team. And in order for the team to move faster, I should ask for help.'"

Nagle, who is director of software development for InterSystems, based in Boston, knows what he's talking about. He and the other members of EcoInternet—including an Australian entrepreneur, an American firefighter, and a window washer from New Zealand—have won all three of the major adventure races at least once. So far this year, they have had two first-place finishes and one second-place finish. They are the New York Yankees of adventure racing. And they're experts on teamwork in extreme settings.

The founders of the team, Nagle and Ian Adamson, first met via the Internet in 1994. The following year, they put together the nucleus of their team. The squad has since grown to include about eight people from all over the world (they rotate on and off the team throughout the year, depending on the race). All of the members are world-class athletes in at least one sport, but they say that it isn't the physical challenge that draws them to adventure racing—it's the mental challenge. "Your limits are constantly being pushed by the surprises that are built into the race, and then there are other surprises that are based on your execution," Nagle explains. "You may make a poor navigation choice, or forget to bring a critical piece of gear, or lose your maps, or run out of food. You have to deal with all of those situations. And that type of test is completely different from the test that's imposed by the physical prerequisites."

So how does the team work? Every decision is made by consensus. If that means that the whole team stops to spend an hour debating which way to head through a canyon, so be it. "Over the course of six or seven days of nonstop competition, you can't look to the same person for everything," Nagle explains. "Part of our success lies in having tremendous redundancy within our team. So we just allow leadership to flow, hour by hour, to whoever is strongest at the time."

The same holds true for many of the "hot groups" that Leavitt

Robyn Benincasa (pictured here with adventure-racing colleague Mark McMahon) is a member of Team EcoInternet. One lesson from this extreme team: A team can move only as fast as its weakest member—and at some point in each race, every person on a team will be the team's weakest member.

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and Lipman-Blumen have studied. "You get pluralistic thinking," says Leavitt. "You get a multiple brain that is likely to be more creative than a single one."

A more important rule for EcoInternet's members is that they let go of a decision once it has been made—no matter how it turns out. "You have to treat mistakes as the next challenge, rather than as a self-inflicted problem," Nagle says. "So we tend to say, 'Okay, we decided to come over this ridge instead of following the valley around. It's a lot worse than we expected. But that doesn't matter. We just have to deal with this circumstance and move on.'"

Which doesn't mean that there isn't plenty of postrace feedback. "We come back after each race and analyze every decision in a very honest and pretty raw fashion," Nagle says. "We talk about why people acted the way they did, why we made particular decisions, and how we ended up in particular circumstances."

In preparing for a 1998 race in Ecuador called the Raid Gauloises, the team miscalculated how much food it would need for the nine-day trip. Upon entering the final two days of paddling, EcoInternet was in first place. One team was within 15 minutes of EcoInternet, while the rest of the teams were all at least a day behind. EcoInternet had figured that each team member would need about 10,000 calories a day for the paddling stretch—and the team had just 500 calories' worth of food left.

"We looked in our bag and said, 'My God, there's no food,'" Nagle says. "But as a group, we knew that it wasn't a problem. It may seem amazing, but we knew that we would find a way out of that mess. And just knowing that is tremendously reassuring. You just have this sense of calm that you will find a way—that you will find a solution. That's how much faith we have in the team."

That evening, most of the team camped by the river's edge while Nagle and a teammate hiked into the jungle, where they found an Ecuadorian farmer. In broken Spanish, they explained to him what they needed, and then they traded some of their gear for food.

Ian Adamson, 35, describes the team mind-set as being almost entrepreneurial. "New Zealanders like to call it 'the eight-gauge wire solution': You believe that you can fix any situation with the resources you have on hand," Adamson says. "We've got a stick of chewing gum and some string. We're all set! We don't waste time whining because we don't have a hammer."

One tricky aspect of adventure racing is that a team can move only as fast as its weakest member. And since each race stretches over a series of exhausting days, every person on a team will be the weakest member at one point or another. The EcoInternet strategy: Shore

up the weakest member at every point in a race—so that everyone makes it through the race without burning out.

"Instead of worrying about my problems and managing them internally, I let them show, and I concentrate my effort on the other three or four members of the team," Nagle says. "That way, I have three people looking after me, rather than one. If one of us stumbles for the second time in 10 minutes, there's no question about what needs to be done: Somebody reaches into that person's pack and takes out some weight, and then we all just move on."

Team member Robyn Benincasa, 33, says that, unlike other teams that she's raced with, EcoInternet is free of internal competition. "All of us are of one mind—one mind with 10 arms and 10 legs. And that really makes a difference," she says. "There's no pride in carrying other people's things. It's just what you need to do to get the job done. You're not the hero for taking on extra weight, or the schmo for needing help. You know that, three hours from now, the guy carrying all of your stuff may need you to carry his stuff."

Benincasa and Adamson have started a training program in California that puts corporate teams through milder versions of adventure racing. "In adventure racing," Adamson says, "you go through every emotion that you'll experience in life—only faster and more intensely: The highs are higher, and the lows are lower. If you can handle that, you can handle anything." For more information please visit www.worldclassteams.com