



ABOVE: Jonathan Geldart and his polar expedition team; INSET: Jim McNeill

ICE WARRIOR

Jim McNeill has been taking people to the most remote regions of the Arctic for over 20 years. The life-threatening harshness of the environment strips away every layer of ego, leaving those who make it with a forever-altered self. These treks are not 'holidays' but if you fancy an ultimate testing challenge, the Ice Warrior expedition could be for you



During my twenty years in the Arctic I've taken scores of people on many expeditions and trained them how to survive. Whether you're there to trek, climb a mountain or simply live and experience life with the Inuit, the all embracing harshness of the environment is evident.

Since 2002 the Ice Warrior Project has made a public call for volunteers to become competent polar explorers. Having completed a rigorous selection process, volunteers then spend 14 months in comprehensive training both in the UK and the Arctic before being eligible to go on expedition.

Jon Geldart, Global Director - Marketing Communications at Grant Thornton International - was one such volunteer in October 2005. "When I got to 40 I decided that I was going to try to do something extraordinary every year for the rest of my life. This fitted! I would recommend the experience to anyone. It just goes to show that anyone can achieve the extraordinary if they train hard and stay focused." In April 2006 his team of nine reached the Geomagnetic North Pole after 26 days in temperatures of -30oc, whilst man-hauling their own

body weight of supplies on sledges, unsupported, across the icy wastes of Ellesmere Island in the far North East of Canada. Jon was understandably proud of his achievement but it was something else he said which really struck home. "It's an extraordinary and incredibly humbling experience to be in the Polar regions. You realise what the word 'focus' means at -35oc in a snowstorm! I now actively apply the lessons I learnt to my own leadership style."

What do I look for when selecting people to go on expeditions? "Attitude". I can train the skills but I can't alter their souls. Getting people with the right attitude is vital. The problem is there are many people with the right potential, but few with the right attitude.

No matter how much you dress it up in business speak any enterprise is totally dependent upon the performance of the individuals and teams of which it is comprised, from security guard to CEO.

This is where the Arctic acts as a great leveller. No matter what your background, what job you do, or how much you get paid, being continually exposed to a life-threatening environment allows you to really know your self. It strips away the niceties of everyday living and confronts people with themselves. It does

this so well because the only thing you have to focus on is staying alive. This is enormously cathartic.

There are some lessons from the Arctic that translate well into business:

Firstly, the importance of common goals. When the personal agendas, egos and petty politics are removed the clarity of the goal and the focus on shared objectives all the sharper. The team can concentrate on the real job at hand; being successful.

Secondly if you've developed and cultivated an atmosphere of (sometimes brutal) honesty and openness then problems can be understood more clearly; competence and training needs to be properly assessed, identified and addressed. That's everyone's needs - even CEOs need continual training.

Thirdly, and crucial to sustaining good business, is the fostering of innovation, inventiveness and creativity. In such a hostile environment people just have no choice but to voice their ideas and opinions, think laterally and be inventive in problem solving. Risk becomes more objectively analysed, assessed and managed.

Translating these lessons into the daily life of business can be done. The result is people that care about and respect each other; are very goal oriented, whilst being ➤

inventive, creative and open minded about how they might be achieved. These people also care about living life responsibly and to the full. All this naturally fosters loyalty, and a positive "can do" mentality.

It does, however, also require the ability to communicate well.

In addition to creating an open culture I also advocate constant review and re-evaluation. No matter how effective your team, or how successful your business, things can be continually improved. Regular evaluation, analysis and adaptation, fosters this. You can never be too good and I constantly brief and debrief expedition members. Conversely, however dire things might appear, you should always have hope, collectively working your way through the problem. Persistence is everything. If Sir Ernest Shackleton had displayed any sign of faltering in his optimistic and determined approach to his extraordinarily difficult situation his men would have undoubtedly perished.

The "attitude" attributes that apply to the selection of Arctic explorers should apply to the executive. The leader should be an exemplar, openly displaying and demonstrating their worth. Honesty, integrity, reliability, determination and the all important empathy are essential qualities, always needed and so rarely displayed. Imagination too is vital. It allows you to think: 'what if?' Things may never happen but if they do you've considered and planned for them. A vivid imagination is as important an asset in business as it is in the Arctic.

NOTE

Jim McNeill is the Founder of the Ice Warrior Project. If you would like to know more about the extraordinary endeavours of the Ice Warrior Project or wish to apply to join one of the expeditions in 2009 which form the most extensive exploration of the Arctic ever undertaken, please visit www.ice-warrior.com. The Ice Warrior Project is currently recruiting for expeditions.