



The making of Antarctic eco-warriors

In March this year, Robert Zipplies had the privilege of being asked to give a series of sustainability lectures on a leadership expedition to the Antarctic organised by legendary British explorer and environmentalist, Robert Swan. Here he reflects on his trip:

While we are often held back by fear when facing unknown challenges, a few are able to break through this barrier and lead truly big lives. Antarctica, a continent of ice, wind and bone-chilling temperatures, brings to mind stories of unimaginable suffering and inspiring leaders willing to embrace audacious challenges. Scott, Amundsen, Shackleton – larger-than-life individuals – spring to mind. Their clear vision and deep wells of determination allowed them to transcend their fears, real and imagined, to achieve the seemingly impossible and thus contributed to expanding our geographical and imaginative horizons.

Robert Swan – the first person to walk to both Poles – is also such an individual. His hardships at the global extremes became the catalyst for something much greater: he witnessed our growing environmental woes and has since been on a 20-year sustainability crusade, along the way receiving numerous accolades and being made a UN Goodwill Ambassador.

Each year now, Swan leads expeditions to the Antarctic by ship. These are not pleasure cruises, but deep-immersion environmental leadership courses. In between site-seeing excursions, participants are worked hard: included are lectures on leadership and sustainability, group work and time for developing ideas for corporate or other change projects. Participants typically embarked on the trip to deepen their knowledge, skills and commitment as change agents.

Our group of 65 from fifteen nations included many corporate managers. Most employees had been sent because their organisations realised their corporate cultures needed to evolve – Coca-Cola China sent eight people – and this requires committed leaders. A shallow intellectual understanding of sustainability does not seem to cut it and deeper buy-in is difficult to instil.

Swan skilfully uses the dramatic Antarctic backdrop to touch and inspire people at their core. One beautiful cloudy-orange dawn was a case in point as we sailed through a sea of colossal

tabular icebergs – some as wide, long and deep as a city block of 50-floor skyscrapers. These are remnants of the Larsen B ice shelf (3 250km²), which unexpectedly broke up and was a “canary in a coal mine” event signalling the upward crawl of our global mercury. The tone that morning was one of subdued introspection.

Aside from my usual presentations, I led several discussions on tackling inner hurdles to change. We also discussed strategies for learning to “feel the fear of the unknown and do it anyway” – as the great polar explorers did to turn those audacious visions into reality.

A day later – luckily a sunny one – we got to challenge our fears when given the opportunity to go “polar plunging” in sub-zero waters. Astonishingly, some 50 swimmers queued up. Most jumped in with much bravado. Then the cold struck. Facial expressions contorted. Hasty, often clumsy, exits were made, accompanied by waves of fear-fuelled laughter.

That sunny freezing afternoon everyone felt an



immense sense of elation after overcoming their fear. And so it goes: Usually the toughest part in taking on something new and uncertain, is deciding to jump over that inner hurdle – and this can lead to real breakthroughs.

There may be a few lessons in all this for some Bidvest companies. A growing number of astute multi-nationals are realising the time has come to be serious about the long sustainability journey ahead – little-known territory for everyone. This requires learning new facts and terminologies, setting stretch goals and, most difficultly, embedding new thinking, habits and processes into the operational fabric.

Mega-companies like Unilever and Walmart have set hugely ambitious objectives and are frank about not yet knowing how to achieve them, but stating that nothing less is required. Innovation and finding new solutions are a prerequisite for getting us there. Similarly, Antarctic pioneers venturing into uncharted territory also did not know how they would do it and had to use their imaginations to find inspired solutions. General Electric's "ecomagination" initiative

springs to mind, which cleverly appeals to our sense of inventiveness when facing difficult problems.

Educating and energising people is crucial to making innovation and pursuing lofty goals a collective effort that is embedded in the organisational culture. This is not an easy undertaking and sending everyone to the Antarctic is too expensive, ecologically and financially. But other options exist: Walmart, for example, not only offers formal sustainability training, but also takes employees to the zoo to teach them how ecosystems function and encourages all staff to take on personal sustainability projects, whether health, education or environment-focused. Those whose passion is ignited will contribute to new products and services, greater operational efficiencies and ground-breaking business models – cracking open the door to new opportunities and enhanced competitiveness.

So, was the trip south worth the carbon footprint? Quite likely! From day one, Swan challenges everyone on to make good on their footprint and he spends time with participants individually to help them expand their imaginative horizons, develop work and personal change projects and overcome their fears, whether real or imagined. I've rarely seen a more motivated group develop and our Facebook wall has been abuzz with shared ideas, resources and inspiration.

Read the expedition blog and watch short video clips (including one on the Larsen B ice shelf) at <http://expedition.2041.com>.

*Robert Zippies is editor of the climate change book, *Bending the Curve* (www.bendingthecurve.co.za).*