

Off My Soapbox

I stood in front of the classroom at the Center for Creative Leadership for some 10 years, lecturing to US and international organizational leaders on the impacts of regular exercise and healthy nutrition for improved leadership capabilities. The research conclusions here are irrefutable, with betterment of sleep, mood, stress, confidence, weight management, and metabolic syndrome factors. The regular exercise impacts to cognitive abilities are perhaps the biggest connection to leadership efficacy, with improved fluid intelligence, critical thinking, creativity, and memory. Then perhaps we can consider lessening risk for the diseases of lifestyle and effects of aging: diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, mental health, mobility, vigor, muscle atrophy. Like I said, the research is irrefutable.

It's quite easy and commonplace to find yourself atop a soapbox when your life is immersed in a particular arena. In my case, I'd spent the past few decades cultivating a career as a high performance coach to athletes and senior executives, empowering them with best practices on strength, speed, power, training plan design, competition preparedness, fitness, nutrition, and stress management. With a high degree of intrinsic motivation and former athletic competitiveness, I most certainly walked the talk. I ate a plant-based diet, trained four to six hours daily...sometimes more, competed in ultra-distance trail running, mountain biking, and adventure racing events, while still managing to lift weights, rock and ice climb, snowboard, surf, stand up paddle, and engage in any other physical challenge that crossed my path.

One day I did some simple math, realizing the past decade had placed me in front of over 5,000 senior business leaders to deliver my messaging. I often wondered, "why don't they get it?" Intuitively, everyone recognizes that moving more and eating better is a good thing. Over hundreds of lectures, seminars, small group, and one on one discussions, I've literally never been challenged on those points. So how is it I wondered, that people simply don't seem to understand and take action? A few decisions I'd make at the end of 2014 were about to open my eyes to the quandary I was facing.

Following one of my typical lectures, I was approached with a job opportunity that would entail shifting gears on my Olympic coaching endeavors to direct a large team of fitness and nutrition professionals. Joining the junior executive ranks, I found myself in an office high-rise, with a cubicle, and all the other executive pleasantries of hiring, budgets, strategic planning, 70+ hour weeks, and an endless schedule of meetings, calls, and decisions. A few weeks into the job, a good friend asked, "how's the new gig?" I laughed and responded, "you're not going to believe this, but this may be the first time I've had to wear pants to work five days a week in a really long time." For good or bad, it wasn't a joke. My coaching life entailed long days on the field of play, the gym, my bike, and a much more relaxed dress code.

Despite the change in apparel, what I never saw coming was the change to my daily environment and the impacts it would have on my health, fitness, and waistline. The story unfolds a bit like that of the slow boiling frog. Drop a frog in boiling water and it immediately jumps out. Yet place him in cool water and slowly turn up the heat, it'll swim around casually as the water eventually comes to a boil and Mr. Frog's eventual demise. While no one truly knows if this phenomenon is true, we've all heard the story and can understand the point. I've used it myself in teaching to explain how poor dietary choices and inactivity have little to no impacts in the short term, but can eventually lead to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. In any case, the tables were turned and I found myself swimming in gradually warming waters.

Many years of good practice kept my behaviors relatively positive. I still cooked 95% of my meals, all healthy and plant-based, stand up paddled, surfed, and ran a few times per week when time permitted. Yet the change in my schedule, more sedentary environment, and living location created disruptions that I didn't see coming. Getting up to speed in any new role entails diving in headfirst, spending extra time preparing, studying, and making certain things are going according to plans. My early morning workouts were soon replaced with email and meeting prep, with evenings following suit. The occasional happy hours started to become more frequent, a behavior I'd never engaged in before. Just as I'd started to figure out a slight rhythm, I changed the matrix again by moving to the opposite end of the country.

Flash forward two years later, a few dozen happy hours, late night eating, long sedentary workdays, the typical executive stressors, and twelve extra pounds...now I get it. I used to head out on five-hour mountain bike rides and trail runs on a weekday morning, not in a race, but simply for fun. Today I find myself in a slightly different place. I have a completely new understanding, appreciation, and empathy for those thousands of business leaders in the trenches that I addressed in the classroom who "didn't get it." If someone with my background can become the boiling frog, it's no mystery that the challenges are very real.

I've been exposed to the daily hurdles and choices we're all faced with, and have begun to institute strategies in my own life to take back the control I once had, still recognizing and wholeheartedly believing in the power and impacts of fitness and healthy nutrition on my leadership efficacy, life, and relationships. My teachings will now be delivered from an unclouded perspective, not from a soapbox of confusion, judgment, and misunderstanding. My sincere hope is that the lessons I share on this platform will empower you in some small way to think, evaluate priorities, and make a single degree of change that will lead to improved leadership and quality of life.