

LEADERSHIP LAB

How running a marathon silenced the doubter in me

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Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Sunday, Jun. 15 2014, 7:00 PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Jun. 13 2014, 4:04 PM EDT

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It's amazing how your past can haunt you – how the imprint of who you thought you were so many years ago can be etched in your mind and help dictate present and future behaviour. Sometimes it is obvious, and sometimes not. Either way, the past lives on.

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As an executive coach who has worked with top-level executives in law, banking, technology and other major industries, my role is to help clients clean out the past and to make choices (often risky ones) based on a current version of themselves – a healthy, values-driven version inspired by goals and strengths, not past baggage.

Yet when I turned the mirror toward myself, I realized that I also had my own cleaning to do. For many years, my past as an athletically challenged girl, mocked in gym class and left on the sidelines in sports, haunted me. When you grow up in Vancouver, and you don't ski, bike, run, kayak, hike or climb (mountains that is), it is easy to gain a complex.

So, a few years back, while living in New York City, I decided to face my demons head on. With both ankles and one knee injured, I hobbled to my physiotherapist's office and declared my intention to run – far. As in, 26.2 miles far.

I am hardly alone. I often hear stories such as a working mother of three competing in a marathon, triathlon, or even climbing Everest. I've been inspired by my own clients, such as the founder of an e-commerce company who became a committed triathlete; or the clinical psychologist, who regularly logs miles and miles of open-water, long-distance swimming. Many women like me –professionals in their late 30s to 40s – seem to be taking on new athletic challenges.

Why would the world's most notoriously busy demographic choose to add to their busyness?

We crave a chance to prove the world wrong. "Triathlons were something other people did," explains the e-commerce CEO. "Yet as I began training, putting one foot in front of another, I realize that the only difference between an athlete and a non-athlete is adding one mile each week." For me, I wanted to silence the negative voices whispering, "I can't do this. I can't do this," and become an athlete.

Such lessons reach far beyond sports. The e-commerce CEO successfully launched her dream business in a ruthless, challenging market. "If you follow a program, you can do it," she observes. "This applies to everything – setting an intention, coming up with a plan, and following it. It merely becomes a choice."

By adding something we consider physically impossible – even though being busy often feels like our greatest challenge – we open up new channels for growth in other areas of our life – our relationships, our parenting and, yes, even our careers.

That's precisely what happened to me. Flash forward two years, hours of physiotherapy, a cross-border move with a completely new life to build (again), and a lot of blood, sweat and tears, I found myself in Central Park on a crisp Sunday morning this past November, completing the New York City Marathon. At the moment I crossed the finish line, I marveled in the human spirit's power to cleanse itself. What I had yet to appreciate was how profoundly the experience would change me.

To begin with, I finally took on skiing, a virtual prerequisite to surviving the Montreal winters, but terrifying to me. Standing at the top of a run, I could remind myself: "I ran a marathon. I can trust my body. I've got this." This winter, I actually spent days on the slopes with my children, rather than safely sipping coffee down at the lodge. I love the fact that the kids have seen me try something new.

More than learning a new sport, the marathon has changed my way of "being." It's given me newfound confidence. Running is primarily a mental game, where you must will yourself into every additional mile. Now that I've proven myself to myself (which is the ultimate mind game, really), I feel less susceptible to the judgment of others.

That particular lesson has helped clear some smoke surrounding my aspirations. I've learned to say no to clients who sound impressive but are not aligned with my values. This frees me up to

focus on the work I love: Helping professionals who are at the intersection of family, career and self, to face their fears and do it anyway.

I can now tell them personally about the deep sense of pride that comes from setting a goal and making it happen. Such a simple satisfaction, and its inherent rewards, will spill over into everything else. I should know. I've been there.

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