

'Life is like a 21 speed bicycle-most of us have gears we never use.' cdv

by Catherine DeVrye



In preparation for an unsupported cycle adventure over the Andes, I needed a better bike if I was to have any chance at all of completing the trip. After all, it had been a number of years since I'd cycled and the three gears on my old bike were unlikely to give me the technological advantage I'd need. Having reached the other side of forty, I figured I'd need all the help I could get! Walking into a local cycle shop, a young salesman asked if he could help.

'What would you recommend for a middle aged woman wanting to cycle over the Andes?' I asked.

'Well, why don't you bring her in and we can see what we can do', he replied with a wry smile.

This guy was either very good at customer service or a con man. I discovered it was the former, as he patiently explained the various product options. I eventually decided on a custom-made, hot pink, 21-speed model.

With the best technology available, we now needed to start the logistical preparation for a trip that was definitely outside my normal comfort zone. As plans slowly fell into place with my six fellow travellers, it became evident that there were many similarities to the business challenges some of us were facing at the time.

First, we had set ourselves a goal-which at times seemed to be a rather unattainable one- of ascending over 5,000 meters from Argentina to the border of Chile and then heading downhill from the summit to the Pacific Ocean, over 800 kilometres away.

A quick look at the map provided a preliminary plan, one which admittedly seemed somewhat daunting until the overall project was broken down into manageable chunks; estimating how much ground could reasonably be covered each day, planning evening stops and making allowances for inclines and questionable road conditions. A buffer of a few days was allowed for contingencies such as poor weather or breakdowns.

After obtaining visas and security clearances, it was time for the physical preparation. In fact, in some ways, we'd inadvertently started those preparations when we first learned to ride a bike, all those years ago. And, although most of us hadn't cycled a great deal since, the basic skills- like many we humans possess-lay dormant and it was no longer necessary to get out the training wheels. We just had to get out of our comfort zone.

We knew that our ageing muscles would have to be eased into a training regime rather gently, so we started with easy rides on a cycle path, without the hazard of cars. Over a period of months, we set a schedule of increasingly longer and more difficult rides, progressing to hills and out on the road in preparation for riding in Buenos Aires traffic (although nothing could have adequately prepared us for that!) With only a few weeks to go, we added to the load by putting telephone books in our saddlebags to condition ourselves to the extra weight. Just like a business plan, we needed to walk before we could run.

Occasionally, in bad weather, we'd use stationary bikes at the gym, but that seemed less motivating as we were busy pedalling and going nowhere and it was harder to remain encouraged without actually feeling you were making some progress. Sometimes it seemed that way as well in my newly formed business! And I occasionally wondered if I should maybe have a partner, like a partner on a tandem bike, but decided I didn't want to risk the equivalent of doing all the pedalling at the front, while someone coasted pleasantly behind.

As the weeks and months rolled on, I surprised myself with increased fitness levels and the enjoyment of cycling with a couple of good friends-the best part was a stop at the end for cappuccinos and some tasty treat. Likewise, on a business journey, it's also important to set little

rewards for oneself along the way. This is especially true when you feel you're constantly pedalling uphill or into a headwind.

Like most people starting a new venture or adventure, we'd had a few disagreements leading up to our departure, but these were now behind us as we set off to the airport full of unbridled enthusiasm.

Confidence waned when our bikes arrived damaged and our leader left his passport and saddlebags behind on the very first day. Our tyres and spirits were both flat but we hadn't come this far to give in so easily. He seemed unworried and cheerfully said that there was no use worrying about something he couldn't do anything about so he'd make the most of what he did have. Another good lesson.

After nine hours of an uphill battle against gale-force winds, we wondered if we'd made a serious mistake, but as we hadn't seen a single vehicle in that entire time, there was no choice but continue to our evening's destination. If we stopped pedalling, we'd fall over. Arriving sore and dirty, we wondered whether we should have trained more rigorously in the first place-and don't we often wonder that about many everyday projects as well! It was also one of those moments when you wished you were at home in your own comfortable everyday environment, but yet knew that, if you'd been there, you'd have been wishing you were off on an exciting adventure! I consoled myself that I was glad I was healthy enough to be able to experience this much temporary pain, through my own choice!

The next day or two seemed easier and we worked more as a team, gaining marginal relief from the winds, by riding close together in each other's slipstream, with the front rider providing some protection from the fierce environmental conditions over which we had no control. So too, in the economic environments we often find ourselves in, solid partnerships can provide some buffer during particularly bleak times. When we encountered 80 kilometres per hour head winds and snow, our goal seemed impossible. But, through persistence, we found ourselves, a few days later, at the border of Argentina and Chile at the top of the summit pass.

'Why would anyone in their right mind want to cycle over the Andes anyway?' you might ask.

Customs officials must have thought the same thing and body-searched us for drugs, as they were convinced we 'loco gringos' (crazy foreigners) had to be on them! But the rush we felt as we started heading downhill was a natural high, as we easily covered twice the daily distances than on the ascent, now taking time to stop and enjoy the magnificent scenery.

In the same way, many people think others with innovative ideas are crazy-until the ideas work! We'd done it. We'd stepped outside our comfort zones and tested our own limits. As we philosophized, while dwarfed by magnificent mountains, we couldn't help but be reminded that we were all only part of a much bigger picture and often lost perspective about minor roadblocks in our way. One of my friends, having hassles within the organization where she worked, commented:

'Well, I got my rear into gear and if I can endure the discomfort of a sore backside while cycling over the Andes, I can easily cope with the people at work who are a pain in the butt!' There would be no more back-peddalling for her and the brakes were well and truly off as she returned to embark on a new mid life career with renewed vigor.

So, how do ordinary, middle aged people cycle over the Andes? Exactly, the same way we should all approach challenges in our everyday life-one pedal at a time; one step at a time; one distance at a time as we set higher challenges for ourselves than anyone else would. And, always remembering that: ***'Life is like a 21 speed bicycle-most of us have gears we never use.'***

Catherine DeVrye, Australian Executive Woman of the Year, is a #1 best selling author and global speaker on service quality and change. This is an extract from her book *'Hot Lemon & Honey-Reflections for Success in Times of Change'*.