



A Walk in the Park with 30,000 of My Best Friends

On April 1, I ran my fourth Cooper River Bridge Run. It is a 10K (6.2 miles), or you can do the 10K walk. It closely resembles the Carolina Cup in Camden, a thinly disguised cocktail party masquerading as a horse race. However, you do have a few serious competitors like the Kenyans who make a mockery of “running for fun.” They and the other world-class runners always start in front of the pack, and all the wannabes follow.

Because of the large crowd it took 30 minutes for some people to reach the starting point. By this time the Kenyans had already finished the race! Winning time – 28:16....not fair!

I decided to get a little more serious this year and set some goals to see if I could compete with at least those in my age bracket. My goals were as follows:

1. Survive. It would be totally embarrassing to have been carried off on a stretcher. Right before the race, Tom Madden, Director of our PMBA program, said unsympathetically, “Comeback with your shield, or upon it!”
2. Run my age in minutes. Since I am 61, that meant I had to run it in 60 minutes and 59 seconds. This seemed reasonable at the time, even though the time would be 3 minutes faster than my time in the 2005 race. Are some goals more important than others? Of course. This was the one I wanted most.
3. Finish in the top half of all runners and the top half of all the runners in my age bracket.
4. Run the whole way. I also had this goal in 2005, which I met. More about this one later.
5. Enjoy the run.

As I relay my experience up to and including the race, I will put numbers at the end of certain leadership points. See if your thoughts on these points match mine. I will give my thoughts at the end.

I went into “serious training” January 1, figuring 90 days until the April 1st race would be sufficient. Part of my training was to run the new bridge. I was in Charleston on business in mid-February, drove over to the Mount Pleasant side, parked by the bridge, ran 2 miles simulating the start of the race, and ran/walked to the top of the bridge and jogged back down to my car. The old bridge was symmetrical, two spans, half-mile up and down each span. The new bridge, which is an unbelievable structure, has one span, so it is an uphill run for one solid mile! I knew then the new bridge was going to be a challenge. However, I figured I would pick up at least a couple of minutes on the downhill side on race day. (1)

About the first of February I bought a new pair of running shoes that were too tight, giving me a corn on my little toe, knocking me out of running for two weeks. (2) My training progressed from that point

without interruption. However, you do need to know that I am a jogger, not a runner, and that my training regimen is suspect. (3) Kind of interesting how many people you know who participate in this, some you haven't seen in a long time. It's a lot of fun to reconnect, and I had many conversations leading up to the race where we shared our goals freely about what we were trying to do. (4)

On the Friday night before the race, a 48-inch water main broke and knocked out the entire water system in the city of Charleston. Not parts of the city, but the whole peninsula. No water, no toilets, no coffee, nothing. It broke under the water in a marsh north of the city, and on TV looked like Niagara Falls coming out of the ground.

Mayor Joe Riley said it would be 24 – 48 hours before water would be restored, and when you got it back they advised everyone to boil the water until it was deemed safe. My pre-race ritual of a good hot shower was doomed, (5) not to mention the prospects of being in Charleston on Saturday night with 30,000 people who had walked or run the bridge and had not showered in 24 hours. Not a pretty thought!

I ran the race without my hot shower. Thank goodness for bottled water for other needs! Here are my thoughts on some leadership points that I re-learned, especially as it relates to setting goals.

Leadership Point (1) – I learned something about bridge construction, and according to the newspapers the next day, a lot of other people did too. The consensus of opinion is that what goes up must come down the same way. Not so. The bridge is constructed with a steep grade going up, but because of the additional length of the backside going into Charleston, the grade is much shallower, by about 2 percent, according to the folks who built the bridge. Therefore, practically no time was made up. My leadership failure was not running the entire bridge in advance and assuming the bridge was symmetrical (you know about assuming!). Homework left undone cost me dearly.

Leadership Point (2) – Buying a new pair of shoes two months prior to the race was idiotic, at best. The leadership point is that we should not make significant changes in people, computers, software, vendors, or strategy two months before the kickoff of a significant effort. I will check my tire tread earlier next time!

Leadership Point (3) – My training regimen was suspect. I put a fair amount of effort and time into this, but I did not have a well-thought-out training plan. In leadership, we cannot take our people into any significant endeavor without a well-conceived plan, communicated to all levels.

Leadership Point (4) – It was a warm day and around the 5th mile, I “hit the wall” -- that point in any endeavor where you feel like you can't go any more. I have never had such a strong desire to quit running. However, I knew if I did, there would be no way I could make my time goal. The only reason I did not quit is because I had “gone public.” Shared goals that hold you accountable have a way of strengthening your commitment significantly.

Leadership Point (5) – About the lack of water...rarely do things go as planned, and it is probably safe to say that no one in Charleston from the mayor on down ever considered a complete loss of water. In leadership we have to expect the unexpected, have a backup plan as best we can, and learn to accept, without complaint, those obstacles we cannot control. When we returned to the hotel after the race with intentions of loading up and heading directly home, the water was miraculously back on. Some 30,000 showers had to have lowered the water pressure again! We stayed in Charleston and had an absolutely great weekend replenishing the water lost in the run!

As for my goals, I made all but one. I walked twice approaching the top of the bridge for about 15 seconds each time. It is a killer climb. My leadership challenge to you is to set some sort of physical goal. It could be to lose that extra 5 pounds, start going on walks with your spouse or friend, or take that yoga lesson you have been meaning to. The sedentary lifestyle that we as a nation have adopted and our associated declining health is well-documented. As leaders in our organizations and in our families, we have a responsibility to remain healthy. There are lots of things we can't control, some

health issues included, but those things that we can control, we must.

It was a hard run. Maybe it was my age, the heat, the new bridge, or my lack of correct preparation. Probably a combination of these, although being honest, the guy I see in the mirror each morning has to take the blame. I don't know if I have the courage to do it again next year. I may, as my wife and many thousands of the smart ones did, do the walk...nah, I'm not real smart, so I'm going public and commit to running again in 2007 with a revised plan, increased knowledge, and better training.

My goals will be the same, so I will pick up one minute of time, but I will also pick up 365 days of age! If you would like to join a bunch of us who are going to walk or run together on March 31 of next year, send me your e-mail address and I will contact you in December with the details of having a lot of fun together – before, during, and after. It really is a magnificent experience in a wonderful city as any of my 30,000 new best friends will attest!

I encourage your response to these thoughts. farlgroup@aol.com

Have a great day!

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