

A high-angle photograph of a runner in a desert landscape. The runner is wearing a white cap, a blue and black athletic shirt, black shorts, white socks, and black shoes. They are running across a vast expanse of sand with distinct, wavy ripples. The lighting is bright, casting a shadow of the runner onto the sand. The overall scene conveys a sense of endurance and achievement in a challenging environment.

**HOW TO TRANSFORM WHO YOU THINK YOU ARE  
TO REACH YOUR HIGHEST ASPIRATIONS**

**KAY BRETZ**

# **TURNING RIGHT**

**INSPIRE THE MAGIC**

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## **Praise for *Turning Right* – Inspire the Magic**

“Kay uses his great storytelling ability to relate how his life changed when he started turning right. His running and racing is such a perfect metaphor for life and work, and something that is very relatable. Both entertaining and inspiring, he dives into the ebbs and flows ultra runners experience in every race by grappling with his own vulnerability, with honesty and a driving curiosity of how to solve the problems presented to him at any given moment. He uses those experiences in his role as a leader in his work. I highly recommend this uplifting and fun read!”

**Meghan Canfield**, ultramarathon coach and nine-time US-representative at the 100-km world championships and ten-time top-ten-finisher at Western States 100 Mile Endurance Run

“For sure, this is a must-read. *Turning Right* offers the reader very personal insights into how to see all the options life has to offer. There is much more to life than the daily hamster wheel. *Turning Right* inspires you to explore all the possibilities your life has to offer! You have to dare to read it.”

**Dr Harald Fanderl**, Senior Partner at McKinsey & Company

“One of the insights from Kay’s book is: ‘Many things in the world we can’t control, but we can choose our attitude and mindset.’

“This is a deeply personal account of how a highly intelligent man has challenged his own mindset and attitude to achieve results that were almost impossible, for example winning the Big Red Run. He has disciplined his very rational mind not to focus on the fear of failure but on how to achieve success. His key is to embrace perceived

uncertainty and challenges, and then develop the resilience to bounce back from adversity – ‘time to fly.’ Spontaneously following your intuition leads to the magic happening! This book is really mind training for success in whatever field you choose.”

**Peter Kirby**, former Global CEO of CSR Limited and ICI Paints PLC (UK), former Chair of Dulux Group Limited and Medibank Private, and Board member of Macquarie Bank Limited

“Kay shares a true example that absolutely anything is possible, when you put your mind to it... The book that keeps you thinking long after you’ve put it down... Inspiring... A true self-reflection of lessons learnt when racing doesn’t go to plan.”

**Kirstin Bull**, 100-km world champion 2016

“*Turning Right* is a detailed, entertaining and truly transformative book. It offers every reader, no matter where you are on your journey, a blueprint for greatness. Kay is a high achiever in the academic world, business world and athletic world. His insights will take you from zero to hero using tangible and achievable techniques to transform your world. All you need to do is TURN RIGHT!”

**Joe Ward**, champion ultra runner, and head coach and founder of Manly Beach Running Club

“Whilst I read this book over a few weeks, it has directly impacted my life throughout the months since. I have learned to stop at the crossroad of opportunity and look left to observe but turn right to thrive. I think this book can help anyone and everyone, and its lessons will stay with you years after turning its pages.”

**Lucy Bartholomew**, elite ultra runner

This book is dedicated to my mentors.

*The perception of glory is a rare occurrence in our lives.  
We fail to wonder, we fail to respond to the presence ...  
Life is routine and routine is resistance to wonder.*

—Abraham Heschel

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## FOREWORD

### FINDING A NEW PATH

It's after midnight, I've been running for over 17 hours, and I'm not even at the halfway mark of the race—a 350-kilometre non-stop ultramarathon. The race is aptly named the 'Delirious W.E.S.T.', which is the race organisers' attempt at humour, mixed with the sadistic reality of a point-to-point slog along the Bibbulmun Track in Western Australia that will leave all of us runners not only 'delirious' but also at the point of exhaustion like no other race in the country.

I'm pushing myself hard as I run through the undulating sand dunes rising up next to the Great Australian Bight. Along with poisonous snakes crawling in front of me, I'm dodging cobwebs and spiders every few metres that are at face level. I'm purposely leaving them for the runner behind me whose head torch lights I keep seeing bobbing away in the distance.

The runner behind me is a guy called Kay Bretz, someone I'd never heard of before and someone who had never run this length of race. We had briefly met at the race meeting the day before, and he'd asked me how best to run this race distance as I'd run three 200-mile-plus races previously. As we chatted, I could see Kay was positive about the challenge ahead and that he had the determination to do

whatever it took to finish, while still being under no illusion of the difficulty of this lengthy distance.

I had told Kay to run his own race, have a sleep plan and, most of all, enjoy the adventure into the physical and mental unknown. Now I was thinking to myself, *How can this relatively inexperienced runner be pushing me so fiercely?* No matter what I did, it felt like he was just over my shoulder and always gaining. The drive, determination and sense of purpose Kay showed to push to the limits in what was for him an unknown race distance made me want to get to know Kay once the race was over. For now, as we were both battling for the lead, I was fully focused on just trying to keep everything together and not be overtaken by him.

In the days after the race had ended, I spoke with Kay about what had unfolded on the track, and he said to me, ‘There are so many things in the world that we can’t control, but we can choose our attitude and mindset.’ Kay had this unique ability to stick to his race plan under pressure and remain in control of the process, not the outcome of the race. He told me a story about how one day ‘turning right’ changed his life forever. After years of pre-programming himself to always turn left as he left his house, one moment of deciding to turn right took him on a completely new journey and one that would change his life and mindset, forever.

Just a few months after finishing the 350-kilometre race in Western Australia, Kay’s decision to always challenge himself to look for new horizons by ‘turning right’ would lead to Kay becoming the fastest ever Australian runner at the 24-hour world championships, and he would go on to be awarded the Australian Ultra Performance of

the Year. All this came from one simple life-changing moment — one moment that we can all take.

What happens, though, when you don't have the courage or confidence to turn right, and you're missing out on those opportunities that life presents you, by sticking to the daily grind and not challenging yourself to look for new horizons? In 2016, as I was running a 250-kilometre race across the Gobi Desert, I was competing for the win when something peculiar happened to me: I stopped mid-race to help a stray dog across a large river crossing. This was my own 'turning right' moment. It changed my life forever. I think about that moment with everything I do now. If I hadn't taken that decision to do the opposite of what I would normally have done, I wouldn't be writing this foreword, for one thing.

Ultra running has taught me many things about myself, made me stronger and made me learn how to be adaptable under extreme pressure. These life lessons are not only useful in sport but also relatable to life and leadership. If you want to become the best version of yourself, whether that's in day-to-day life, leadership, business or as an athlete, *Turning Right — Inspire the Magic* can guide you to achieve more than you ever thought possible.

**Dion Leonard**

International bestselling author of *Finding Gobi*

## PROLOGUE

# DISCOVERING OUR INNER MAGIC

*We tend to think of Sisyphus as a tragic hero, condemned by the gods to shoulder his rock sweatily up the mountain ... He doesn't realize that at any moment he is permitted to step aside, let the rock hurtle to the bottom, and go home.*

—Stephen Mitchell

My wet clothes were stuck to my body, I was shivering, and it was almost midnight. I didn't have to open my eyes to realise that my worst nightmare was coming true. 'Everything okay?' one of the boys asked. Nothing was okay. This was a disaster, and I was on my own.

I was so close; it was the last night of school camp. All I could do now, however, was escape to the bathroom. I got out of bed to leave the dorm, pretending nothing had happened. But, as I stepped out of the puddle of my own wee, I sensed several pairs of eyes staring at me. Had they noticed that my light blue PJs had dark patches? Hopefully, it was too dark to notice.

When I got back to the room, nobody said a word. All I could do was not stir up any suspicion. For the rest of the night, I lay awake, ashamed and frustrated, in my own sticky mess. Everybody else at the age of almost 13 had learned how to regulate their basic bodily functions. And now this. It could not be worse. At our age, there was no room for any weaknesses. Judith, one of the girls in our class, had been bullied the entire week once somebody discovered she didn't use deodorant. We kids had become brutal, and I would be the next victim.

When we all got up in the morning, I was dreading the announcement—something along the lines of, 'Smartest guy in the class wees himself'. But nobody said anything. I could feel my classmates observing me; they had huddled in little groups and were whispering. Maybe they'd even told the teachers? If I could have, I'd have run away to save myself. Instead, I waited, impatient, and avoided looking at them. When we finally hopped onto the bus home, the public flogging had still not started. Nobody said anything that day.

Nobody said anything the week after, either. Only after several weeks did I realise I had, miraculously, escaped the worst humiliation I could imagine. My frustration with myself, however, only grew. Every few nights I needed to change into dry gear. Nobody could help. Comments such as 'Time will heal everything' from the doctors had been a lie. To add insult to injury, my father didn't stop taunting me. Declaring, 'Kay, you will wake up in a wet bed on your wedding night' was funny to him.

A few months after school camp, I was in bed reading about a little boy who was dying from an incurable cancer. While his situation was significantly more serious than mine, I could imagine how

he must have felt. Being stuck in a hopeless situation was lonely. The moment would come when you just had to give up.

That was not what that boy did. Instead, according to the story, he invented a mind game in which he commanded an imaginary miniature spaceship. He navigated this spaceship through his body, destroying every cancerous cell it encountered. He made this game a nightly routine, similar to brushing his teeth, and every evening before going to sleep his spaceship slaughtered cancer cells. One day, the doctors brought him the unexpected news that his tumour was getting smaller. Within months, he was cured.

That was the answer. If this boy could cure himself with only the power of his mind, I could do the same. If my mind was creating the problem in the first place, my mind could fix it. This was clearly the path out of my misery, and I was determined. 'I will no longer weep in my bed. Never again.' Trust was the answer. With trust in myself, I could achieve anything.

My solemn vow was, almost instantly, countered by my cynicism and the small voice asking, 'What if that boy never existed? What if the writer had made the story up? What if his cure wasn't because of his mind game?' Those were reasonable objections, and they started to convince me. It wasn't going to work. My high-flying hopes were deflating.

But I was so sick of my misery that I was prepared to even trust an approach that sounded silly. I intuitively knew what I had to do: I needed to take my frightened self and begin a journey. 'Maybe we won't succeed straightaway,' I told myself. 'And, if we wake up again in a puddle, we won't panic. It might take a bit of practice. Hang in there. We can do this.' That would become my daily encouragement.

Night after night, I was dry. Each day I'd recite the promise in my mind. Nights turned into weeks. Until, finally, I had overcome my embarrassing habit.

My entire outlook shifted, and not only in relation to my wedding night. I'd seen a glimpse of the immense power I had. I could not unsee it and, more importantly, it became the spark to finding out what else was possible if I put my mind to it. And the emerging question went deeper than asking what else I could achieve. It was about who I could become, and maybe even who I was.

My epiphany was that for all those years I'd been searching in the wrong spot. I was looking for external help or trying to get different skills to make my problem disappear. Instead, I had to shift to a new identity. There was nothing to learn and only things to unlearn. I had to transform — like a caterpillar into a butterfly — but to do that, I had to drop my self-doubt. For once, I had to trust myself and know I was no longer a victim.

I felt relief, but also anger. Why had nobody told me about the powers we hold inside? What I had experienced went beyond the mental processing powers I was developing. I couldn't even speak to anyone and find out whose voice had come from deep within me. I was far too ashamed to tell anybody about the miracle.

Before long, the memory started to fade away. The adult world I grew into had no place for magical encounters or 'miracles'. Success became the mature version of childish magic. Thus, I became good at being successful. I was awarded a doctorate in record time and travelled the world as a top management consultant for global firm McKinsey. The half-life of success got shorter and shorter, however, and what grew was my desire to reignite the magic I had experienced and share it with others.

Through a succession of crazy running adventures (which I outline in this book), I embarked on an inner journey and learned how to nurture that inner voice that had saved me when I was an insecure kid — my intuition. I was passionate about exploring the depths of the mysterious forces I had once seen. I wanted to leave behind the limitations I placed on myself, this time for good. What followed was a scary journey, where I left behind the part of me that had made me a successful runner and executive. This same part had ultimately prevented me from reaching my dreams. My entire perspective on what we are all capable of shifted when I transformed from a recreational marathon runner into one of the best ultramarathon athletes in the world.

But this book is not about athletics or super-human performance. When we face seemingly unsolvable challenges, having additional skills or taking advantage of more favourable circumstances are rarely sufficient to cut through. The solution is not external; it is within us. The path requires us to leave the world we are familiar with and embrace the unknown. The key step is that first one — crossing the threshold into the unknown. That is when we allow transformation to take place.

My quest is around transforming who we think we are to reach our highest aspirations. This book is all about helping you unlock both your biggest challenges and your innermost dreams by revolutionising your inner game and undergoing vertical development — step-changing your personal growth and accessing a new level of awareness.

I've written *Turning Right—Inspire the Magic* in three 'acts'. The first act of the book focuses on the possibilities that open up when you take fate into your own hands and change your trajectory. Both as a manager and a marathon runner, I was disillusioned by life.



A seemingly random right turn led me outside of my comfort zone and challenged my identification with success. My journey was no longer built on a yearning for greatness; it was the start of an expedition to explore the magic.

The second act of the book sheds light on what it takes to unleash the magic within you and reach new heights. For me, a series of growing running adventures, culminating in a 350-kilometre race, challenged me to deal more effectively with the unexpected.

In the final act, I hope to answer my question, ‘How do we make the magic accessible in the whole of our life?’ Our volatile world is asking for accelerated leadership development and cultural transformation in organisations. By raising your consciousness, you can become better equipped to deal with what’s thrown at you, knowing you can reach your highest aspirations.

*Turning Right — Inspire the Magic* is for people who, like me, desire more from their existence and have the courage to lead a life where they shine brightly. To help with your own transformational journey, I’ve included ‘self check-in’ questions at the end of each chapter to help you reflect on the journey and focus on this course.

I’m curious — what magic is waiting to emerge from within you? Over and over again, I have experienced the joy of leaving behind what seems reasonable and logical. And, over and over again, I have seen how doing so can unleash something extraordinary in us. I hope this book inspires you to encounter what you’re seeking in life and unleash the extraordinary within you.

**ACT I**

**SEEKING  
THE MAGIC**

**EMBARKING  
INTO THE  
UNKNOWN**

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

—Robert Frost

## CHAPTER 1

# TURNING RIGHT AT THE GARDEN GATE

*Sadly, developing our leadership effectiveness  
often gets side-lined because we resist the vulnerability  
of learning and changing.*

—Robert Anderson and William Adams

I had sneaked out while it was pitch black, before anybody else was awake. I was getting absolutely drenched, which I hated, but at least I'd gotten used to the darkness. Running through these hilly, unfamiliar streets in heavy rain was no fun. Yet, in six months' time, I had to be in the shape of my life.

The upcoming trip back home to Germany after two years of not having seen my family would be special, but the icing on the cake would be to run the Berlin marathon and pass through the Brandenburg Gate as countless spectators cheered me to the finish line. I've loved running marathons since high school, and I'd missed it keenly when I worked as a management consultant. Here was an opportunity to not only run another personal best but also do it at home.

My work weeks of up to 100 hours and seemingly constant jetlag at McKinsey had put a hold on my passion. I knew all this time had been an investment in securing a decent career, and it had opened surprising doors. When I left Germany, my experience had catapulted me into a senior position with a major supermarket in Melbourne, Australia — the other side of the world. I no longer worked the crazy hours of a consultant and thrived on getting back to my love for running. It kept me sane. I loved the freedom of those early morning runs, and they became a non-negotiable in my daily routine — that is, until the reality of running my department kicked in.

Colleagues had often asked me how I found the time to run as much as I did. Not being in a relationship certainly helped, I answered, but there was more to it. Running was not a time-drainer for me; on the contrary, I couldn't afford not to run. When I did give myself the occasional rest day, I got significantly less done than on the days I ran. Even my team noticed that lack of balance. The more I ran, the more the other areas of my life just fell into place.

Once again, I had lost myself in thoughts during my run in the dark and rain and, as my morning exercise was coming to an end, I saw I had only to make it up one last hill. My enthusiasm for hills was not far off from my hate for running in the rain. Hills sucked.

For the entire week, I'd had no choice but to run hills. I was looking forward to getting back into my usual routine, but for a couple more days I was locked away with a bunch of work colleagues for an offsite training course. 'Inspiring the Magic' was the theme for the course, elegantly summing up my employer's next grand vision.

I couldn't make up my mind whether the course was great or a waste of time. While a multi-year turnaround had significantly

improved my employer's market performance, the company culture seemed to have been sacrificed along the way. For me, work was anything but inspirational, and I felt only a massive portion of magic would fix the overall sentiment and team engagement. Most of our energy was drained by meetings, and the level of aggression among colleagues seemed to rise with the rank of the attendees.

One of the worst experiences for any employee was to be invited into the boardroom and witness an episode of yelling and fists banging on the table. The most obvious indicator that the state of tension was rising was when a leader pushed the button for the creeping frost on the boardroom's big glass walls. From one moment to the next, the transparent fishbowl turned into an opaque hideout. Nobody in the open-plan office could witness the scene, but everyone knew what was happening.

The experience reminded me of my dad's regular outbursts and mum racing to shut all the windows, so the family shame was not shared with the entire neighbourhood. By this time in my life, I'd hoped to have closed the chapter on being an abuse victim, but there it was — an appalling show of autocratic behaviour that I hadn't thought would be tolerated by grown-up executives. As a teenager, I had learned that making myself small was the wrong strategy. Once I stood up for both my mother and myself, my dad stopped his aggressions.

## **INSPIRING THE MAGIC**

If we did not find a way to fix our company culture, we would regress into darker times. The largely dictatorial management style might, in the short term, have helped accelerate decision-making and fix business fundamentals. Now, though, the high turnover of employees and our

fear, or inability, to express our opinions did very little to foster the sustainable upward trajectory the board expected from us. To lead the company into the next transformative phase, the entire leadership team needed to learn how to bring out their 'X-factor'. To date, all directors had participated in the 'Inspiring the Magic' course. So far, however, I hadn't really seen many of them shift their behaviours. Now, all expectations lay on us, the levels below.

The content of the course was promising. But without role-modelling from the very top, the program was doomed to fail. I certainly wasn't going to endure the toxic environment forever. Not only was the business in desperate need of change, but so was I. I felt stuck. I was responsible for pricing and offering great customer value in the middle of a price war and, while it was never going to be an easy task, I was too familiar with the topic to have sleepless nights over it. My personal learning curve had flattened out—I had no proper challenge and, for the first time in my life, was barely being stretched.

I was craving more 'oomph'. Finding that feeling of being on top of the world was becoming harder and harder. My colleagues would have said that I was expecting too much from life. What else did I need apart from doing a great job, being backed by the leadership team and receiving a good salary? Wasn't my success sufficient? I even carved out enough time for daily sports. I should be happy, was the implication.

Still, I did have a predicament. I didn't feel satisfied with my achievements, and any acknowledgement of them faded almost instantly. I had success, but I lacked fulfilment. Every time I reached a higher peak, I realised it wasn't what I was looking for in the first place.

Yet, what was the alternative to pushing myself in work and sports? *No*, I thought and doubled down on my efforts; perhaps the

next peak would be more fulfilling. Some light was better than no light at all, and I didn't know of any other way to reignite the magic in my life.

Once again, I had gotten so lost in my own head that I hadn't even noticed I'd conquered the final hill of my run. I had to park my biggest challenge for another time. Now, back at the conference centre, I had just enough time for a quick shower and to inhale some breakfast before our day started. The agenda looked promising—with a stimulating guest speaker who would be the highlight of the week.

Gavin Freeman's credentials were most impressive. Apart from working as a business coach, he had been a sports psychologist for the Australian team at Summer Olympics, Winter Olympics and Paralympics. Particularly notable was that he had been responsible for the mental training of the archery team leading into the 2000 Sydney Olympics, which culminated in Simon Fairweather's gold medal.

The memories came back about how I, always a sports enthusiast, changed my sleeping routine over weeks to follow the Sydney games live on TV from Germany, where I lived at the time. I remembered jumping up and down in my living room, cheering for middle-distance runner Nils Schumann, who surprised with a gold medal in the 800-metre race. Now, I was intrigued to discover what it took to win a gold medal for your country, with thousands of spectators cheering in the stadium and millions following on TV. Managing that level of pressure was beyond my comprehension. Mastering such a skill would be handy, regardless whether I was running marathons or a department.

The first few morning sessions of the course were not overly exciting. Finally, after a few hours, Gavin Freeman stood in front of us.

He covered health and wellbeing, and we discussed how to enhance our leadership by leading ourselves better. The suggested solution, however, barely required anybody of his calibre. In a nutshell, his recommendations included getting sufficient sleep, doing some exercise and eating a balanced diet. I agreed completely, but the session did not teach me anything new. Those were basics even non-athletes knew. Impatiently, I looked at the clock. Gavin had turned into the man who stood between us and our lunch break.

Thinking about lunch helped me see the irony of the situation. Here we were talking about healthy food, and what was waiting for us next door? A platter of mostly unhealthy sandwiches, spread with uninspired ingredients packed with mayonnaise — one ingredient I would not touch with a barge pole. The other meals of the day were not much healthier, but at least they were tasty. I imagined how great it would be to see my favourite lunch waiting for me: a large plate of pasta with cheese. Even though I ate it every single day, I never got sick of it.

‘Kay, are you with us?’ No longer did the facilitator pronounce my first name as if it were a girl’s name, rhyming with day. By now he knew it was pronounced ‘Kai’ and rhymed with sky. My German parents could never have foreseen that giving me this boy’s name would lead to regular confusion once their son lived in an English-speaking country. Over the years, I’d gotten used to it.

The facilitator took a step towards me and asked, ‘Do you have a question for Gavin?’ My silence went on for so long that the room buzzed. Luckily, a colleague stepped in. She asked Gavin what made the difference between winning and losing at the Olympics. Why did some favourites choke on competition day? Instantly, Gavin was in his



element. I could sense this was his world. Probably, he was as bored talking about the basics of wellbeing as it had come across. Suddenly, he was full of energy, and his entire body was radiating the glory of the Olympics. Finally, Gavin demonstrated that he was worth his money.

He explained how the difference in the competitors' mindsets determined their results. Each one of us could be motivated along a spectrum of two extremes. On the one hand, we could strive to overcome challenges, focus on the process and give our best. With that mindset, anything was possible. He called it 'motivation to succeed'. On the other hand, we could spend our energy avoiding a negative outcome. This was 'motivation to avoid failure'. Whenever people with a similar skill level competed against each other, their mindset made the difference. When we witnessed favourites choke, they were typically driven by their fears. They were motivated to not fail, rather than motivated to succeed. In summary, Gavin concluded, the key difference between good and great was the ability to perform consistently under pressure.

Gavin triggered something in me that I had not felt for a long time. For a moment, I had the privilege of seeing life from a completely fresh perspective. Instead of being caught in the settled life I was leading, I could smell adventure in the air. Those elite athletes were working hard on themselves to overcome enormous challenges. How I wished to be one of them. Delayed gratification is not everyone's cup of tea, but I had come to terms with the reality that the reward was all the sweeter when it followed the upfront hardships. But how was I motivated? To succeed or to avoid failure? Colleagues and friends considered me a positive guy. Therefore, surely, I was mainly motivated to succeed?

Gavin had referred to a magical feeling where anything seemed possible. I knew that feeling of being invincible, without being restrained by the usual limitations. The more Gavin explained the concept, the more it dawned on me that my mindset had shifted over time. Initially, when marathons were new to me, I wanted to expand my limits. Nowadays, running mainly served the purpose of stilling my hunger for another personal best. There was little room for error. Everything needed to be perfect: my training plan, my discipline, the course profile and the conditions on race day. Nothing could be left to chance; I needed to manage any detail I could think of. I realised my focus was all about not stuffing up, not failing.

In a recent marathon everything had come together to run another personal best. The following day, a colleague brushed away my achievement with a cold, 'All of that effort for a meagre nine seconds?' He disregarded sports being more about the journey than the outcome, and I wanted to be clear — a win was a win. I was disappointed he wouldn't acknowledge my mental toughness, fighting to the final metres of the race. Whereas the race result might not have a life beyond the race itself, I thought that I could bring the mindset that achieved it anywhere, including to work. Where he had a point was that my talent was limited and, soon, I could not expect any more improvements. I was terrified about reaching the imminent plateau. Was it possible that I was motivated not to fail? After all my efforts, maybe I just didn't have what it took to be great?

Luckily, the session concluded and, with it, my dark thoughts disappeared. Once everyone had sprinted off to lunch, I introduced myself to Gavin, and we had a short chat about sports. I told him I was training for the Berlin marathon and that I was intrigued by the

idea of working on the mental side of things and shifting my mindset. I had never, either in sports or at work, come across anybody who had put any effort into this area. He affirmed I had to work on it if I wanted to become great.

To get me started, he promised to send me his book *The Business Olympian*, in which he transferred lessons from elite athletes into management. If I had any questions, I could always reach out to him. What a generous offer. Not a wasted morning after all, I had to acknowledge. Maybe his book would reveal some secrets to becoming a faster runner. It took me by surprise to notice that potential business improvements excited me significantly less.

### **EMBRACING THE MYSTERY**

Suddenly, momentum was pumped back into my life. Everything happened quickly from there. Before I got home from the workshop, Gavin sent me a PDF version of his book, along with an invitation for a coffee catch-up. Luckily, I could spend the weekend reading his book in preparation. I did not read it; I inhaled it. I sensed an entirely new world opening up in front of me. Everything was so different from what I knew — so much so I even had to re-read the book to grasp its richness.

A week later, I sneaked out of work early to meet Gavin in a café. The afternoon wind had picked up, and I was chilly sitting outside just in my shirt. I wished Gavin had picked a quieter place. Hordes of school children streamed out of the nearby train station, and several kids bumped into our table as they passed by. The café staff weren't welcoming either, announcing that we could only squeeze in a quick coffee before they shut.

Nothing happening around us seemed to bother Gavin, however. He was interested in who I was and why a manager like me was so obsessed with marathons. My passion for sports must have come across, because only a few minutes into our conversation Gavin suddenly offered to mentor me for the upcoming event in Berlin. He would help me experience the difference between good and great. I would learn what he had taught Olympians and become a master of pressure situations.

I had just hit the jackpot. An expert in his field was taking an interest in my passion. With his help, I would easily run another personal best in Berlin. To my surprise, Gavin did not even want to charge me for his support. He only said, 'Sometimes you have to pay it forward. What goes around comes around.' He had worked with many elite athletes aspiring to become business people. Why not the other way around, work with a manager on his athletic efforts? All I had to do was put my approach on paper, so that he could build on it. That assignment was straight down my alley. If I was good at something, it was communicating a plan.

I was riding a wave of excitement and, by the end of the following weekend, Gavin had my detailed 12-page plan in his inbox. It was a masterpiece I was proud of. Similar to a child waiting for Christmas, I was desperate to receive his reply. From there onwards, things turned fast. Gavin sent me a text a few days later, which brought me back down to earth. He sounded way less excited than I had been and just stated, 'Kay, we better catch up in person. I do not want you to misunderstand me.' Oh dear. It sounded like I was going to hear some uncomfortable news.

As much as I tried, I could not find any flaws in my plan. Impatiently, I waited for our next catch-up, this time over an early breakfast before going to work. It was our first breakfast meeting at The Merchants Guild, which was about to turn into our headquarters. We had much more privacy for meaningful conversations, and the food menu was original. The superfood breakfast was a winner and so was the freshly brewed chai latte.

Gavin was still half asleep and looked as if he had just rolled out of bed. Even after a strong long black, he couldn't give me the answers I was hoping for. I heard what he was saying but didn't understand a single word. Nothing made sense to me. 'You're too planned and don't leave anything to chance' was his verdict. Apparently, my plan was very diligent and would be great for anyone else. *Perfect*, I thought. Not for me, though. Gavin had a gut feeling that my plan was not giving me room to deal with the unexpected. While road marathons didn't throw up many unknown variables, in his experience, something always went off plan in any challenge. He suspected that I was not good at dealing with curve balls, in sports or in business.

Gavin was aware that he could hardly explain what he was trying to convey. With no further explanations, he asked me to just trust him and his intuition.

*Too planned? What?* My plans had gotten me to where I was now. I was a fast marathon runner due to my planning and disciplined execution. And now he expected me to trust him, when he could not even explain his point of view? Surely, the Olympians he had coached had received better explanations than what he'd given me. I had no time to dwell on this trust matter, however, because our conversation was about to get worse.

Gavin didn't waste a single further word on how we could save my plan. He ignored it altogether. Apparently, it was not worth the paper it was written on — not if the aim was to lift me from good to great. I was hoping to find another edge, but Gavin was not interested in tempo sessions, interval efforts or long runs. Running training, he said, was just a ticket to the game, purely the basics that needed to be done and, therefore, my responsibility. He'd support me through my mental training. Then, suddenly, he got excited and for the first time that morning appeared awake. 'Kay, you have to do runs, but you cannot foresee what they are about.'

*Clever, Sherlock.* How should I plan to do something unplanned? Gavin was still going on about this risk of something unexpected happening in the race and me not being able to cope with it effectively. My urge to control could be my downfall. He kept repeating himself, until he said, 'Why don't you ask a friend to lead a running session, without telling you what it is? All you do is follow him and do whatever he does.'

My face must have gone white and, in shock, the only answer I could get out was, 'Do you mean a mystery run?' That was exactly what he meant. Within a few minutes his idea had gained shape. I just had to run. If the pace increased, I would run faster until my friend slowed down again, whenever that might be and for however long the session would last. Anything between a walk and a sprint was possible. A session might finish after five minutes or last for several hours. I would not be able to figure out what I was in for the entire way. No control. It sounded like torture.

The more excited Gavin got, the more my curiosity was replaced by sheer terror. I knew my friend Corey was the ideal partner for this

mystery run. We were best friends and already trained together on weekends. My mistake was that I called Corey straight after breakfast and told him all about Gavin's suggestion. It was no surprise that he loved the idea, and I had lost my chance to get off the hook. That morning, I had made two gentlemen very happy. The first, Gavin, was content with his plan and wished me good luck for the mystery run, saying farewell with a massive grin on his face. The second, Corey, laughed at the prospect of making me suffer. I got tricked and missed my chance to stay in control.

When I had arrived in Australia, I had been warned of the 'tall poppy syndrome': stick out your neck too high, and you will be chopped back to size. My brain was already racing, and I tried to figure out how I could survive those sessions.

While I might have been better at marathons, Corey had a middle-distance running background and was much faster than me. Both of us knew that he could 'break' me whenever he chose to do so. At no point during the mystery run would I know for how much longer I had to hang in to find relief. Naturally, my key concern was when it would be fair to give up. Asking Gavin for help was clearly a mistake. Relying on Corey was another mistake; he just wanted to see me suffer. I was on a path to disaster. Mystery runs sounded like hell and, in the end, I was probably wasting precious time to train for a faster marathon. I had just lost ownership over my training and potentially even the prospect of a successful race altogether. Calling off the mystery run would be for the best.

Pure pride probably prevented me from chickening out; I'd have to admit to Corey that I was terrified. Maybe, deep down, I was curious to see what Gavin had in mind. In the few days leading into

the first mystery run, I tried to get ready as best as I could. I read Gavin's book for a third time and found it made absolutely no reference to mystery runs. He apparently let Olympians off the hook way easier than me. Even worse was the fact that he had not given me a single clue how to prepare myself. When Corey picked me up at my house in Albert Park, on the south side of Melbourne, I was tense and nervous. The grin on his face was at least as big as Gavin's when we'd said goodbye after breakfast. These guys were having far too much fun at my expense.

Without doubt, my sole motivation was to avoid failure. My thoughts were spinning around the level of discomfort at which I had the right to give up. I felt like I'd just gotten on a roller-coaster, with the suspense building up as I slowly crept up that first climb. Only this was not going to be any fun. Corey dropped his belongings in my kitchen and led the way out — no more time to say any prayers. The mystery session was on. He opened the front door and then the flyscreen, crossed the little front garden, went through the garden gate and turned right. Corey turned right and so did I.

### **SELF CHECK-IN**

- What brings you joy and revitalises you?
- To what extent do you seek this joy out, or feel you should try to be happy with what you already have?
- What are you dreaming of in your life?
- When did you last challenge yourself way outside of your comfort zone?