

Alex P. Bartholomaus

The Race You're Running

Today, Alex Bartholomaus believes that, if a high level executive in sales or leadership re-thinks their career in terms of what type of distance race they're running, they can take their performance to a new level of success by preparing for it in a new way. "It's about building up your endurance," he says. "One's ability to endure comes from a variety of areas—your awareness of yourself, the help from your support team both at work and outside of work, and the amount of training you put in physically, mentally, emotionally, and professionally. A lot of high-level executives think they're in a sprint, but it's a marathon. Know the race you're running. You may not know where it'll take you in the end, but you'll know how to train for it, and therefore, how to finish it."

Alex is the founder and Managing Partner of People Stretch Solutions, a management consulting firm that focuses on revenue growth, sales development, and leadership teams in the pursuit of excellence. He's keenly aware of the rise and fall of the terrain around high-level executives, the fortitude of their muscles, and the stride that will get them to the finish line. But when the race first started, he couldn't have guessed how long he might be running or what his own unique blend of endurance was made of.

The starting gun came with a diagnosis in 1996. His mother, who had been sick with breast cancer since 1992, was told that the illness had metastasized, and that she didn't have long. Alex had been with the business for two years since graduating from college. His father, a successful entrepreneur, had launched a wine import business called Billington Imports that was doing \$3 million in annual sales at the time. Fatigued from running the business all those years and emotionally drained by his wife's illness, he decided to hand the keys to Alex. "I think he

named me CEO because he wanted to focus on Mom, and because he knew I had a vision for the future of the business," Alex recalls. "He said it was time to pay off my college loans, so if I messed up, just figure out a solution quickly and learn from it. He really let me run with it."

Driven by a relentless pursuit of excellence and the opportunity to make a difference in the wine industry, Alex took off. He made his fair share of mistakes along the way, but he had great mentors in his grandfather, his father, and the many owners and distributors in the industry who had been won over by his father and wanted to see the business succeed. "Some people took me under their wing," he says. "Others were very skeptical of how young I was. But what I lacked in experience, I was determined to make up for in knowledge. By the time I became CEO, I knew more about wine than most professionals in the sales side of the industry."

Alex's mother passed away in 2000, when his daughter was three months old. "When someone close to you dies, a haze sets in," he explains. "But when it lifts, you're left with perspective. I felt that appreciating every moment of life was the only way to respect those who no longer had the opportunity to live it."

Through the early years of running the business and the haze that set in after his mother's passing, Alex was a fair leader, but a hard one. "I guided myself on principles that seemed logical to me," he remembers. "I didn't ask anyone to do anything I wasn't willing to do. I treated others as I wanted to be treated. I expected everyone to shoot for the stars so they'd land on the moon. But not everyone responds well to that no-nonsense approach."

The business did incredibly well with Alex at the helm, escalating from \$3 million to \$15 million in annual revenues within eight years. He



had gotten an idea of the race he wanted to run, setting his sights on building a \$100-million-dollar company. "It was all excellence, drive, growth, and endurance," he recounts. "I really wasn't thinking about what it meant for my family. I wasn't fully cognizant of what it was costing me to invest all that time in my professional life."

Alex's race took an abrupt turn, however, with a second earth-shattering diagnosis at the end of 2002: his son, Jack, was severely delayed in speech and development at age two. He was given the label PDD NOS (pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified). Alex and his wife, Mary, had a suspicion it could be autism, but it was too early to be sure. Committed to doing everything they could to see that Jack received optimal care and support, Alex and Mary read a great deal about developmental psychology and neuroscience. This education ran parallel to the work Alex was doing in the professional realm to educate himself on psychology and behavioral science after witnessing the performances of several solid employees plummet unexpectedly. As the haze of the loss of his mother was dissipated by the need to be present and active for his son, these parallel lines of study began to converge, leading to the groundbreaking realization that success is about investing in people holistically.

"I had always pursued excellence and demanded it from my employees, but I hadn't realized that excellence can only be achieved if you address a person in his or her totality," he explains. "A person's emotional intelligence, self awareness, empathy, and ability to self-regulate remain constant at home and at work, and will create systemic problems that span both spheres. Through this intuitive journey, I came to the understanding that we need to pursue both excellence and a holistic approach to get a deeper understanding of why people struggle and why they're successful."

Alex's rigorous academic pursuit revolutionized his perspective of what it means to be the CEO of a growing business, and in the aftermath of that watershed moment in 2003, he found himself with an immense new toolbox. Able to offer uncommon insight that factored in the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-limiting beliefs, and the challenges of picking up emotional cues, he began treating each of his employees not the way he would want

to be treated, but the way they, as individuals, each wanted to be treated. Over the next five years, revenues escalated to \$37 million annually.

Alex's heightened perceptions of human nature allowed him to pick up on subtle shifts in his home life as well. By August of 2008, he could tell his father wanted to sell the company. And though his wife, Mary, deserved a medal for her patience and perseverance through his long absences from home, he knew his course needed an adjustment to better balance his priorities. "It meant a lot to me to be present in the formative years of my children," he says. Eight months later, the company was sold, with Alex agreeing to stay on an additional year with the acquirer.

Not long after the sale of the company in 2009, Simon Sinek came out with his thought-provoking book, *Start With Why*. It was an introspective period for Alex, and after deeply reflecting on his own values and beliefs, he realized the real reason he gets out of bed each day. "Very simply, I realized I love challenging people to recognize their own bias and limitations, so those roadblocks don't prevent them from getting to the next level of performance," he avows. "I love watching people step up, see things differently, make changes, and make choices. There's always a perceived reason as to why someone can't do something, and I love applying the tools of psychology, behavioral science, neuroscience, and emotional intelligence to surpass those imagined obstacles."

With that, Alex hung the shingle for People Stretch Solutions in 2010 and set to work creating a new ecosystem within his consulting model. With several senior consultants and full-time project managers working with him, the company is now doing almost a million in revenue on an uncommonly lean platform with a high value proposition. Though it focuses on sales and leadership, the team also excels at marketing. The business serves primarily commercial companies that are between \$25 million and \$500 million in size, with the resources to invest in bringing in capable experts to advise them on how to reach their targets faster. "This is not a lifestyle business," he affirms. "The vision is to create another growth company. And with our phenomenal spheres of influence and board of advisors, we're perfectly situated to realize that goal."

Today, to keep perspective and to remind

himself not only of where he's going, but of how far he's come, Alex simply glances down at the watch his wife, Mary, gave him for his 35th birthday. With an understated elegance and uniquely handcrafted movements, the timepiece is a work of art, reminding him of his warm, passionate, aesthetically-minded mother. Understated and classic, it also reminds him of his grandfather, a Chilean farmer who worked till he was 77 and taught Alex good, old-fashioned, salt-of-the-earth values. Unyielding and resilient, it also reminds him of his father, an entrepreneur who cofounded the first wine import company in 1977 before striking out to launch Billington Imports in 1985.

Born in Washington, D.C., Alex and his family lived in Arlington for the first five years of his life and then moved to Annandale, where he savored his public school experience. "After visiting my grandfather in Chile as a child and witnessing extreme poverty and hardship, I was appreciative of everything," he recalls. "I had seen parents literally kill themselves to send their kids to good schools, so I was grateful for the good public schools I had access to here in the U.S. I invested my energy in school and was driven by my competitive nature to be the best."

As a kid, Alex thought he might grow up to work on Wall Street. From the money he scraped together doing odd jobs like shoveling snow or raking leaves, he invested in stocks. "We always had what we needed, but we had to save up for things we wanted," he remembers.

After performing at the highest levels, both academically and athletically, Alex graduated twelfth in his class of 500 and was accepted to the College of William and Mary. His parents agreed to cover tuition and board, but he was responsible for all other expenses—a weight he shouldered with appreciation. The summer after his freshman year, he sold cutlery. "Commission-only work teaches you what sales is really all about," he laughs. "It was a great experience. Then, during my sophomore year, I got a job at a golf course. My father had already given me the best education possible in relationship management, and that work experience truly put those skills to the test." In that capacity, Alex's natural leadership qualities shone through as he pushed his coworkers to hustle and ensured his department ran smoothly. Those leadership skills were honed further while he served as President of his fraternity. "Some of

the learning experiences I went through as an early leader were painful at the time, but they all really helped me to evolve."

Graduating college, Alex was in discussions with different companies, including AOL. But ultimately, the 22-year old thought the gateway into the international spirits industry afforded by the family business was a no-brainer. Working to build business relationships across international borders and with diverse groups of people cultivated in him a love of culture and meeting new people. Then, in 1996, the same year he took over running the company, Alex met Mary through mutual friends. "I'm very lucky to have met someone who is such an incredible teammate," he says today. "Though we're very different, our values are perfectly aligned. Cheryl Sandburg's book *Lean In* explains how a woman being successful as an executive climbing the ladder needs a spouse to support them, and I have been lucky to have a very supportive one."

When his mother passed, Alex and his brother, Erik, decided to launch a project through Billington Imports called 2 Brothers Big Tattoo Red, where fifty cents from each bottle sold was donated to cancer or hospice. In seven years, they raised a million dollars for charity. Since then, Alex has worked to better the community through 5k charity runs, pro bono work, and other avenues.

Now, as managing partner at People Stretch Solutions, Alex sees his work as a consultant as a form of alchemy, transforming people's performances into gold, unlocking the perspective and insight that launches paradigm shifts within corporate cultures. "We tend to work with CEOs who are very ambitious and dissatisfied with the status quo, always looking for the road to that next plateau or number," he explains. "Does the problem lie with the team? The CEO? The process? The culture? Oftentimes, the answer is all of the above. That's why a holistic approach is crucial to achieving top performance. Seeds of undoing can be hidden behind a veneer of success. We think people fail because they don't go deep enough to find those seeds. People will avoid the world of psychology because it's very murky and emotionally risky. It's not easy work, but it's incredibly important, and that's a level where we operate very comfortably."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Alex stresses the importance of curiosity and exploration. "People are often

curious, but they don't know where to go, so they remain inactive," he explains. "But it's important to explore—both the world around you, and your own personality. Exploring is building endurance. What race do you want to be in? There's only one way to find out—start running."

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President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

