

WHY MUD IS A GREAT MOTIVATOR

Former counter-terrorism officer Will Dean founded the Tough Mudder obstacle course to challenge people's fitness and improve their self-esteem.



Rachel Botsman is a global authority on the power of collaboration and trust.

During his MBA course at Harvard Business School, 35-year-old Will Dean recognised a huge opportunity to start a business that would test people's fitness but in a quirky and challenging environment. He had a hunch that people were getting bored with mass-participation sports such as marathons, and they were after something that would test endurance and create a meaningful sense of team connection.

A former British counter-terrorism officer, Will had experienced the power of military-style obstacle courses to get people out of their comfort zones. In 2009, he co-founded Tough Mudder with his high school friend Guy Livingstone. The event is an 18-kilometre course in which participants pay \$100 to \$270 to crawl through narrow tunnels, under barbed wire, face the "Arctic enema" (a dumpster filled with ice) and dash through "electroshock therapy" – live wires zapping participants with up to 10,000 volts. I know it sounds crazy that people would pay for this kind of pain, but I have completed a course and, despite being bruised and battered, I was hooked. Since it launched, Tough Mudder has held 250 events attracting more than 2.5 million participants across eight countries including the US, UK, Australia and Germany.

For many participants, it's not about a one-off challenge. This year, 42 per cent of participants have completed a Tough Mudder before. So how did a former counter-terrorism officer build a business with \$US5 million (\$6.7 million) profit in 2015 and a global brand with a loyal, tribal following?

Why do you describe Tough Mudder as a self-esteem business not a fitness business?

Fifteen years ago, if you were at a bookstore perusing the self-help section with titles such as *In Search of Hope*, there'd be a perception that your life wasn't on track. Now, as a society we are better at embracing the idea of self-improvement; we challenge ourselves so we're constantly learning and seeking out new experiences.

Undoubtedly, you need to be in shape to do Tough Mudder, but that's half of it. We have obstacles that are not just physically challenging, they're mentally challenging too. It doesn't matter how fit you are when you get shocked by electricity. You may gain confidence when you can do more pull-ups than someone else, but facing things that scare you, there's something powerful in that. When you complete a Tough Mudder you can say, "Now I did that. I did a good job. I became something."

What was the gap you were trying to fill in people's lives when you started Tough Mudder?

Our lives are full of loose connections and superficial similarities. The moments when people have a deep sense of being part of a team is something relatively rare but is what we all crave.

Most of our lives are spent in environments where we compare ourselves to others. From academic institutions to workplaces, we get put on success bell curves. That is why we don't do race times and rank participants; it's the antithesis of what we do. We're not the only muddy obstacle course out there, but I think the reason why we have been the most successful is because we create a genuine sense that you're in it together.

What are the most useful lessons you took from your experience as a counter-terrorism officer?

I had been exposed to pretty brutal leadership lessons in that kind of environment. You have to work with people that are very different from you and who are often based thousands of miles away. You have to be able to deal with adversity, where conventional solutions or ways of working aren't appropriate. And you have to be able to drive towards a difficult conclusion. These lessons became quite transferable in terms of setting a broad idea and goal, and then building a team and consensus to go after the goal.

It surprises me how frequently people tend to come up with business objectives without really ever being able to connect them with a much bigger purpose. Having a well-defined mission and the sense of unity around what you are trying to achieve is incredibly empowering and motivating.

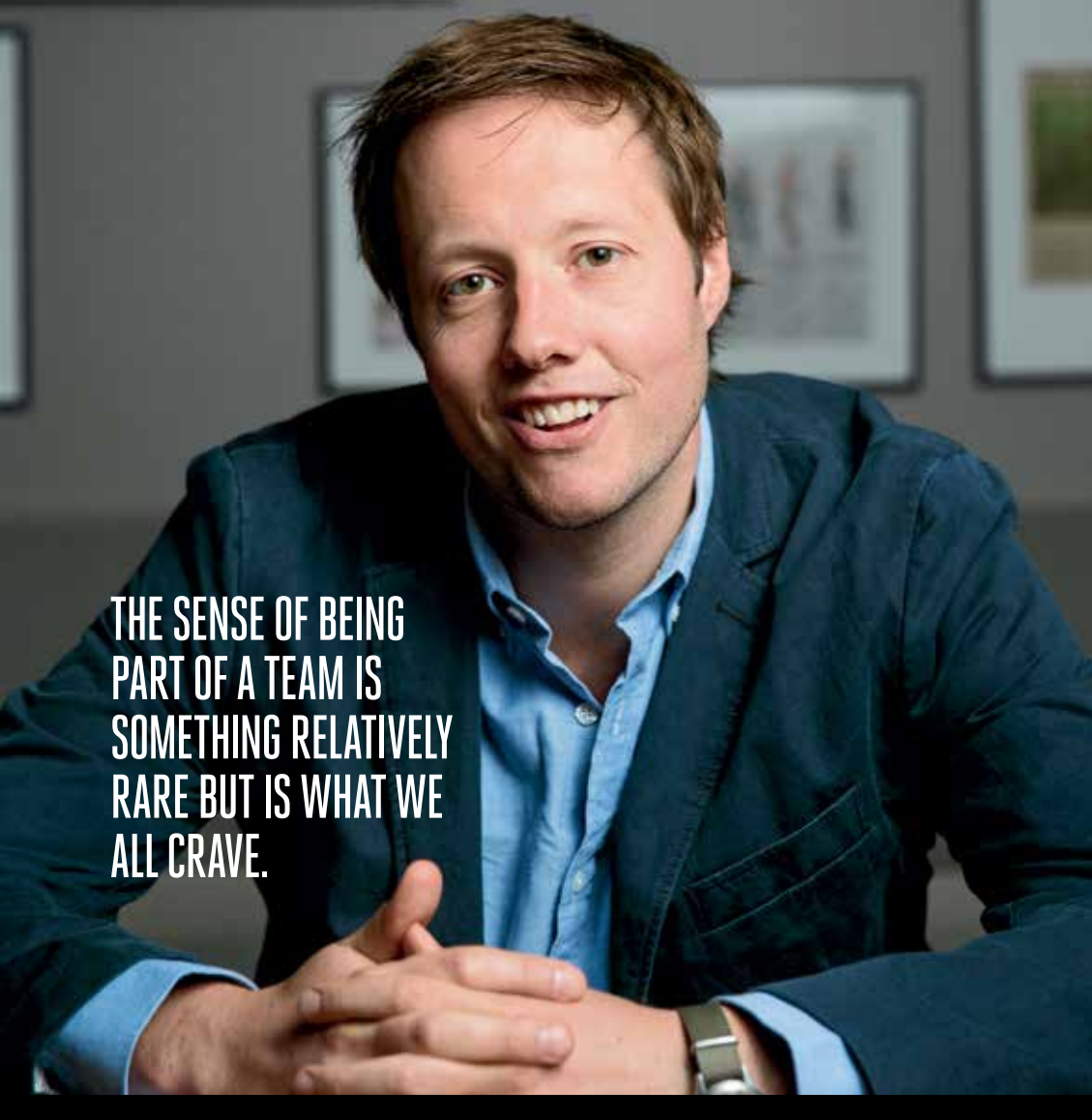
You are openly obsessed with company culture.

What makes the Tough Mudder culture stick?

Culture often gets distilled down to talking about free beer in the fridge and foosball tables and that kind of cool stuff. But culture is how people behave when you're not looking. At Tough Mudder we have four clear values that help guide people with their behaviour: teamwork, fun, courage and accomplishment which, given what we do, is relatively self-explanatory.

How do people come together as a community in Tough Mudder?

I think of team and community as different things. People know everyone on the team and they are relatively small units with established ways



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of working. When I think of community, there's something that is shared at the collective level. You can come to a Tough Mudder with your six friends and form a team. You may experience camaraderie out there on the course that goes above and beyond just your team.

In life, we look for things that we have in common with people. I can go for a run in the park in Berlin with my Tough Mudder shirt on and see another Tough Mudder there and we're probably going to high five because we have a connection. You are part of the community because you've done the Tough Mudder.

I've read that you teach your employees Harvard Business School case studies. What do you want your employees to achieve?

Once a quarter, we hold a 90-minute discussion of a Harvard Business School case study, based on a theme somewhat analogous to our own. For example, the last one was about Porsche's launch of the Cayenne, an SUV. Prior to that Porsche only made sports cars, not cars for soccer mums. It's pertinent to Tough Mudder because we are now launching Tough Mudder Half and some of the team view it as "selling out".

The case method is a great way to give the team another perspective on management and challenges. When they listen to other people's opinions and defend their own, the process will be quite scary but hopefully it will build confidence. **You've said trust within a team is fundamental.**

How do you get your team to trust you?

By exhibiting integrity and consistency in terms of how I make decisions, how I behave, and what examples I set. Sincerity and purpose is also critical. It's hard for people to trust your competence and ethics when they don't know what to expect from you. I spend a lot of time telling people up front what are my strengths, what are my weaknesses and what are my true points. I'm very open about that.

How do you know if you're innovating fast enough as a start-up, and if you're going too fast?

It's a tough one. I think the most important metric is how many failures you are racking up. I've seen the pendulum swing too far in both directions in the past. When you make a mistake, it's very tempting to say, "How can I make sure that human beings who are fundamentally fallible don't make mistakes any more?" Well, I can build systems that disempower them. That's how big bureaucracies are built. But

HACK THE MINDSET: WILL'S RULES

1

Do something every day that scares you: it's quite easy to click into neutral if you don't set challenges for yourself.

2

Only work with people you'd have dinner with: if you work with people you like, trust and respect, no matter how bad things are, most things can be managed.

3

Be as serious as the occasion requires, but no more: It's OK to be an intense person when needed but it doesn't mean you always have to be serious.

you don't want that, you want people to continually try new things, and at times they will fail.

That said, there is a lot written in Silicon Valley these days about the importance of failure. People talk about these things that clearly weren't fun to live through like it's some sort of great badge of honour. Of course, you have to learn things from your failings, but it's still better to succeed. You have to strike that balance because you have to extrapolate the costs of failure while not making it a virtue.

What do you worry about as the company grows?

As we go beyond 150 employees and get into new markets, it scares me that my ability to articulate my vision, priorities and values will be hugely diminished. We've just launched in China, for example, and I don't speak Chinese. It's one thing to go to Germany, and although my German is pretty crappy, I can be on the starting line of a Tough Mudder and can say, "Well, the vibe seems right here". I won't be able to do that in China. It's almost impossible for me to control. For instance, if I put the word from our Chinese website into Google Translate it translates it as "strong as mud person". At least, that's what I was told.

I have to accept that as the company grows, it requires me to let other people make decisions. There's that degree of letting go, in order for the company's mission to go to the next level, that's quite scary.

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