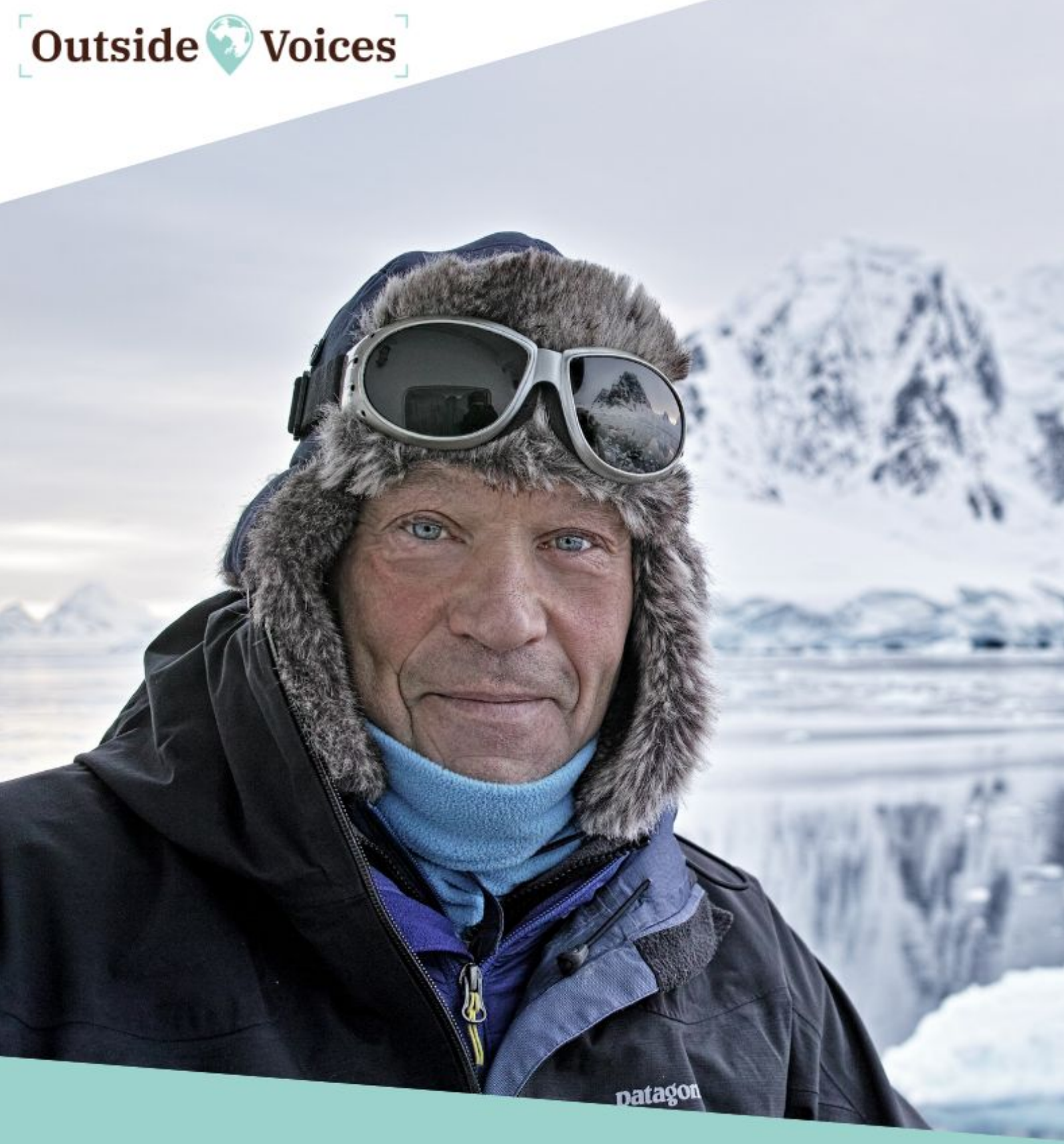
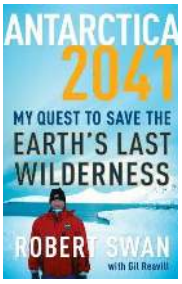
Outside Voices



Leadership Lessons From 40 Years of Polar Exploration with Robert Swan

By Mark Bidwell

Robert Swan is a polar explorer, environmentalist and the first man ever to walk unsupported to both the North and South Poles. He is currently an advocate for the protection of Antarctica and renewable energy. Robert is also the founder of 2041, a company which is dedicated to the preservation of the Antarctic and the author with Gil Reavill of *Antarctica 2041: My Quest to Save the Earth's Last Wilderness*.



"That whole idea of a leader being more of a servant leader when it's the right time, is absolutely key."

So Rob, it's great to have you on the show. How did you become an explorer?

Well, it began for me really watching a film. I think films are very powerful, art is a very powerful form to change people. And that film star John Mills is Captain Scott, and I was eleven and I watched that film on Christmas Day. That film sucked me in for lots of different reasons - the courage and bravery of Captain Scott and the fact that he'd been beaten to The South Pole by the brilliant Amundsen, and that was such a tragic story. But also the place itself, Antarctica, fascinated me as a kid. Maybe I'm just lazy, Mark, but that dream never went away and it's still with me now 50 years later.

Lots of us had dreams at the age of eleven or twelve, but very few of us actually did something with them, particularly with dreams of this nature. It was a really ambitious and bold dream that you had. You went to Durham University, you drove a taxi for many years to fund the first trip. During that period, how did you sustain yourself? How did you maintain motivation as you were driving a cab around London, trying to build up the reserves for this first expedition?

I think that I learned two things to keep going. One was that I was telling people I was going to do something. Being rather a traditional sort of person, I felt that if I was talking it up, talking big that I was going to walk to the South Pole one day, and people were interested enough to listen, they might not be of interested party to actually sponsor us at the beginning, everybody said no, probably quite rightly until I got more organized, but I was talking it up, and I felt somehow that I had to keep going. I often say to younger people one way of making sure that you complete a mission is to tell everybody you're going to do it, then you're kind of stuck with it. And the other thing was that I was learning and I was very curious as to why people were endlessly saying no to me. And they were saying no, we can't do it, we haven't got the budget. But bottom line was they were saying "Rob, we don't want to support you because we don't want you to go and die." So I was listening really carefully, and gradually by listening to people saying no, eventually I got a yes. Once I got one yes, I built that to two yeses and it went on and on. But really, I would imagine the thing was just being rather bloody minded and hanging on to the dream, but overall, which I think is so important in life, is that I was lucky enough to be number seven in my family. I saw with my brothers and sisters, who obviously are all older than me because I'm the youngest, I saw how quick life was. And they advised me, as my brothers and sisters, and my parents did too to say "Rob, if you have this dream, do it now. Because if you don't, you'll never do it, you'll get wrapped up in everything else to do with life, and it'll just be word. So do it now." So it was even at the beginning a bit of a team effort, maybe a family team effort.

Yeah, but they were sending you, as you say, into a very hostile environment where you might die. I'm curious, how did you prepare psychologically for the reality of living in very close quarters with others in this very hostile environment for so long? And what would you do differently today, when you go back?

“I would say to any leader that listening is one thing, but not bringing what was into now and saying that the future of the company, the business, the family, which is the younger people, that they have good ideas.”

Again, it goes back to family. I realized pretty early on in life that one of the reasons that people upset me was because they were right. As a kid, people really upset me because they would be saying something I didn't like, but I realized it upset me because they were right. They were pressing buttons in me I didn't like, and I think I learned very early on about hostile environments, about leadership, that you have to choose really strong, different people. I studied quite seriously the stories of Scott, Shackleton, all those real explorers, because I'm not an explorer, I'm just merely a traveler. I looked at the makeup of the teams that they had, and there were a lot of different characters. So I thought I've got to have strong people, because this is too serious to have people saying to me "yes, let's just do this, Rob." I needed a team of people that were surrounding all of us who I could trust, and that they would, I hope, trust me, and divided the responsibilities of the expedition very early on between different people. I chose the people so each person would have responsibility. I was in charge of raising the money, that's all I did. Roger Mear would be in charge of the polar journey to the South Pole, Gareth Wood would be in charge of our base camp, Peter Malcolm would be in charge of our ship. Very divided responsibilities, which were truly handed over to each person, without any of the rest of us overlooking their shoulders. In a modern day word, it would be empowerment, we truly empowered each other. To be really frank with you, and I thought about it a lot, because it's a long time ago, I wouldn't do anything differently with how I prepared for Antarctica. We of course had to go and suffer cold weather. But what was really good about our expedition, because it was so old fashioned, and we couldn't just fly into Antarctica, we knew we'd have one year in Antarctica before we actually started walking. So there was no need for us to go off and freeze ourselves in Greenland or something before we went. Once in Antarctica, we could test everything out thoroughly. I would not change anything, and I certainly, although we didn't get on, I would not change the makeup of my team in any way at all. Because we got there, we did it. We achieved a small piece of pointless history.

Were there any specific life or death decisions that you were faced with, and how did you as a group make those decisions? I presume that you outlined roles and responsibilities for things that could be planned, like base camp, the journey, but stuff that showed up, given the hostility of the environment, were there any big life and death decisions that you had to wrangle as a group and how did that work?

Well, the whole thing was complete life and death. We had no radio communications, we had no fancy GPS to tell us where we were as we were going to the South Pole, one building in an area twice the size of Australia, we had to navigate using the Sun, a sextant and a watch. And if we failed and didn't get our calculations right, we'd miss the South Pole and die. We had no backup, nothing. So we were making the longest unassisted march with no radio, nothing ever made anywhere on Earth in history. We had to make some really tough decisions as a team before we went, because on a journey it's no time to be talking about it, you have to agree on the hard things before you go. I am not a particularly disciplined person, Mark. My two companions, Roger and Gareth are professional mountaineers, so they are incredible people, totally and utterly disciplined. We had to agree on simple things like, as we went to the South Pole, if we run out of food, we'd die in five days so we had to protect our resources. That required having a rule “no miles south, no food consumed.” That's very easy to say, sitting on a podcast with you, but it's a bit more tricky at -40 when you're in a tent and you're really hungry. So we made decisions to say “if that happens, this is the decision that we made, do we all agree on it?" We made decisions during the crevasse period of the expedition, we had to cross over 5000 of these crevasses, who would actually be in charge, who would call the shots. And that would be Roger, he would choose the route in the most difficult places and we would follow unconditionally and without debate during that session. What happened if somebody became injured and could no longer walk up until about 400 miles out of the 900? Well, we would turn our sledges around and we would attempt to pull that person back to our base camp. If that injury took place after 400 miles, that person would be left to die if they could no longer walk, there was no way out. We had no communications, there was no one there. That was a decision we took. The only decision we didn't make, interestingly enough, we just didn't have it in us to make it, was whether you would leave that person with food or not. Because actually they were dead, but would you just say "sorry, mate, here's your breakfast, we're out of here," or would you leave them food just in case somebody might see them, which would never happen? And that was a decision we never managed to make. A lot of the hard decisions were made around a table, looking into each other's eyes, and those decisions were made before we left and we would stick to them. Because when you're tired, you want to die anyhow, it's not a time to have a debate inside a tent. Decisions made: deliver on it.

“In the business sense, things are changing so fast, and if you do what you've always done, one day you might find yourself on one side of the deal and out of a job, or out of the game because you weren't checking that you were being relevant.”

There are obviously multiple potential outcomes, it was a very ambiguous environment, stuff happened that you can't have thought about in advance. I'm wondering how did you make decisions on the fly? Are you saying that you had a set of rules that you would apply, irrespective of the context?

No, I think that on the actual journey, it's a system and you stick to it. But obviously there might be certain things that could happen, and then of course, as a decision, you'd make it as a team. I'm always very honest in saying that my job is the expedition founder, I'm not the expedition leader, but the person that got us all there was me. And I chose the right people in Roger and Gareth and the rest of our team. But my job was over on day one, except for getting to the South Pole. So Roger and Gareth, who are "climb the north face of The Eiger in winter before breakfast" type of people, probably couldn't raise 10 euros. But on the day we started for the South Pole, it was their moment. I think that whole idea of a leader being more of a servant leader when it's the right time, is absolutely key. And that I believe was one of the reasons we succeeded, is I shut up and followed their instruction through to the South geographic pole. My job was to pull my sledge and support Roger and Garrett, who would make the majority of the decisions, in fact all of the decisions really, as we went to the Pole. That was their moment. But the biggest moment obviously was when we arrived to the South Pole, after speaking to no one for a year. And we heard that our ship, Southern Quest who'd come back to Antarctica to collect us, have been crushed by pack ice and sank. And that was then back on me, interestingly enough. Roger and Gareth got us to the pole, suddenly, I was back in my territory, which wasn't the easiest place to be, and then I had to make the decision that we've made promises to Sir Ernest Shackleton's son, Lord Shackleton, Sir Peter Scott, Captain Scott's son, very eminent people, Jacques Cousteau, all our patrons, that we would leave Antarctica just with our footsteps in, no ship, 3000 miles home. And I'm bankrupt, because you can't insure a ship that far south on Earth, I promised my bank manager that I would sell the ship to pay off my debts. So I've got nothing, except I'm standing at the South Pole, and suddenly the mantle of leadership is back on my shoulders. Great! But we came through that and made the decision that leadership is, in my humble opinion, not that complicated, that you should think carefully before you make any commitment as a leader, and once you make a commitment you should deliver on it. So it was an enormous battle, cost me debts of 10 years, but we managed, by the team spending another year in Antarctica, including Gareth who just walked to the Pole, he'll be there two years of his life, with the help from the US Navy and no one ever knew they had helped us, we managed to get back to New Zealand. Then a year later I took another ship, pulled out the team, left Antarctica with just our footsteps in it. That was the moment where the leadership mantle was back on my shoulders, and that was really very much on the fly. But what was the basis of that? The basis of that is that we'd made a promise. And I think that in a world where promises are becoming far less valuable to people, and people say things and they don't really mean them, I think a very valuable moment for me was to say "damn it, we're going to do this, and we're going to finish the job.” Why, not just to do it, but also, really importantly, we were starting as a small team to build some track record, if you do what you say you're going to do, even in the most hostile circumstances on the planet, people will actually begin to listen to what you're saying and possibly even help you do another mission, do whatever you're doing.

And then, fast forward to most recently, you went back into this environment and you took your son Barney, and I'm really curious about how you, and I'm making assumptions here, how did you hide the fears and the doubts that obviously I would imagine came with operating in this environment? You are a lot older, there were two of you, you are operating purely by biofuels, renewable energy, so there were all sorts of things that could have gone wrong, and that was very different. How did you hide from him the inevitable fears and doubts that would play out in this kind of environment?

Well, let's just say that once reaching the North Pole 30 years ago, I was never going to walk anywhere ever again, definite. So this was actually Barney's idea. He wanted, as my son, to have his own story, not just have his father's story quite rightly. And he suggested this journey of 600 miles from the edge of Antarctica to the South Pole, only surviving for the first time on renewable energy, which had never been done. And I looked at it with not a lot of enthusiasm until I began to remember something, that as a kid, eleven years old, I've read the story of Shackleton, and Shackleton had attempted to cross the whole of Antarctica, but sadly, he never got his foot on the shore of Antarctica because his ship was crushed and sank. His story was a fantastic story of leadership and survival after that, but I suddenly looked at the map and I

thought if I can make that 600 miles, I will have crossed the Antarctic continent, and that's not a bad thing to have done. So I got really enthusiastic about doing it. Now, if you're dealing with a 23 year old, who is, I might say, a damn sight tougher than I am but had not been to that edge before, I think that what we did was to talk it through again. We're both very different characters, but I tried to talk it through with him so he understood that even though now, 30 years later, we've got satellite phones and all this communication, and an airplane could come and pull us out if there was a problem, but still I made it clear to him that you couldn't rely on that, you could still get injured, you could still fall down a crevasse. But by talking it through, going through the history books talking about what we'd done 30 years before, I managed to get him in a good frame of mind to respect where we're going. Because with all the input that we have now, of films and the internet and all these things, it's often a mistake to think just because we've seen it on millions of films, and these people being on YouTube from the South Pole, that it's actually less dangerous than it was 30 years ago. It's still as dangerous. So we came through a really good time as father and son, and very different characters as I say, because we had to put the expedition together to raise the money, we had to get the equipment all sorted. So it was three years together getting this to happen, from the age of 20 until he was 23. And he made the journey with me and two other companions, Carl and Martin. We set off together, but the story of what happened next was a whole new chapter in my life, which I'd not expected.

And I think you mentioned you were faced with the prospect of total failure as a result of what happened, right?

Mark, as you know, I failed in just about almost everything in life, except I've never failed as a polar traveler, although I'm not very good at it. If I said we were going to get to the Pole, North or South, I made sure that we got there, or we made sure that we got there. So I never failed in that department. About a month before we left, I started to get a little bit of an uneasy feeling in my left hip. It was too late to do much about it, except have a couple of injections and hope for the best, and rather arrogantly, and I have to say this, that I thought because walked both poles, I can hack this one through.

At the ripe old age of what, Rob?

Sixty one.

So you're not a spring chicken.

When you smashed yourself around like I have, this was a big deal with or without a bad hip. So 300 miles into the journey, in the silence of Antarctica, I could hear my hip grinding as I walked, and at night I could not sleep. For a long time I was fighting really hard to keep up the average for the team, but I was falling behind. It was just the most appalling time of my life, because my body could no longer match my mind, it couldn't. After 300 miles, I had to come to the choice of saying Barney must go on with Carl and Martin and I've got to cut out, I've got to get out of here, I'm going to slow them down. And that for me was just the most appalling time, not only as a sense of failure to the expedition, but also as a sense of failure to my son at 23, and he was about to go into the worst part of the journey up to 10,000 feet, the temperature would fall to minus 40. But I came out, Barney carries on with the team.

Can I pause you? Any parent listening must have been thinking "is he going to need me in the future and I'm not going to be there?" That must be a very difficult thing to deal with emotionally.

Absolutely appalling, because this is my patch, this is what I'm supposed to be all about. And then it gets worse, because we've got satellite phones, and Barney has a problem with one of his boots, and he gets frostbite on his feet and his toes went completely numb. And like in the old days, one wouldn't have known about this, but there he is, bless his heart, on the phone saying "you know, Dad, I can't feel my feet, and it's day two, and I cannot be on my toes, and one's gone black." And what the hell does a parent think? Forget about being a polar traveler. You think he can't fall to bits, this can't happen. But Barney turned around and said to me "Look Dad, I've got to make this journey. It's happening. You're my father, your blood runs in me and tough, I'm going to hack this out, and I'm going to make it to the Pole." And that was a moment of huge pride for me, he basically told me to eff off really and just let him get on with it. But at the same time it was a huge time of fear and worry. But the temperature went up, Barney's feet semi

recovered, and he made it to the Pole. What was great about it is that, had some PR guru said to us what should be the outcome of this journey, it's exactly what happened. The old warrior goes back, falls to bits, handsome future person, Barney, makes it to the South Pole, it's his story, and not under my shadow, got nothing to do with me, his own success. I think that what we learned as father and son, very different people, is that in order to really make it work between father and son, or mother and daughter, or father and daughter, whatever it is, people have to listen. And we don't really listen, especially people like me who think they know they've got it right, and possibly do have it right, but you can't just project what you think is right onto your children. You must listen and not listen and think "okay, I'm listening, but I know exactly what I'm going to say, and I'll just listen because it looks good." You've actually got to really open your ears, and understand that your son or daughter has every damn right to be listened to, and it goes the other way. But a lot of young people will listen to Dad or Mum and think "God, not again, this is some five hour lecture, some big speech coming up again." The younger person should listen, really listen, and try and take it on board that no one's actually right, but maybe in the middle there's some joining. And having patience with each other, and I think Barney showed much more patience with me, then I showed with him. That in a way is a leadership skill, and especially under very difficult circumstances. If you don't listen, you don't know what other people are thinking.

You're reading my mind. A lot of our listeners are corporate execs, and they might be operating in a very harsh commercial environment, in brutal terrain with lots very aggressive new entrants, maybe a poor economic climate, maybe they don't feel they've got the right resources, but obviously not a matter of personal life and death, but perhaps a matter of life and death for their enterprise or their product or their organization. And of course, many of these leaders are perhaps more of our generation, and the bulk or at least a significant portion of the organization is now millennial so there's a generational gap. You touched on listening as a core leadership skill, and not just appearing to listen, but actually deeply listening and it being a two-way process. What other skills can the listener to this podcast take away from your experience, having operated in harsh environments for almost 40 years?

Yeah, I think it's a very simple thing, and leaders can fall into the same trap I fell in, which is, I was the first person ever in history to walk to the South Pole, 900 miles, and 700 miles to the flipping North Pole. So really, I should know what the hell I'm doing. And I have a hell of a lot of experience under my belt to do those things. However, I made the mistake of taking what I did all those years ago, and thinking I could superimpose it on today. And that's wrong. I was arrogant. I did listen a bit, but I thought I used to do it that way, it's going to work again. No, because circumstance changes, attitudes change, equipment changes. I am in preparation now for my last big expedition to the South Pole at the end of this year, and believe you me, I am going through things 10 times more strictly than I did when I went to the Pole with my son Barney, because I tried to project the past onto now. I would say to any leader that listening is one thing, but not bringing what was into now and trying to say that the future of the company, the business, the family, which is the younger people, that they have good ideas. And don't just say because it worked that way, maybe it could work in a different way. And also I think allowing the younger people, the millennials, whoever these people are, to make mistakes. And maybe allow them to push it forward a bit and realize "wow, okay, I've learned that one," rather than telling people, obviously not at risk to the business or whatever it is, but allowing people to go down a way that you think is definitely going to make a mistake, and you'd be surprised how often they don't make a mistake, that actually they've made it work, and you thought it wouldn't work that way. So I think those two things I've learned recently - listening better, especially to younger people, and also not projecting the past onto now because things change.

Yeah, the past doesn't equal the future, and the world is becoming more and more ambiguous and complex. What got you to where you are today, won't necessarily help you go forward.

I think also the word that sums that up is "relevant." And I think it's terribly important that all of us actually stand back and just check that we're still being relevant as a leader. Because it's very easy to think that you're being relevant while everything around you is changing. That could include your family, the people you love, the people who love you. Especially in the business sense, things are changing so fast, and if you do what you've always done, and not have a check that you as a leader are still being relevant, one day you might find yourself on one side of the

deal and out of a job, or out of the game because you weren't checking that you were being relevant. I think that's a very important thing.

Got it. So Rob, what's next for you? When we met in London a couple of years ago you had a bike with you. I think there is a trans-American cycle ride planned for later this year, is that correct?

Probably that's going to be delayed because there's some unfinished business, Mark, and you'll laugh knowing me well, I had that dream as a kid to cross the Antarctic continent on foot. That dream lay dormant, but when Barney came up with his plan of going to the Pole I thought wow, this suits the story, because if I make it to the Pole with Barney, I will have crossed the Antarctic continents on foot, which doesn't matter to anybody else except me, I might say, and fell short by 300 nautical miles with a completely destroyed hip. But I now have a new hip. At the end of this year 2019, I'm going back to the exact spot measured by GPS now, where I left Barney, and I will complete those last 300 nautical miles to the South Pole on foot, and complete a dream that's taken 35 years to put into place, it will have taken nearly 55 years from when I thought about it to actually doing it, but that dream has been in the making for 35 years. I'm quite nervous, I wonder how the new hip is going to stand up, but everything's looking good. I think that in the whole picture, people often say to me "well, Rob, what the hell, you walked to both poles, why do you have to go back and do this again?" Well it's quite simple: one is because I said that I was going to do it, and I think you should do what you say you're going to do. But the other thing is that, as you get older, if you're still in the ring, and I'm still very much in the ring, Mark, I'm not going to look at a map of Antarctica, which in my life I had to look at every day, I'm not going to look at a map of Antarctica when I'm eighty and see a gap of 300 damn miles, which is possible for me to complete now. So I'm going to do it while I've still got the chance. And we're doing a lot of stuff in the United States, it's a very important country, to inspire people as an election is coming up in a couple of years, we can't just ignore all the people who voted in the present commander in chief, or we might end up with somebody worse. So there's a lot of action on, but what's fantastic, and I would like to end with this, that to see my son having reached the South Pole, and now he's launched his own campaign, which is called Climate Force, which is all about inspiring young people to take on some responsibility with action, not awareness. His quote is "the time for the inconvenient truth about the environment and climate change is over, it's time for the convenient solution." So he's doing some great stuff, and what's fantastic is that it means I can actually start to step back and he can start to fire into gear, which makes me very proud, but also being quite lazy, I'm quite enjoying starting to stand back a bit.

Lovely. We'll follow that very closely, and looking forward to seeing you again in person. So Rob, I sent you some questions in advance. The first one is, what have you changed your mind about recently?

I've changed my mind that myself as a human being, which is quite a powerful mind, I've got to actually take into consideration that I'm in my early 60s now, and what my mind says cannot always be managed or matched by my body, and that I need to actually make even more efforts to look after that body and make sure it can perform. I've kind of taken it for granted most of my life.

Excellent, thank you. Second question, where do you go to get fresh perspectives as you address your major challenges?

I live in the Sierra Mountains in California, and one of the reasons I live here is for training to get ready for my last big expedition to the Pole. When I cycle high up to 10,000 feet, there's no one on the roads round here, it's cyclist heaven. I'm cycling out there, and there's a fantastic beauty of the wonderful forest, but you just see these huge scars of forest fires that have raged in California. So the fresh perspectives are, we have a beautiful world, but we really are in danger of of messing it all up. It's just there, right in front of me on my bike, the beauty on one side of the road and on the other side just devastation from a fire that possibly shouldn't have been there. But our weather's changing, the climate is changing. I enjoy those moments for the good and the bad.

I personally find that you can get really interesting insights by sitting on the back of a bike and just engaging and exploring new parts of the world. It's a very fruitful environment for me to reflect on things, and come up with different ways of looking at the world.

Exactly, and what you see is, if it's a stark reality how it is in the Sierras after last year's fires, it kind of inspires you but also makes you think.

Yep. And finally, what's been your most significant failure, what have you learned from it, and how have you applied that learning?

Failure, it sounds very trite to say it, but failure is in yourself and how you view it. I remember fully leaving Barney at 300 nautical miles from the Pole, and I've never felt a bigger failure in my life on that day. It took a long time for me to stand back and say no, and this was big Mark, this was a massive attack in my soul, in my pride, everything was smashed. And I came back from that to say I can't live with this. So therefore, I've got to turn this around by some hard work, and thinking and support from my son, my family, friends and the team, that basically it turned around to be actually an enormous success, that gave Barney the moment to get out of his father's shadow, and be himself and have his own story, his own success, which had nothing whatsoever to do with me. I turned that, it sounds easy to turn it, but I think getting out of failure cannot be a complex maneuver. Failure comes very quickly to people's minds. Damn it, I've failed, it's quick. To get out of it, it must be equally as quick, you can't take forever work it all out to get out of it. You go in fast, you got to come out fast and not live in failure. And I learned that it doesn't matter how bad things get, you can turn it. You can turn it around if you think, and I've got the support to make that happen.

Yeah, yeah. Lovely stuff. Rob, as always, I'm hugely, I'll say it publicly, I'm enormously inspired by your work, and I've learned a lot more about you from this conversation which is touching on a number of levels. I wish you all the luck in the next stages, can't wait to meet up with you again in person, and thank you very much for your time. Before we go, where can people get in touch with you?

Our website is www.2041.com, and my email is robert@robertswan.com.

We'll put all this in the show notes. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your honesty and your time. I know you got a lot on your plate, I know you're not 100%, you're nursing a cold from your last trip. It's wonderful to reconnect and I'm really looking forward to hearing what our listeners say about this remarkable conversation we've had. Thank you so much.

Well, go for it Mark. Good luck, mate, and well done with what you're doing, I'm proud of how you've pioneered this and I know that it's a success, and well done to you.

Great, thanks, Rob. Cheerio!

Bye!