

May 2017:

As part of the *Café Insights* series of interviews with inspiring speakers, The Insight Bureau recently caught up with Rob Lilwall, a former geography teacher turned adventurer, whose remarkable story is told in two books and has been serialized by National Geographic magazine.



- AV:** Hello and welcome to another in the series of Café Insights. I'm Andrew Vine, CEO of The Insight Bureau here in Singapore, and today I'm in conversation with Rob Lilwall. How are you?
- RL:** Good, thanks.
- AV:** Well, nice to see you again. This isn't the first time we've done an interview like this. We did one in Singapore a couple of years ago.
- RL:** Yeah. I think me and my wife had just ridden a tandem across America.
- AV:** Right. Okay. Rob's got one of the most glorious titles that you could put on a name card: "Adventurer", which is fantastic. Your claim to fame, of course, is that you've done a number of major adventures around the world: cycled back from Siberia, you've walked back from Mongolia, and you've pulled a sled across the Chinese Taklamakan Desert, just recently. So you are, therefore, slightly crazy [*laughter*].
- RL:** Yeah, part time! I'm a part time crazy person. It tends to be about every two years I get a crazy idea in my head to do an expedition and then, to my surprise, I suddenly find myself actually doing it. And most recently was probably a shorter expedition, but one of the scariest ones I've done, was a walk across the Taklamakan, which is this huge desert, about the size of several countries in western China and it's all made of sand. Most people have tried to cross it with camels, but I tried to cross it pulling, basically, a beach cart with a sled strapped on top of it. So it really tested me to my limits, but it ended up being a very satisfying trip.
- AV:** Wow. I think this begs the question ... and we've just been here in Singapore at an event this morning where the first question that was asked was: "Why?"
- RL:** Yeah. It's a brilliant question. I think there are various reasons I kind of use to answer it, which are all true, but maybe they're going gradually deeper in terms of level. So I think one answer is just, I enjoy adventures. And I'm sure a lot of people enjoy just the feeling of going out and doing something in nature that fun. I love learning, so I love learning about the places I go and the people I meet. But I think a deeper reason, which I only really realized relatively recently, after I'd done a lot of adventures, is I'm very passionate about personal development. I love testing myself and growing. I'm always really wanting to develop as a person, and I've found adventures are a brilliant medium for that, because it tests you intellectually, physically, in terms of your character, your courage, everything. So when you come out the other side of an adventure, you've always changed, hopefully in a good way.

- AV:** And what I didn't say was that you used to be a very ordinary kind of guy in terms of a geography teacher. And, for those who are listening - because we don't have video it's only audio - you're not, by your own admission, some kind of Superman, SAS kind of guy. You're a very ordinary guy who's done some pretty outstanding, extraordinary things.
- RL:** Yeah, yeah. I think that's true [*laughter*]. I'm very ordinary. I was a high school geography teacher. I was not on top sports teams. I wasn't in the SAS or the Navy Seals or in the Olympic team. I was Mr. Ordinary and also, not a very brave person, naturally. Perhaps that's one of the reasons I do these trips, because I don't like my life being determined by the things I'm afraid of. So I find adventures force me to kind of learn how to overcome fears.
- AV:** And I think it's these kind of lessons of adventure is what you're so good at when you come and speak to audiences. Sometimes it's conferences, other times it's customer events, but a lot of the time, it's also internal company events, where it's helping individuals have a slightly different mindset about some of the challenges that they face. I was particularly struck today when you were talking about 'false fears', for example. That really, I think, is quite powerful.
- RL:** It's amazing how, yeah, the attitudes and mindsets you need on an adventure can help in pretty much everything you do, whether it's writing a book or running a business. Today we were reflecting a bit about false fears, where often when you set off on an adventure, a lot of people will tell you why you shouldn't and can't do that. Today, I spoke about the Russians when I went through Siberia in winter on a bicycle; all the Russians we met were very friendly, but basically thought we were going to freeze to death, or others thought we were going to be eaten by bears, or others thought we were going to be murdered by the gold miners, and everyone thought we were going to die. But as we kept going, we found a lot of those were false fears. The winter was minus 40, so it was very cold, but you can survive minus 40 if you've got the right stuff. The bears, of course, hibernate when the winter arrives, so that was not really a risk. It was a risk in summer, but not when we were there in winter. And the people in the wilderness, it turned out, were very friendly. So they were all false fears in hindsight. And so I think, "Well, what are my false fears in other areas of my life which just really hold me back, but they're not actually real?"
- AV:** So we heard from you this morning, as well, that one of the most important things is about being very, very clear about what your goals should be.
- RL:** Yes, so on an expedition, it's kind of like, you have to have a goal, a destination. I mean, that's what an expedition is; you're trying to get somewhere. And so it's sort of built into the thing. Whereas, maybe in work sometimes, it's not quite so clear, or I actually think in our whole lives, sometimes, we're not really clear what we're trying to do. We sort of run around doing what everyone seems to do, trying to earn more money, whatever it is, but we're not really clear: Okay, so I'm trying to earn this much money so I can put my kids through university, something very specific. And that actually really helps focus us, and there's fascinating research showing how they compared two groups of people; one group of people just thought about their goals in their heads, the other group of people wrote them down, broke them into sort of shorter-term targets, and shared them with a friend, and they were almost double as likely to achieve their goals through that simple activity of writing it down, breaking it down, and sharing it. It takes, what,

half an hour in Starbucks? Yet it could radically change your chances of achieving what is important to you.

- AV:** Lots of people look at what you've done and say it's incredibly risky. I mean, why would you take such incredible risks? I mean, that doesn't seem sensible. A lot of people feel that the safe thing to do is to *minimize* risk, not to go and embrace it, actively.
- RL:** Yeah. I mean, risk taking; it doesn't come naturally. I'm not naturally a kind of reckless sort of person. But I think, first of all, we're talking about the false fears; a lot of risks, when you really look into it, you might come to a different view of what is risky. There might be a risk of *not* acting. There are so many companies which go bust because they don't move with the technology. They haven't taken that little risk of employing a new IT expert, or whatever, when they needed to. So there's a risk in not acting. Sometimes risks are very exaggerated in our minds, so we have to talk to real experts before we decide what risks to take or not take. And there is huge reward, often in taking risks to achieve something in business or whatever.
- AV:** And it's about making *calculated* decisions, and being well-prepared.
- RL:** Yeah. You can limit the risks. You can calculate them by talking to the right people, and weighing them up. Even, I think, sometimes we need to just have a little bit of time to think about something before we know what to do and not to rush.
- AV:** I thought it was really good today when you mentioned a time where you were not afraid to admit that something was too risky. You actually decided, "No, I'm not going to do this." When you were going through Afghanistan ...
- RL:** Yeah, yeah. I was riding a bicycle towards Afghanistan, and I was in Pakistan. I had to decide, "Should I cycle through Afghanistan?" And I did research, talked to people who were working in Kabul, and it turned out that there was a region of Afghanistan which was definitely a very, very bad idea to cycle through, but other parts which were okay. And so the really, really dangerous bit, I ended up compromising on my kind of rule to cycle my whole route, and I caught a taxi with an armed guard for about 300 kilometers.
- AV:** So sometimes the right decision is to *not* do things, not to just press on and do them blindly.
- RL:** Yeah. And it can take more courage *not* to do something sometimes, or that you ought to modify the plan. And you have to tell everyone, "Well, we did have to modify the plan" but that was the right decision.
- AV:** Most of your travel, you've been on your own. I mean, are you some kind of loner [*laughter*]? I mean, that's what I was accused of when I went backpacking around the world, but it's not, is it? It's not like that at all.
- RL:** No. I mean, I have done trips with people as well. I think it's more fun when you travel with a friend or a companion, in many ways. But on your own, I think you kind of have a different dynamic when you meet local people, which is a really special part of a lot of trips. And also you learn more because you have to face your fears by yourself. You can't hide behind your friend.

- AV:** And when you are on your own, you get to meet some amazing people who are very hospitable.
- RL:** Yeah. I think you probably found that on your backpacking, there's just extraordinary hospitality, especially outside of cities. In most parts of the world, people like lone, nomadic dudes. They look after you, and it's a real privilege. And you can never really give back as much as you receive from the people who look after you, but it's a real privilege. Hopefully in the whole of one's life, one *can* give back, but probably to different people.
- AV:** And another one of your messages, of course, is that even if you are on your own, you don't have to do it alone. You can ask for advice, you can get help, you can use your networks.
- RL:** Yeah. I mean it's really essential, I think, to ask for advice, to network until you find a person who can show you the way, or offer you a ride in a boat, or whatever. Yeah. So I think there's many levels which we're very connected. I mean, on this recent trip through the desert, I was very alone. There was one point where I had a bit of a setback, where I had to, again, change my route a bit. And I was really downcast because it wasn't my 'plan A'. I was having to do a sort of 'plan B' route. I had mobile phone signal on the edge of the desert. And I got three of my best friends to phone me up, and it completely changed me around. And there's research, again, that people who are successful tend to have strong social support networks. So it's not just about being amazing in the office, but having a good social support network which will help your business success, too.
- AV:** Well, it's fascinating to talk to you. Everyone's asking you, "When is the next trip?" But it's not for a little while, yet?
- RL:** Yeah. We just had a baby -- in December -- me and my wife had a baby. So that is the next adventure.
- AV:** That's like an adventure in itself [*laughter*].
- RL:** Yeah, it is. Probably the best one, isn't it? So yeah, enjoying that and we shall see what comes next.
- AV:** All right. Well, that's brilliant. Rob, thank you very much for spending a bit of time with us today.
- RL:** Thank you, Andrew.
- AV:** And we'll see you soon.

www.insightbureau.com/RobLilwall.html

<https://vimeo.com/166154800>