In October 2007 Cascade Powder Cats, a mechanized ski guide service, operating under new ownership, hired me as Lead Guide. The company resources consisted of three snow cats, two suburbs equipped with Mat Tracks, two explosives magazines stocked with one box of shots, a yurt at 4700ft, and a lease on private land for 2400 acres of avalanche prone terrain four miles west of Stevens Pass, Washington, eight miles from the nearest paved road.

The recent change in CPC ownership received few records from the previous guiding or avalanche-forecasting programs. The remaining operational record was the magazine inventory. The information that I did receive told me that the previous company was run much like a ski area. The company was over resourced; consisting of a volunteer assistant guide staff that received minimal formal training and relied heavily on an avalanche mitigation program using explosives.

As I began work, I needed to decide whether I wanted an avalanche mitigation program using explosives or a backcountry operation implementing an avalanche forecasting program using weather, snowpack assessment and avalanche avoidance through proper route selection. It was an easy decision knowing the storage and use of explosives can be a paperwork nightmare. I also considered the time to dig out the magazine, arm and complete the control route could take up to two hours of valuable time that could be used assessing and learning about the complexities of avalanches. I also believe that explosives should not be a replacement for good judgment when navigating through avalanche terrain. We traded the capability to safely test slopes with large loads, for the ability to continually observe the weather and snowpack throughout the season on a daily and hourly basis. If I did use explosives I would create large areas of bed surface, reducing the amount of good snow to be skied at a later date after bonding of non-persistent weak layers has occurred.

I decided on a forecasting program that did not involve explosives and made preparations for a weather plot and recording standards. Taking this shift into consideration I hired professional guides who possessed industry standard qualifications, good and timely decision making skills in the backcountry, and work independently while keeping the client profile in mind. I also looked for people with a passion for sharing their knowledge of the avalanche phenomena, companion rescue, and the ability to recognize and address human factors, heuristic traps, and communicate the differences of real and perceived hazards.

The first season of operation under new ownership with a staff that was unfamiliar with the topography followed by the largest recorded snowfall the cascades had received in years, added stress to the guides, vehicles, and the mechanics. Regardless, it did not take long to get into the groove of the operation. We were recording weather twice daily, snowpack observations, compiling data to create a snow stability analysis, and avalanche danger rating for multiple aspects and elevations. With this information we utilized our terrain appropriately for the constantly changing environmental conditions, allowing the staff to create route options. Throughout the day we continued to observe weather trends, perform hand shears, and other field observations.

Every client was issued a safety kit containing an avalanche transceiver, shovel, probe, and received hands on companion rescue training. The clients were encouraged to manage their own risk and were instructed on backcountry philosophy of “the more we become a team, the more terrain we can access”. This was a significant learning outcome for the staff and I. For the first time in our careers we were putting theory to practice on a daily basis. Through weather, snow pack recording standards and industry standard qualifications there was improved communication and heightened situational awareness for the staff and clients. These practices empowered the staff to work independently, giving every guide the title of hazard forecaster. With the implementation of standards and regimented practices CPC managed avalanche hazard without mitigation action.

We operated a total 43 days (a company record) of cat skiing and backcountry education courses. However breaking records were not without their price. For every day the snow cat(s) operate they...
require two days of maintenance, which is very expensive and time consuming. CPC continued to operate with the same business model for the 08/09 seasons, focusing primarily on cat skiing with the occasional backcountry course. This business model lacked efficiency. With the older equipment frequent use meant frequent repair, tracking down parts, more staff required to help with the repairs, and with more people comes less accountability for quality work, damaged equipment, and vehicles (snowmobiles).

When the 09/10 season began, I received word a majority of the owners lost interest in the company. I approached the one remaining, dedicated owner and asked what would it take to buy into CPC? His response, “money.” As winter approached rapidly, we had a lot of preparation to do and little money to do it with. We started selling off equipment to help pay for needed repairs. With less equipment on hand, fewer employees would be required for repairs and operation. With fewer employees there would be more accountability for quality control and less payroll going out.

A new business model emerged out of necessity, focusing on backcountry education and ski touring with considerably less cat skiing. This was called the “less is more” plan. The “less is more” plan efficiency was based on the need for two full time staff (the two owners) and one part time. For the courses and touring programs, the snow cat would only transport clients and gear to the yurt with the instructor/guide operating the equipment. Once at the yurt, everyone tours, allowing access to terrain where the snow cats could not go.

Our experience of leaning the CPC operation model followed many key points that other industries used to improve their efficiency and overall operational capacity. As Jim Collins cited in his book, Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't, the key points include

- “Level 5 Leaders” - leaders who have both “personal humility” and “professional will”. These are not rock-star leaders whose companies go into decline when they move on. They are diligent and hard working - more bite than bark. Celebrity leaders often work for a time, but appear to be damaging in the long run, because they don’t create sustained results.
- Get the right people on the bus - that has to happen before the “what” decisions are taken. That can change if you have the right people, but the wrong people will certainly make the enterprise fail.
- You must always be willing to “confront the brutal facts”. Don’t ignore reality in favor of what your hopes reflect it to become. Only by having accurate information can you achieve success.
- The “Hedgehog concept” means having a simple, extremely clear concept of what their business is. That business is something they can
  1. Make money at
  2. Be passionate about, and
  3. Be the best in the world at

These are also known as “The Three Circles”
- A culture of self-discipline is critical, because it creates an environment where people work within a defined system, and yet, because the confines of the system are known, gives them more freedom to act within that system.
- Technology is an accelerator, not an agent of change. Good companies use it to execute better, but it won’t save a mediocre company.
- “The Flywheel” refers to the idea of momentum - keep pushing in one direction and you’ll build up a lot of it that will help you to overcome obstacles. Momentum is built a little bit at a time - it’s not a dramatic, revolutionary change, but constant, diligent work.

Summary

The idea that sparked the changes made at CPC track well with many important points that make other enterprises work well. The backcountry environment forced us to consider what the baseline operational necessities were and what target outcomes we wanted to achieve. We hired staff that possessed a balance of skill, commitment, passion and self-discipline to adhere to a program based on information gathered from field observation. This required complete transparency so everyone could make informed decisions based on the information that was left by the previous guide. This model provides empowerment through training and responsibility resulting in an efficient and experienced staff. Therefore creating a rewarding and sustainable business model.