



# Alumni in the spotlight

**Marsha Heinen**

Executive Director Reputational  
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In May 2025, Marsha, a former KPMG Forensic manager, completed a remarkable 600-kilometer ski crossing of Greenland's ice sheet from West to East. We spoke with her about the motivation behind this extreme journey and the lessons she learned along the way.

#### **What motivated you to take on such an extreme and rare challenge as crossing the Greenlandic icesheet? How did this experience push you beyond your comfort zone – both physically and mentally?**

The Greenlandic ice sheet is immense – vast beyond imagination. When I visited Greenland in the summer of 2023, I was left deeply impressed by the ice and the recent history of polar exploration. Perhaps that sparked a similar human curiosity in me to go beyond. Part of me, I realized after I returned, I was seeking for validation. The expedition was a way to strengthen my confidence by confronting something undeniably hard. And it was. Time and again, I was pushed far beyond my comfort zone. In truth, I don't think a comfort zone even exists on the ice sheet. Physically, it's relentless: skiing nine hours a day, every day, with only a ten-minute break each hour, while pulling a seventy-kilogram sled carrying your tent, sleeping bag, and food. Mentally, it's even tougher. There is no comfort, no distraction. Once you reach the plateau, everything is endless white. There is no life on the ice. Only silence, you and your thoughts.

#### **In today's volatile business environment, resilience and adaptability are key. How did your time at KPMG prepare you to navigate the unpredictable and high-pressure situations you faced during the expedition?**

Funny enough, during the expedition, I thought of one of those KPMG trainings where you find yourself stranded in a burning forest, armed with just a few items to save yourselves, and forced to agree on a survival plan with the team. We faced the real-life version: That anticipation of a storm – winds forecasted at up to 150 km/h – we had two options: ski the standard 23 kilometers overnight (about nine hours of effort) or push through 42 kilometers to reach an abandoned Cold War radar station where we could take shelter. There were different opinions in the team as to what was best, and in the end, we decided to take it step by step. Ski as much as we can and see where we land. After nine hours of skiing, we were utterly exhausted. It took us another couple of hours to dig snow dugs and build snow walls to protect our tents. We would have never made it to the radar station - and pushing for it would have been very risky. That storm kept us locked in our tents for 41 hours.

#### **Strategic planning is critical in both polar expeditions and leading a business. What lessons from preparing for this journey can be applied to managing complex business transformations or crises?**

When I decided to cross the ice, I had no idea where – or how – to begin. The sheer scale of preparation felt overwhelming: the physical training, mental conditioning, and the long, expensive list of equipment to arrange. You cannot think too much about the end goal – it's too daunting. Instead, you break it down and focus on the small step you can complete today. It's like hiking a mountain – those small steps feel like no progress, but at some point, you look over your shoulder and realize how far you've come. It's the same in business. At KPMG, we often faced ambitious projects. Some deadlines seemed impossible, and yet, somehow, we always made them. I think we did that in the same way – by breaking the challenge down and moving forward, step by step. And then, one day, you would look up and realize you went from a slide deck to completing a 600-kilometer polar expedition.

**Leadership under extreme conditions often reveals hidden strengths and weaknesses. What did you learn about yourself as a leader during this expedition, and how has it influenced your leadership style in the corporate world?**

I believe people often underestimate what they're capable of – something I like to challenge. A few key lessons I took into everyday life:

**Time discipline:** Small inefficiencies add up quickly – even a few extra minutes can make a real difference over time.

**Take it slow:** Rushing leads to mistakes. It's better to move carefully and get things right the first time.

**Details matter:** In extreme environments, small oversights have immediate consequences – precision is key.

The experience also reinforced how critical team dynamics are. Recognizing each person's strengths allowed us to collaborate effectively from day one, even under pressure. This ensured strong alignment and execution – a principle that equally applies to high-performing business teams.

**Crossing the Greenlandic icesheet is a rare achievement, much like navigating a company through uncharted territory. How has this experience shaped your perspective on risk-taking and decision-making in today's fast-changing business landscape?**

Funny enough, I've never been someone who enjoys taking big risks. But I also think that life without risk is not a life worth living. It's how we learn. It's about managing the stupid risk – you don't cross Greenland without the right equipment – and anticipating the uncontrollable risks. You move forward one step at a time and adapt your strategy as you go.

**The preparation for such an expedition required a year of intense focus, training, and investment. How do you balance long-term preparation with the need for agility – both in extreme adventures and in leading a business?**

In the end, it's about showing up and putting in consistent effort. Missing one training session isn't a problem – but missing them regularly will be. It's the same in business. If you find yourself repeatedly skipping trainings, or falling short in another important area, it's worth asking: Am I being realistic? Am I sufficiently committed? Have I created the conditions that allow me to dedicate time and energy to this goal? If you don't achieve your goals, you need to change something. Nobody will do it for you.

**What advice would you give to other C-level executives who are looking to take on bold challenges – whether in their personal lives or in driving innovation and transformation within their organizations?**

I like the phrase "one day, or day one?" What stops you from starting today? You need to ask yourself: If not now, when? Live a little.

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