

A unique personal journey

In a remarkable story **Chris Moon MBE** explains how life-changing events can strengthen – not weaken – a person

Chris Moon's personal journey is one that, at first sight, seems to have little in common with an ordinary person. He is a former soldier and landmine clearance expert. He has survived being kidnapped. He lost an arm and a leg in an explosion. But the truth is, he's gone through as much as any disabled person has, in terms of facing challenges and prejudice. There is a lesson for us all in how he dealt with these experiences.

"I was working in Cambodia during the civil war in 1993," says Moon. "We were clearing landmines so that people could return to their villages. We were working for the United Nations."

On the second day, while returning from the minefield, Moon and his team were ambushed by around 30 Khmer Rouge guerrillas. "They were fearsome. They were the first really well trained, aggressive soldiers that I had encountered in Cambodia. The ambush was well planned and executed. I was taken into the jungle with two of my Cambodian colleagues.

"As far as I could see, the Khmer Rouge prisoner-handling system consisted of three things: interrogation, torture and death. So, it wasn't looking good."

However, Moon made an important personal decision that made a big difference: "I decided, no matter what happened, that I would never assume the role of the victim. There were about seven times, during the three days when we were held, when we could have been executed. Our captors were talking about it, so it was a real possibility. On each occasion, it was possible to change how they felt."

Moon managed to persuade a Khmer Rouge commander that he was not a foreign military advisor, but was on a humanitarian mission, clearing landmines.

A new perspective

"There's a direct lesson for diversity and inclusion from my experiences with the Khmer Rouge," says Moon. "Because it was a principle that came back to me when I became disabled: that I won't be a victim."

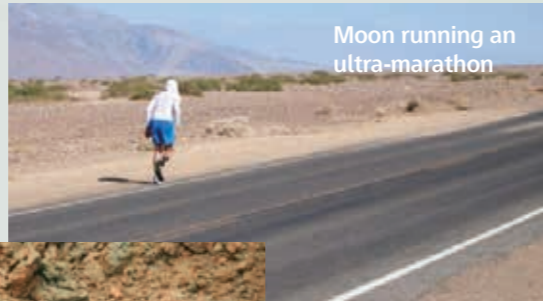
"I think it also teaches you something about responsibility: that no-one can really be responsible for us and we aren't always going to be treated the way we want to be. I've learned from that experience the importance of being personally resilient, or asking for help when you need it and of not giving up."



Chris Moon survived being kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge



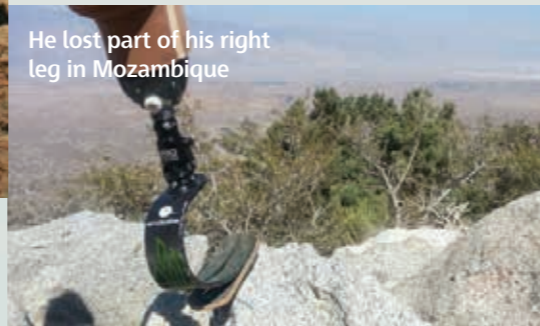
Chris Moon in Cambodia



Moon running an ultra-marathon



Destroying the debris of war



He lost part of his right leg in Mozambique



Despite his experiences in Cambodia, Moon was not deterred from returning to clearing landmines: “I loved what I was doing. I was very passionate about preventing people from being taken apart by landmines. You can’t just give up at the first hurdle. So, you dust yourself off, learn what you can learn and go back with renewed vigour.”

Incident in Mozambique

It was just two years after being kidnapped, that Moon was blown-up in a landmine explosion in Mozambique. “I was in a cleared lane in a minefield, doing an investigation, when something felt wrong. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I heard the loudest bang I had ever heard. I thought that maybe a mortar had gone off.

“I could smell blasted flesh,” continues Moon. “I said to myself: ‘look, you’ve got to be realistic and see what your injuries are’. I forced myself to sit up and I saw my lower right leg was completely blown off. My right hand was also badly damaged. In that moment, I knew I would be lucky to survive there, because we were such a long way from a hospital.

“Quite quickly the body produces endorphins, so you don’t feel any pain or any different to normal. Then, it just starts to hurt. It gets worse and worse until you wish you were dead. However, I couldn’t die because I was focused on all the reasons why I had to live: my family and my friends. My work also gave me another reason to survive.”

It took 16 hours to get Moon to a hospital because the area was so remote. He lost part of a leg and one of his hands in the explosion. It was a huge change which he says needed a lot of planning and focus. “As soon as they stopped injecting me with morphine, I refused painkillers. I did it, because I knew I’d have to get used to the pain, as you get phantom pain. It needed continual effort not to feel sorry for yourself. Above all, it required a lot of discipline and you had to teach yourself to do things again.”

Moon says that people were not always understanding of his disability: “Some people did treat me differently. Some people had a real problem with the fact that I had lost my hand. Others had a problem with disability in general. Fortunately, over 20 years, it’s got a lot better. Attitudes have really improved.

“Ultimately, for me, it was helpful to say: ‘I’m the only person that can deal with this. I’m going to get my head around it and move on. I know some people will be difficult, but that’s their problem.’”

Enhancing the workforce

Moon passionately believes that disabled people bring a lot to employers: “It’s very easy to assume that people can’t do things, but at the same time we have to accept that there are some quite serious limits: there’s no point in me, as a one-handed man, wanting to become a concert pianist. I think we have to be realistic on all sides.

“The most successful employment programmes for disabled people are those that don’t look at the disability: they look at what the individual can do. Then you make the environment fit the person.

“I think the key to success is dialogue, listening and thinking about how we can educate people to overcome their limits. We also need to educate organisations, such as large companies, that there is value in employing people with disabilities. For example, retention rates are often much better.

“They may have better problem solving skills because they have to solve so many problems in their lives. I think inclusion is really important.”

Improving diversity and inclusion at work is a complex issue, says Moon. He believes that there is not a simple solution, but that issues such as flexibility – for example, allowing people to go to hospital to attend appointments – are crucial.

“I think the question at the starting point should be ‘who is the right person for this job?’ I think it’s wrong to employ someone just because they are disabled, and I don’t think many people with a disability would want that. It’s about recognising that different people can contribute different things. I might not be a great one-handed brick layer but you might have a congenital amputee who can do amazing things with bricks.

“I think we need to understand where people can add value. I think some companies do see the benefit of employing people with disabilities. But I do think there is unconscious bias. People think – I couldn’t do that with one hand, so can they? People with health problems are seen as a big risk. I think things are better than they were but there’s a long way to go.”



I decided, no matter what happened, that I would never assume the role of the victim.

Chris Moon

Towards a more inclusive society

“Inclusion means a society where everybody is included. That means things such as ramps for wheelchairs, if people need them. It includes traffic light systems that let blind people cross the road. I spoke to a friend of mine who’s been blind for a number of years, and he said: ‘The one thing I want is to be able to go where I want.’

“If you look at house design, let’s make all of our taps with levers so anyone can turn them on. They are much easier to use, than traditional turn-based taps. Why don’t all new homes have a wet room, catering for people who can’t use a bath? All buildings should have lifts. We should be asking: ‘what can we do to make society more inclusive’. And there are so many things.”

Attitudes must change

“I think society has a lousy attitude towards mental illness,” comments Moon, addressing another significant health issue, which affects many people during their working lives. He adds: “I think there’s a huge amount we can do in terms of education, encouraging people to ask for help and talk about their problems. We need to change our attitudes, to understand people better so we can help them. And we constantly need to improve our professional intervention, helping people to get better. But, at the same time, the most effective way to get a healthy society is by getting people to take ownership for their health.

“I think a lot of prejudice can be unconscious. But, I also think there is conscious prejudice. I think it’s very important that organisations stigmatise conscious prejudice. They should say, if you walk by something that you feel is wrong and don’t deal with it and speak up – you are condoning it.

I think we also need to concentrate on dealing with people fairly and with respect.”

Moon says that he has had many conversations with a range of disabled people: “I know some who feel they are treated in an appalling way, by society and the state. They feel ignored and ostracised. But I also know people who, at the same time, say that the system is very fair and supports them really well. There’s another group who think they’ve just got to get on with it and get working, because no-one’s going to give me a chance. I think there are many different views. If we’re going to talk about equality and diversity, we’ve also got to include the whole issue of the unsung heroes who care for relatives at home.”

Encouraging diversity and inclusion

The Paralympics in London have been a game-changer. Moon says they have had a real impact on attitudes: “The general public began to realise that disabled people could do amazing things.”

“Change in any organisation is really led by the leaders. If the leaders take diversity and inclusion seriously, in my experience, then it will be taken seriously by everyone in the organisation.

“The solution is to create an environment of trust, where people can be comfortable about talking about things – even things which have a stigma. The best thing we can do is create an environment where we help people to find their own solutions. If we can do that, then we’ll go a long way to changing the whole of society.” ■

Find out more

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