

INSIDE

Weekend  
Sport

HANDS UP WHO'S BEEN A NAUGHTY BOY

The Sydney Morning Herald

# Weekend Business

## Shale gas

The locals in rural Pennsylvania want to know what's really coming out of the wells.

PAGE 10

FRACKING

Breathe in, then take the plunge to change.

MY CAREER  
STARTS PAGE 17



## MY CAREER

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD  
Weekend Edition February 23-24, 2013

17

# Breathe in, then take the plunge to change

Freediving holds vital business lessons, writes **Sue Green**.

There are times in business when you have to take a deep breath and dive straight in. Ant Williams knows this well and he's had the perfect training.

Williams is an international freediving champion. He can hold his breath under water for eight minutes and in December, at Dean's Blue Hole in the Bahamas, a 202-metre sinkhole, dived to 100 metres in one breath.

With no scuba gear or breathing devices, it's a dangerous, extreme sport requiring physical and mental strength, courage and a willingness to take risks.

These are lessons New Zealand-born Williams, 42, previously a sports psychologist, realised could apply to business. As the head of the new Melbourne branch of Sydney-based business performance consultancy Maximus, he uses his personal lessons to help clients develop their companies and improve their bottom lines.

"It has taken me a long time to work out if there were any lessons [from freediving] and to try to describe or even teach those lessons to other people," Williams says.

"The lessons come under that bracket of self-awareness; freediving is a sport that requires a lot of mental strength."

Williams, who holds a psychology master's degree from Otago University, had been working with top athletes such as boxers and mountaineers. While working with a MotoGP team in the south of France he realised he had never experienced the danger and risk that were grist to his clients' mill.

"I thought, part of me feels like a fraud: here I am teaching all these tough athletes how to do their sport but I have never done it. I thought I would find a sport that has an



Confident air ... freediving champion Ant Williams says business success has similarities with venturing into the deep.

element of danger to it and I will see whether I can apply the things I am teaching people." His aim: "To take on a risky sport and get to a degree of confidence."

Williams chose freediving because in the south of France it was that or bullfighting. When he started freediving in 2001, he had never

succeeded in a sport and no one in Australia or New Zealand knew much about freediving. Now, by contrast, both countries have highly seeded teams.

"The thing that attracts me to it most is it is about being able to go into the ocean and face some very primal fears, something basic

around not being able to draw breath, the suffocating, going very deep - to experience those fears," he says.

When Williams began diving, risking decompression sickness, he could not get beyond 15 metres, he was so tense about being down there in the dark. Then came lessons

he uses in his workshops for managers: "Through the sport I learnt how to remain calm under pressure. I learnt to better manage myself and my own strong emotions under pressure.

"I translate that into how other people manage the feelings when they are under pressure."

Williams says the preparation for freediving is "quite remarkable", beginning four months before a dive. Divers enter an almost meditative state, with yoga and breathing exercises part of their training.

"That ability to breathe really well through stress and anxiety leads to better decision-making, a more calming presence around others," Williams says. "Often the only test of that is when you are under pressure - your ability to take measured risk.

"I see managers who cannot take risk and they stifle an organisation. They can be damaging for a company. When they get into senior positions, they have an ability to start demanding strategies. They set safe strategies, not ones that will drive the company forward."

In Melbourne, Williams has been doing "long breath holds" in a pool, always with a buddy because of the danger. And he does "opportunistic training" - holding his breath behind his newspaper on the train.

Married for six years and the father of small children, he is under pressure to take family holidays, rather than train for several months to hold his breath under water on the other side of the world.

Meanwhile, with clients such as Fitness First, Estee Lauder, 3M and insurance companies including Suncorp, he is focusing on his work in leadership, organisation and sales force development.

"I have a model that talks about rather than focusing on the moment when you're in the challenge, spend your focus on that moment before the challenge," Williams says.

"I teach them to manage that moment, then the performance should come naturally."