

Everest Tragedy 1996 – A Case Study in Leadership Lessons

Lesson 1– Pursuit of Destructive Goals

When leaders identify themselves too closely with a goal, there is a danger that their obsession can lead to disaster. This condition is known as goalodicy. In relationships this is the equivalent of fatal attraction! The phenomenon of pursuing a destructive goal raises a larger issue; the difference between **passion and obsession**.

Passion is an intensity of feeling about doing what you are passionate about. To say you are passionate about this or that is not being passionate. Passion is when you go and prove you can. Passion is about doing and not merely feeling.

There is a thin line of difference between passion and obsession. Passion is intense belief in something but at the same time being balanced and aware of one's surroundings. Obsession, on the other hand, is when you block out the rest of life. It is obsession or nothing else! Passion may get you there but may not get you back. Obsession will most certainly get you there, but it is doubtful whether you will get home.

This is an aspect of leadership in goal-setting that has not received adequate attention. We call this the pursuit of a destructive goal.

46 year old **Doug Hansen's** condition deteriorated considerably on 9 May at Camp 4. The previous year he was forced to turn back when he was just 300 metres short of the Everest summit. He was now determined that this would never happen again. There is a *Two O'clock* golden rule on Everest; climbers must turn back latest at 2 pm. This is because the descent is tough and climbers must get back to the advanced base camp for safety and bottled supply of oxygen.

Doug summited at 4 pm two hours beyond the turnaround time. On his way down he collapsed and died. He is a classic example of **goalodicy**, a situation when a person continues to pursue a good goal with negative consequences. During the final assault Doug was emphatic about his life's mission:

"I have put too much of myself into this mountain to quit now without giving it everything I've got."

Dr Beck Weathers, a pathologist from Texas, is another example of extreme goalodicy. Suffering from bouts of depression, and an unhappy marriage, he desired to scale Everest to find inner peace. Despite blindness he continued climbing and described his physical condition.

“One eye was completely blurred over. I could barely see out of the other, and I’d lost all depth perception.”

When the expedition leader Rob Hall tried sending him back, he convinced him to allow him to continue climbing. Beck finally did scale Everest but on his descent gave up. His survival is a miracle, possibly the only person even to have woken up from hypothermic coma. He was given up for dead twice before he was airlifted to safety. Although Beck Weathers survived after being left for dead, his frost bite condition paid a heavy price: amputation of the right arm between the elbow and the wrist, four fingers and thumb of the left hand, and an amputated nose that had to be reconstructed. Was this price worth it?

Theodicy provides explanations in times of adversity to create an illusion of success. Ancient literature is replete with examples where theodicies given by philosophers try to explain the problem of evil in a just world, for example, *“Why do evil people prosper?”* The *karma* theory explains that a person is suffering for the sins of his last birth. I have heard people justifying poverty by saying that *“people are poor because they want to be poor.”*

The phenomenon of goalodicy was palpably visible on Everest. As the weather deteriorated the professionals ignored the amateur’s lack of experience and continued leading them towards a narrow goal – Everest. The Everest teams created their theodicies to remain obsessed with their narrow goals:

- a. **Sandy Hill Pittman**, a New York socialite who became the 34th woman to scale Everest, and Neal Beidleman, a mountain guide, minimized their painful coughs justifying that they were necessary discomforts in high altitude.
- b. **Beck Weathers**, unable to see even a metre ahead due to effects of high altitude on eye surgery, strongly believed that as he neared the summit; his vision would improve with the warmth of the sun. He commented:

“Fortunately, I didn’t really need to see the route, because deep steps had been kicked ahead of me.”

- c. **Sherpa Lopsand Janbu** stated vomiting near the summit, a sign of high altitude sickness, but justified his condition by stating that this was his body’s natural reaction to high altitude.

Worksheet # 1

Why would anyone continue to pursue a goal, however good it may be, despite all the evidence that its achievement is not possible? And in the process, risk one's life and those of others to whom one is responsible?

Goalodicy comprises six key features.

1. **Narrowly defined goals** like *"To scale Everest."* A practical and wider goal could have been *"To climb Everest and return safely."* The problem with narrow goals is that it produces fewer options and only one course of action.

In the late 1960s, Ford wanted to sell a small fuel-efficient car – the Ford Pinto. The CEO, Lee Iacocca set the challenging goal of *"under 2000 pounds and under \$2000."* The goal was so narrow that the management omitted to have a safe fuel tank. Design wise, the Pinto could ignite on impact; leaving behind a trail of 53 deaths and many injuries.

2. **Public expectations** can force people to continue moving towards a destructive goal. There were ambitious clients like Sandy Hill Pittman, and those like Weathers and Hansen who had failed an earlier attempt on Everest. Their inability to scale Everest would be perceived as a failure. Conversely, past successes can lead to over-confidence. Rob Hall was one of the best climbers in the world and was so confident that he ignored the 2 O'clock Golden Rule.
3. The dream of an **idealized future** was a hugely romantic notion of life of what the world would like after conquering Everest.
4. Everest would give them a **sense of destiny**, the victory of good over evil, and cleansing of the inner self. The goal becomes the seekers identity. To abandon the goal is to abandon oneself. Gamblers, investors, and other high stake players continue to throw good money at bad goals despite a string of failures.

5. In a crisis, groups can become dysfunctional when **emotions take over rational thinking** leading to bad decisions. Let me give two examples:
- a. **“Risky-shift”**: Groups are known to make riskier decisions than individuals.
 - b. **“Group-think”**: Groups tend to form consensus too quickly, thus limiting critical thinking. The fear of rejection keeps them together. When faced by an external threat, the group goes into a huddle because of the fear of rejection or failure.
6. Complete **dependence on a leader** or leaders for key decisions. This is played out time and time again. When teams break down or are not formed in the first instance, as on Everest, individuals turn to the leader for guidance and directions. The leaders are seen as confident, successful, experienced and optimistic like Fischer and Rob Hall. The leader replaces the team as well as the individual, and this is a very dangerous situation. In turn, the leader also relegates the individual to complete dependence by encouraging members to rely on them. The relationship between Rob Hall and Beck Weathers bears testimony. At 27,500 feet Beck Weathers waits for Rob despite the weather packing up, and does not descend, thereby risking his life.

History offers examples of extreme goalodicy – Napoleon and Hitler’s drive to Moscow despite severe winter conditions. There are several potential explanations for this deathly phenomenon. First, leaders affected by this malady exhibit an obsession – **achievement for the sake of achievement**. Such leaders are fiercely ambitious and independent, and, therefore, are not team players. They are prone to high risk-taking and are determined as well as assertive. They maintain their calm even under severe stress and are unlikely to panic.

A good leader ensures that the team is not too dependent on him to achieve the goal. Dependence stifles initiative, limits learning, and prevents collaboration within team members. Rob Hall took away the authority from his client climbers of taking the decision on when to turnaround. He said he only would give the decision to turnaround.

Worksheet # 2

What processes should be in place to allow individuals and even groups to abandon earlier commitments? Beck Weathers, a victim of this leadership malaise, summed up the necessity:

“It’s easy to over pursue goals. It’s easy to become obsessed with goals.”

First, in a complex situation where there are many variables, leaders must avoid defining goals narrowly. **Goals must be clear and broad.** To “*summit a mountain*” is not enough. In the Everest tragedy, reaching the summit was not enough. Returning safely was equally important. Writing in the Outside Online in 1997, Jim Williams was explicit: “*You’re not paid to summit Everest. You’re paid to get people to the summit of Everest and return them safely.*”

Goals and *objectives* are not the same. The time frames and effects they produce are different. Goals are general and broad while objectives are narrow and specific as shown below:

a. **Goal:** “*I want to achieve success in the field of genetic research and do what no other person has done.*”

b. **Objective:** “*I want to complete this thesis by the end of this month.*”

Second, goals and objectives should be reviewed periodically because goals can change due to change in ground conditions.

Third, trust has to be at the foundation of all endeavours. Rob Hall was a poor example of a leader in so far as trust was concerned. He said to his team members, “*Maybe I’ll get unpopular, but somebody has to be unpopular sometimes.*” Trust can be built up provided leaders minimize power differences and communicate humility.

Fourth, team members should **look out for warning signs of goalodicy** amongst leaders. In particular there are four indicators: when leaders define narrow goals that limit the complexities involved; when leaders say that failure is not an option; when leaders offer an idealized future where all problems will go away; and when achieving the goal will mean achieving one’s destiny.

Finally, given the uncertainty and chaos in life, plans seldom go according to what is planned. So, leaders should keep Plan B ready. **Contingency planning** helps to react when faced with unexpected situations.

Lesson 2– Team Work

As late as 05 May, just five days before the final assault, there was no such thing as a team. Jon Krakauer lamented in his tent:

“In this godforsaken place I felt disconnected from the climbers around me...We were a team in name only, I’d sadly come to realize. Although in a few hours we would leave camp as a group, we would ascend as individuals, linked to one another by neither rope, nor any deep sense of loyalty. Each client was in it for himself or herself, pretty much.”

In difficult situations only teams win. Teams require being **cohesive and trustworthy**. The two expeditions were nowhere near this readiness level. Krakauer commented candidly:

“In climbing, having confidence in your partners is no small concern. One climber’s actions can affect the welfare of the entire team...But trust in one’s partners is a luxury denied those who sign on as clients on a guided ascent.”

Krakauer’s feelings are reinforced by Beck Weathers. Beck noted:

“...it sometimes seemed as though half the population at Base Camp was clinically delusional.”

The two expeditions lacked the characteristics that define what a team is. Nobody trusted the other person, and the members barely knew each other. There was no common bond and the climbers had not practiced as a team before. They were heavily dependent upon their two leaders. As a result, when both the leaders were unwell and later were killed, the teams disintegrated immediately.

Worksheet # 3

Teams never discussed issues and errors and even some of the guides were uncomfortable expressing dissenting views. Why was team-effort lacking?

Team work is the foundation. We need to differentiate between a *group* and a *team*. Teams emerge when individuals share a common fate, a common goal. For example, climbers needed each other in the final hours of the ascent. On the other hand, groups may not be a team. For example, passengers travelling in a plane are a group, not a team. However, if the plane is hijacked and the passengers collaborate, they become a team, united by the hazard of their situation.

Achieving a difficult and risky mission like scaling Everest is a team effort. Team work involves discussing mistakes openly, exchanging information rapidly, questioning

prevailing views and assumptions, and providing close support to each other. The primary reason for this lack of team effort was because **trust and mutual support were missing**. Each one was seeking personal glory. There were other reasons too:

- a. All climbers had been indoctrinated not to question the judgment of their guides. What the guides did not know was not worth knowing. Such was the exalted position and power distance of the guides.

- b. In turn, even the guides were unable to speak their minds to the leaders Rob Hall and Scot Fischer. For example, Neil Biedleman, a guide on the Mountain Madness expedition, felt uncomfortable telling Fischer and other team members to turn around at 2 pm. Krakauer argued that Biedleman *“was quite conscious of his place in the expedition pecking order.”* As an individual, Biedleman seemed junior and submissive. He is on record to say:

“I was definitely considered the third guide...so I tried not to be too pushy. As a consequence, I didn’t always speak up when maybe I should have.”

- c. Rob Hall, who was the expedition leader for *Adventure Consultants*, was autocratic, and was therefore distanced from his team. He made his position clear right in the beginning:

“I will tolerate no dissension up there. My word will be absolute law, beyond appeal. If you don’t like a particular decision, I will be happy to discuss it with you afterword, not while we’re up on the mountain.”

- d. Fischer was no less an autocrat. Despite noticing his deteriorating health, no one in the team could muster the courage to advise him against proceeding towards Everest.

- e. Krakauer described his team as *“a group of complete strangers.”* He admitted that they were *“a team in name only.”*

Team spirit was lacking. Each climber was on his or her own mission. Even the climbers were concerned whether they could rely on each other during difficult times. They even fretted about the possibility of not being accepted by their team-mates. Cohesion was lacking well before the climb started. So was trust.

“In climbing, having confidence in your partners is no small concern. One climber’s actions can affect the welfare of the entire team... But trust in one’s partners is a luxury denied those who sign on as clients on a guided ascent.”

Krakauer

Lesson 3– Crisis Decision-Making

With rising interdependence, demands for accountability, unstable climate patterns, and growing power of the media, society is becoming increasingly crisis-prone. The real test of a leader is in a crisis.

A crisis is characterized by:

1. Surprise and psychological dislocation leading to mental blocks.
2. Uncertainty and lack of accurate information to base decisions on.
3. A rushing sense of urgency as there is a finite time for response.
4. Threat to the basic values of the organization.

In crisis-situations particularly, leaders should be careful of four serious impediments in decision-making: **over-confidence**, the **recency effect**, **stress**, and **delayed decision-making**.

First, overconfidence impairs decision-making and judgment. Both Hall and Scott Fischer were victims of overconfidence. They had every reason to be confident. Both had climbed several dangerous peaks, and Hall had scaled Everest at least four times in the past and guided 39 clients. The two were accustomed to making bold and elaborate

statements during the climb that demonstrated classic symptoms of overconfidence bias. Fisher bragged openly:

“We’ve got the Big E figured out; we’ve got it totally wired. These days, I’m telling you, we’ve built a yellow brick road to the summit.”

Rob Hall was no less of a braggart. He openly claimed that, *“he could get any reasonably fit person to the summit.”* When Krakauer expressed serious doubts, he received a shut-up call from Rob:

“It’s worked 39 times so far, pal, and a few of the blokes who summited with me were nearly as pathetic as you.”

Second, in decision-making the **recency effect** plays a dominant role. Leaders are prone to be influenced by events and information that are most recent and easily available. We give greater weightage in decision-making to what is latest. If 30 texts are being received every one hour, number 29 and 30 assume outsize importance, regardless of their quality and validity.

“What starts driving decisions is the urgent rather than the important.”

Eric Kessler, at Lubin School of Business

At Everest, the recency bias impaired the judgment of even the most experienced and world’s best climbers.

- a. There had been remarkably good weather at Everest in recent years, and it was, therefore, only natural to believe that climbers were unlikely to face violent storms.
- b. Rob Hall, one of the greatest high altitude climbers, had experienced good weather season after season. There was no reason why May 1996 would be different.

There is a third factor that affects decision-making – **stress conditions**. Prolonged exposure to extreme environment or stress, or both, causes cognitive deterioration. The phenomenon is quite clear:

- a. Narrowing in one’s focus of attention and loss of concentration.
- b. Leaders tend to be cautious.
- c. Alternatives are often not explored.

- d. Inability to perceive new information.

At Everest, as climbers gained in altitude, their decision-making capability dropped appreciably. This is most common at heights above 20,000 feet, where lack of oxygen has devastating effects – you cannot eat, drink, or sleep. The only things that keep you alive are grit, determination, and hope.

Fourth, in a crisis situation it is common to find leaders getting a mental block. This delays decision-making and numbs the decision centres in the brain. A crisis demands **rapid decision-making**. Although this invariably involves risk; but risk-taking is better than status quo. A wrong decision is better than no decision. It is better to decide and make mistakes, because wrong decisions can always be reversed. Those who cannot decide will seldom be able to exercise choices when the time comes.

Intuitive Decision-Making

The Everest tragedy clearly brings out the paramount need for leaders to be intuitive in decision making. Intuitive decision-making is a skill leaders require the most, especially under extreme conditions. Most of what we learn about decision-making in business schools is an analytical model based on a process involving four steps:

- a. Identifying and finding the problem.
- b. Generating alternating solutions to the problem
- c. Evaluating each option or solution.
- d. Deciding on the best course of action.

This system has been developed by scientists, and is, therefore, reductionist. Scientists reduce the human phenomenon to a lower sub-human level – they compartmentalize and rationalize. There are no emotions attached. This category of thinkers believes that love is nothing but sublimated sex!

One significant breakthrough in neuroscience has revolutionized traditional beliefs in thinking. Neuroscientists now accept that **emotions play a decisive role in decision-making**. Antonio Damasio has conducted path-breaking research on persons whose emotion-centres in the brain have been damaged, For example, such individuals can rationally argue the merits and demerits of all the restaurants in the neighbourhood, but they cannot recommend or decide which one to select. Because selection and decision

requires the interplay of emotions. It is now widely accepted by the scientific community that, decision-making involves both logic and emotions.

The debate between intuition and rationality has brought to the fore that, there are two families or systems of mental processes. These are given at Figure 1 below:

- System 1: Intuitive, uncontrolled, and associative.
- System 2: Rational and process-based.



Figure 1: Systems of Mental Processes

The Everest tragedy of 1996 unfolded itself under extreme conditions, and these conditions are quite common in life. They are quite common in professions like the military, medical emergencies, fire fighting services, or in situations characterized by the following conditions that demand speed in decision-making;

- Uncertainty
- Lack of accurate information
- Too much or exaggerated information
- Rapidly changing environment
- Stress and fatigue
- No time for rational process

Under any one of these conditions, only intuition helps. In the words of Carl Jung: *“Intuition is perception via the unconscious,”* that is to say, sense perception and not rational judgment. Intuition is a pattern-recognition process where we match existing

patterns with past patterns, and then take a quick call on what actions to take. Pattern recognition is based on experience, domain knowledge, education, and perception. In fact, most of our critical decisions are based on intuition – relationships, marriage, career, business, politics, and even conflict. As is evident, intuitive decision-making is made without facts or where reliable data is not available.

In his well known book *Sources of Power*, Garry Klein narrates one of the incidents he came across in his research on intuition. The nurse returned home one day and on seeing her father-in-law, remarked, *“I don’t like the way you look.”* He replied, *“Well, you don’t look so great yourself.”* *“No, I really don’t like the way you look,”* she continued. *“We are going to the hospital.”* He grudgingly agreed to go the next day, but the nurse insisted they go immediately. An examination showed that there was a major blockage in the aorta.

Intuitive decision-makers do not follow the deliberate process of problem definition, followed by option generation and then leading to option evaluation. This is System 2 thinking. Rather experience enables them to read a situation and match the new pattern with old ones. Experience also enables them to select an appropriate reaction.

Intuitive decision-makers prefer to act first, rather than being paralyzed until the best course of action is arrived at. Given the power of intuition, the decision-maker invariably arrives at the **first workable option**. A workable option in time is infinitely better than an excellent option that comes too late. The power of intuition enables the individual to trawl through several courses of action in order to get the first one.

How does one develop intuitive thinking?

You need a lot of **expert experience** under different conditions that can take years of practice. Experience helps in pattern recognition. For **self-mastery** of any skill and for it to become automatic and effortless, for example, a skill like a chess champion, or a fire fighter, or a soldier in battle, it will take about 10,000 hours of continuous practice. But practice alone is insufficient; you need constant repetition and continuous feedback. If feedback is delayed or unspecific, learning will be retarded.

You need to be a **risk-taker**.

You have to be passionate about what you do to be intuitive. Your passions are your **signature strengths**, strengths that are unique and being practiced every day. You are then mentally involved and emotionally committed.

A person can’t be intuitive if she is thinking of the past, and worried about the future. The mind has to be present in the now. **Mindfulness**, and the ability to concentrate on what one is doing without being distracted, is a prerequisite for intuitive thinking. Mindfulness and meditation help us to focus the mind and listen to the inner voice.

Intuition arises when we **think in concepts**. In my study of Field Marshal Rommel's military life, I learnt that in a meeting engagement between two adversaries, victory goes to the side that shoots first. By doing so, you seize the initiative. I have applied this principle successfully in several crises situations.

And finally, **think positive**. Negativity is the antidote to intuition.

Lesson 4– Inadequate Preparations

In my early military career, military history had taught me that, if the preparations are good, the battle will be easy. 80 percent success in battle depends on the level of preparations – logistics, training, rehearsals, mental conditioning, and correct positioning of forces.

After reaching Base Camp, serious concerns were raised about the physiological, psychological, and technical readiness of the climbers. Lack of team work, cohesion and mutual trust made matters worse. Boukreev, the experienced Russian guide, expressed serious reservations about the abilities and readiness of the clients.

“About the team’s overall level of readiness and ability I had concerns... [particularly] the people who had no high-altitude assault experience... Our practice in training and developing climbers was to build their experience and confidence over a long time, starting with lower level mountains and graduating them to 8000ers when they were prepared. Here, I understood, as had been the situation on the other commercial expeditions, I had been hired to prepare the mountain for the people instead of the other way around.”

Krakauer, author of a famous book *In Thin Air*, and a part of the expedition, expressed his unease.

“I wasn’t sure what to make my (our) follow clients. In outlook and experience they were nothing like hard-core climbers with whom I usually went into the mountains, but they seemed like nice decent folks... For the most part I attributed my growing unease to the fact that I’d never climbed as a member of such a large group – a group of complete strangers, no less.”

Recalling his feelings when he arrived at Base Camp, Krakauer, noted:

“When it can time for each of us to assess our own abilities and weigh them against the formidable challenge of the world’s highest mountain, it sometimes seemed as though half the population at Base Camp was clinically delusional.”

Learning Questions

Subordinate Autonomy

Think of a leader you admire. Does he or she create dependency in any way? Does this leader increase autonomy of the followers?

*How do you create **subordinate autonomy**?*