

CONQUERING MOUNT EVEREST

by Catherine DeVyre

Few of us will ever set as tough a challenge as conquering Mount Everest but most leaders do indeed set more modest - but still stretching - goals for ourselves along life's path.

Approaching a 'significant' birthday last year, I was determined to no longer defer my dream of seeing Everest.

I'm now safely back from beyond Base Camp – and have vowed never to go camping again, as my idea of sleeping under the stars – is the 5 stars!

At least my backpack became lighter along the way, as we gifted copies of 'Hot Lemon & Honey' - which Sir Edmund Hillary endorsed - to schools he built. Proceeds from every sale continue to go towards furthering his deeds via the Himalayan Trust he established.

“ It’s not the mountain we conquer - but ourselves. ”

– Sir Edmund Hillary

He could never have imagined that the ever cheerful Sherpas now had mobile phone reception all the way to the top. Personally, mine was left in Australia as I only wanted to be ‘connected’ to the raw energy of nature, with time to think.

We seldom have that luxury in our busyness of bus-i-ness. And as leaders, life sometimes seems more like Never-rest than Everest! We can’t take care of our team, our customers or our loved ones, if we don’t take care of ourselves; and re-charge our own batteries, as we do our laptops and mobile phones. It’s far too easy for leaders to become so caught up that they overlook re-charging themselves. Life waits for no one and there is such truth that time seems to pass faster as we climb the leadership ladder, hopefully gaining some wisdom of the years along the way.

It seems like only yesterday that I celebrated my 40th birthday on the summit of the highest mountain in Africa; and in what seemed like a heartbeat, more than a decade evaporated into thin air before I left for the even thinner air of the Nepalese Himalayas.

‘They’ say that 50 is the new 40. ‘They’ say that life begins at 40, but when I commenced training, I reflected that life may indeed begin at 40 – but everything else began to wear out, spread out or fall out! So too, 50 is 50 and 60 is 60 - nothing new about that at all! Nevertheless, there were many similarities with planning and training for both ascents.

Looking down on Everest Base Camp from the top of Kala Patthar was awesome but no more so than the lesser revered summit of Mt Kilimanjaro in Africa. Picture yourself standing, for a moment, on top of Mt. Kilimanjaro, 19,340 feet high. Dawn breaks on a crystal clear morning as you breathe the freshness of rarified mountain air. Sun silhouettes ice-capped formations at the summit, as you gaze down on

the vastness of Kenya to one side and Tanzania on the other; 360-degree views over Africa, as far as the eye can see.

At the same time, imagine shivering at minus 18 degrees Celsius temperatures, feeling nauseous with a crashing headache from altitude. Gasping for air and hyperventilating, you see crosses where others have perished. I’d finished full marathons but had never felt as simultaneously elated and exhausted as I did on top of Kilimanjaro.

We commenced the final climb in the middle of the night, ostensibly to avoid avalanche danger when the sun warmed the snow. But, I suspect the real reason the guide woke us in darkness, was because if we’d seen the full extent of the climb during daylight, we might not have done it! Isn’t that the same with any project we take on as leaders? If we knew how hard it might be, maybe we wouldn’t volunteer. However, those who achieve more than others, always do so!

It was sheer shale all the way up. It seemed that we continually took three steps forward and two steps back. Isn’t it a bit like that as leaders at work as well? Or, in life? Just when we feel we’re making progress, we sometimes slip back - even as leaders. But, again what separates winners from losers is that winners keep going forward and focus on their goal, even with temporary setbacks along the way.

Although I couldn’t see the mountain top, I visualised it in my mind’s eye and knew that’s where I was headed. Yes, there were times during the night when I felt like giving up and turning

back but I hadn’t gone that far to quit.

It would have been tempting to turn back if I’d succumbed to feelings of doubt and the menacing avalanche of negativity that so often creeps into our everyday lives. Admittedly, there were times in the past when I didn’t complete a project on the ground for whatever justification I could conjure up at the time. But, thankfully I never lost sight of reaching the top of Kilimanjaro, because it was both the most physically demanding and beautiful goal I’d achieved.

It was a long way from starting life in a Canadian orphanage. Never did I dream of being privileged to meet my childhood hero, Sir Edmund Hillary, who would one day, say of my book, ‘Hot Lemon & Honey’... ‘Information in this book can lead you on the road to success.’

Sir Ed truly embodied success for over 89 years of life. For a man who put the first foot print on top of the world, he was the most down to earth human being I’ve ever met; using his fame to build over 26 schools and hospitals in Nepal. I asked if he had always known he would reach the summit.

“No” he replied. “Of course I had a goal. I wasn’t just tramping around and found myself on top of Everest. I didn’t know I would make it because there were so many uncertainties but what’s the point of having a goal if you know you’re going to make it? What’s the challenge in that?” he asked.

Thinking about that question, I realised the wisdom behind it. I also realised that as leaders, we often don’t set our personal goals high enough, settling instead for mediocrity.

Around this time, I received a fax from Australian mountaineer, Michael Groom, expressing interest in putting the first Australian female on top of Everest. I also realised that as important as it is



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to set high goals for oneself, it’s equally essential to believe you’re in as strong position as possible to achieve them. A recent injury meant I had poor odds of succeeding on this occasion, and it was agreed that I would start training for the following expedition. I had no idea that my injury had been a blessing in disguise and was devastated to learn that expedition leader, Rob Hall, and 11 others in that climbing group, perished in a freak storm on Everest on May 10, 1996.

Rob’s last words were to his wife in New Zealand, from a satellite phone at the summit. Mountaineering technology had certainly changed since Sir Edmund’s ascent in 1953 but the determination of the individual to succeed against the unpredictability of the elements, had not. Technology continues to embrace new frontiers and there are always those pioneers at the forefront of discovery. Less than fourteen months after that fateful expedition, volcanoes, three times the height of Everest, were discovered on Mars.

Two weeks after he perished, I received a postcard that Rob had sent from base camp. Years later, during my recent trek toward base camp, I visited his memorial with a wonderful team of Sherpas.

Today, I’m a ‘Facebook friend’ with Tsering Llama, our quiet but confident leader. Along the trail, we discussed many things; the media debate about the pros and cons of commercial expeditions, the changes that tourism has brought to Nepal, the future for his family. Coming from totally different cultures, we both wondered how often we make mountains out of molehills, with relatively minor problems we encounter in our everyday lives?

I also realised that most individuals would never have any desire to risk their life climbing a mountain! But, we all have those figurative, metaphorical mountains in our everyday lives that sometimes seem like insurmountable challenges looming large on our horizon. We need to tackle those challenges in the same manner one climbs a mountain...one step at a time.

Even if we never wish to leave the comfort of our home, we can fall into the trap of making mountains out of molehills when we face seemingly insurmountable obstacles in everyday life; our own ‘Everests’. We need to take time out to re-charge so that we don’t get run-down, sick and need total-rest. It’s best to get the balance right and sometimes take-a-rest! It’s easier said than done, but vital because as leaders, we can’t take care

of our customers and our families - if we don’t take care of ourselves!

For more Everest insights & images: www.greatmotivation.com/posts/insights-beyond-everest-base-camp-14

May your journey as a leader find you mostly on top of your world; wherever that may be. And remember Sir Edmund Hillary’s words which will still ring true, even to those with no desire to climb:

“It’s not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.”



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