



Book High Altitude Leadership

What the World's Most Forbidding Peaks Teach Us About Success

Chris Warner and Don Schmincke
Jossey-Bass, 2008
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Recommendation

Chris Warner certainly is not the first mountain climber to chronicle harrowing journeys and near-death experiences scaling the high peaks of the Himalayas. What makes Warner unique is his ability to extract critical lessons from his adventures and shape them to be relevant for business leaders at sea level. Warner and Don Schmincke have produced a fascinating book that pinpoints the qualities managers need to not just survive, but thrive. Bravery, teamwork and decisiveness, they say, are just as important in the conference room as on the Khumbu Ice Fall of Mt. Everest. *BooksInShort* recommends the authors’ sage advice. You’ll find yourself on solid footing as you negotiate the higher elevations of leadership.

Take-Aways

- Leadership is challenging whether you guide a mountain expedition or manage an organization.
- Overcoming your fears will make you a better leader.
- “Dangerous, unproductive, dysfunctional (DUD) behavior” can irreparably damage your organization. It reduces productivity by an average of 50%.
- Create a “compelling saga” to overcome selfishness in your organization.
- Simply having the best tools won’t make you the best leader.
- Arrogant leaders who believe they know everything set their organizations up for failure
- Leadership does not occur in a vacuum. You need the help of others to succeed.
- Push yourself and your company beyond your “comfort zone,” but remember that wise leaders – and climbers – know the difference between bravery and foolishness.
- You can be successful without ever reaching the summit.
- Accept the role of luck in your successes and failures.

Summary

Climb Higher

What do a mountain climber leading an expedition in the Himalayas and a corporate leader managing a company have in common? Although circumstances at 26,000 feet (7,900 meters) clearly are different than those in the office, both leaders frequently face dire situations. You need the same attributes for conquering impossibly difficult peaks that you need for maneuvering organizations through a maze of business challenges. The qualities that allow individuals to reach the summit of Mt. Everest also enable business leaders to perform at high levels.

“Whether on a mountain or at work, leading others can quickly become difficult and dangerous.”

Like mountain climbers in the Death Zone, executives and managers must make instinctive, critical decisions that will avert danger or trigger an avalanche. Their businesses may be struggling to survive, placing the workforce in a “life-or-death” situation. Meeting the demands of “high altitude leadership” is a huge challenge that requires understanding the eight greatest dangers managers face. How you respond determines whether you succeed or fail.

“Danger No. 1: Fear of Death”

Author Chris Warner was on a particularly difficult expedition on K2, the world’s second highest summit, when one of the mountaineers, Nima, fell and died. The other climbers were petrified.

“How you respond in the face of real dangers defines you as a leader.”

Forcing himself to think clearly, Chris snapped himself into action, “Listen, if you didn’t think this would happen, you’re delusional. Are you going to let this stop you?” He paid his respect to Nima and offered condolences to his friends – then pushed further. “We...had to accept the possibility of our death if we were to continue. If we didn’t accept what we always knew was a possibility, we would fail. Soon most of us are heading upward.”

“Those in your organization who do embrace death successfully will never look back: Embracing death allows decisive action in careers and organizations.”

Fear is a powerful and paralyzing emotion, but mountaineers cannot climb high peaks without facing their fears. Neither can the leaders in a boardroom. Many individuals are simply too scared to make the right decisions. For example, an executive can sabotage an organization by failing to fire an incompetent salesperson because he or she has been with the company for 25 years.

“Without a little adrenaline, our lives would become boring and our team would stop focusing on its true goal.”

Executives rarely face life-and-death situations, but “metaphorical death” can be an equally powerful experience. The devastating effects of a corporate bankruptcy, for instance, are less severe if the company forges ahead and seeks new ways to build a viable business.

Beyond just accepting fear, actively look for it. Good managers and organizations understand the importance of pushing the envelope. Growth isn’t possible if you don’t venture into the unknown, confront your fears and accept the possibility of failure. Climb higher; don’t be scared to take chances.

“Danger No. 2: Selfishness”

Never underestimate the damage a big ego can cause. A selfish climber who is determined to reach the summit despite dire weather conditions can jeopardize the safety of the entire expedition. A selfish employee who puts his or her career ahead of the team, undermines a colleague to gain favor with the boss or heaps blame upon others can cause irreparable harm.

“When your ego drives you, the results are never pretty.”

Selfishness in an organization manifests itself as “dangerous, unproductive, dysfunctional (DUD) behavior.” One ten-year study indicated that DUD behavior decreased productivity by an average of 50%. Due to DUD behavior, meetings and projects take longer than they should; employees whisper about each other instead of communicating with each other; people don’t speak up in meetings or when they see a project will likely fail; they believe that co-workers are manipulative liars. As a result, DUD behavior severely diminishes profits, erodes products and services, increases the likelihood of law cases, weakens your competitive edge and demotivates employees.

“With the best equipment in the world the man with poor judgment is in mortal danger.” (Royal Robbins, climber and entrepreneur)

Selfishness is “biological, not cultural.” It is a survival instinct that enables a species to survive and evolve. One expedition leader noticed that people regularly helped each other out and behaved like team members on the way up to the summit. However, the teams usually fell apart on the way down. Their connecting tissue was the shared passion, the common goal to reach the top. Without it, people’s innate selfishness surfaced and the groups split into silos.

“We can teach anyone to do just about any job in this company other than fly the plane. The problem we’re concerned about is attitude. We can’t teach that. And that’s what we screen for in our hiring process.” (Southwest Airlines gate agent)

To combat selfishness, create a “compelling saga,” a cause or mission that inspires people to join forces for the greater good. Passion enables individuals and organizations to persevere against overwhelming odds. Passion keeps dreams alive and gives people a reason to come to work every day. Your company’s compelling saga should have a “dramatic theme,” “set a goal that is difficult to achieve,” “focus people on strategic results” and “spawn stories and legends that permeate your organization’s culture.” Use stories that incorporate strategy, foresight, ethics and ideals. Above all, adopt an approach that gives you the best chance of reaching the summit.

“Danger No. 3: Tool Seduction”

The best climbers are not necessarily the ones with the best gear. They may be even worse because they believe expensive equipment can replace proper technique. Many executives are enamored with educational programming, leadership theory and management consulting. They send employees to training seminars or adopt the latest motivational strategies aimed at boosting morale and increasing productivity. Unfortunately, nearly three-quarters of such initiatives fail. Most organizations already have the tools to succeed, but their results depend on “behavior and adaptation.” The world’s finest equipment won’t help a climber who doesn’t act properly.

“Employees aren’t stupid. They know the bad news already. They want to see if their leaders have the courage to acknowledge it.”

Successful companies such as Southwest Airlines and Disney hire people based on personality and attitude, not their resumes. Your organization’s screening process should include methods for measuring adaptability, professionalism, potential and the ability to get along with co-workers and administrators. Remain flexible and don’t rely on tools that are no longer effective. Your company’s system for manufacturing widgets may be unmatched, but that won’t help if your customers are buying sprockets.

“Danger No. 4: Arrogance”

Egotism has doomed hundreds of mountain climbers and thousands of companies. Leaders who refuse to identify trends, face reality or believe they know everything are courting disaster. Corporate scandals involving Enron and WorldCom revealed the arrogance of executives who flaunted the rules and disregarded the fundamentals of accountability.

“Cynics and curmudgeons do not inspire peak performance in their teams. Depressed

To spot arrogance in your company, ask these questions: Do your employees think they know it all? Have they lost touch with your customer base? Do they fail to recognize competitive threats? Teach yourself and your employees to be humble and to embrace failure as an opportunity to do it better next time. Don’t hesitate to fire egomaniacs who are more interested in taking credit than in cooperating with their colleagues. Understand the importance of holding productive meetings. Handing out kudos to employees who are progressing nicely on projects is fine, but you can use meeting time more efficiently by addressing problems and concerns. Employees might prefer to focus on good performance, but organizations benefit more by discussing ways to improve. Set a good example by talking about your own challenges first.

“Danger No. 5: Lone Heroism”

Some climbers insist on taking on challenges by themselves. They’re convinced that asking for help is a character flaw, even refuse to use oxygen in high altitude and express disdain when someone offers assistance. They may be seeking glory, but often simply believe that no one else is capable of fulfilling the mission. Lone heroes on Mt. Everest who defy logic and disregard common sense often wind up as corpses.

“High altitude leaders know that partnership with peers, staff or outside stakeholders trumps lone heroism every time.”

Lone heroes may be popular in books and movies, but in the workplace they lower team morale, impede progress and ultimately lead to failure. Lone heroes on a battlefield put their comrades at risk. During the Vietnam War, several hundred U.S. officers interested only in gaining the praise and admiration of superiors were murdered by their own men.

“I learned how to handle death as it occurs. We have one job, whether the person is a total stranger or an old friend. We need to push as much love into the person as we can. A departing soul deserves to be honored by the greatest human emotion, love, and it is our job to supply plenty of it.”

Partnerships are the perfect antidote to lone heroism. They can develop between individuals in different departments or between managers and workers. Titles or rank shouldn’t prevent you from selecting the right individual to steer a project or initiative. Secure and self-confident bosses can empower other people without feeling threatened. They recognize leadership qualities in others and happily step aside.

“Danger No. 6: Cowardice”

Leaders and workers often hesitate to admit they’ve made mistakes or to raise questions and objections when they suspect something is wrong. They’re afraid that others will blame them or label them as troublemakers. Your company will suffer if people are too cowardly to speak up when things go wrong or if they don’t dare criticize others’ ideas.

“Maybe consultants should take the same pledge as doctors: ‘Primum non nocere’ (first, do no harm).”

Unfortunately, secrecy and cowardice often are part of corporate culture. Shame can counteract cowardice and push people to act bravely (think of the soldier who is afraid to fight, but too embarrassed to desert). Most people now consider it politically incorrect to shame people into action. Pop psychology suggests that people cannot tolerate attacks on their self-esteem. Yet one study indicates that self-esteem has little to do with achieving success. In fact, people prefer to hear the truth and many recognize when organizations use motivational ploys to cover the truth.

Rooting out cowardice requires unflinching honesty. Start with yourself—do you have the courage to face the problems in your organization? Can you handle exposing them? Encourage the free exchange of ideas and opinions. Make the necessary changes to fix an underperforming unit. Move people around and replace ineffective leaders. Stop having drawn-out, unproductive meetings and don’t allow apathy.

“Danger No. 7: Comfort”

Change is painful for most people. They prefer the familiarity of the status quo. Significant and lasting change requires leaving your comfort zone. Life-changing achievements, like scaling an intimidating peak in Nepal or rescuing your floundering business require fortitude and commitment. Adversity is a true test of leadership and accountability.

Confronting employees who aren’t delivering is unpleasant. Pulling the plug on a project that is languishing is hard. Listening to customer complaints is not easy. But there is no other method for fixing problems.

You must face your challenges head-on and be willing to be uncomfortable. Be careful, though: Don’t push ahead blindly and ignore reality. Mountain climbers on the

brink of conquering Mt. Everest have been forced to abandon their summit attempts because of life-threatening circumstances. Perseverance is admirable but not when it flies in the face of logic and common sense.

“Danger No. 8: Gravity”

Surprising avalanches or sudden, fierce winds have swept away the most experienced climbers with the best equipment and strategies. High altitude leaders can do everything right and still come up short. An anticipated promotion may fail to materialize; the market may not accept a product; a strategy may turn out to be flawed in the face of new circumstances; a severe recession rocks the economy and decimates seemingly safe retirement funds. It’s impossible to predict shifts of fortune.

The only way climbers counter gravity is luck, which plays an integral role in success. People frequently take too much credit or blame for outcomes beyond their control. You can improve your odds through hard work, preparation and a good mental attitude. But also be open to new possibilities and welcome unexpected opportunities. Learn to follow your instincts, obey your hunches and play the percentages. Be optimistic and, in the end, expect good luck. Do all you can to position yourself to succeed. The rest is out of your hands.

About the Authors

Chris Warner is an educator and entrepreneur who has led more than 150 international mountaineering expeditions. **Don Schmincke** is a management consultant and founder of the SAGA Leadership Institute.
