

White Paper

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Ascent up Mt. Everest: A Study Of Leadership & Change

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The Ascent

It was early May of 1996 when three groups of people and their leaders were attempted a successful climb up and down Mount Everest. The three groups totaled about thirty people; each person carried with them their goal, their dream of summiting the great mountain.

Although it was a successful climb to the top of the mountain, the descent from the summit was a failure for some. Five people lost their lives when they were met by a massive storm on their way down the mountain. The details of this tragic story can provide us with a better understanding of the roles of leaders and followers. This analysis will focus on the leadership styles and group dynamics of two of the three groups (based on the movie *Into Thin Air* and the article by Dowling and Pokorny entitled *Death on the Mountain*).

Rob Hall can be described as a “by-the-book” leader. He had a more transactional leadership style. He set up guidelines for the climb and had a strong desire to work within these guidelines. For example, one of the key guidelines which demonstrated Hall’s transactional leadership style was the set turn-around time. Prior to the climb, Hall had set a time for his team to start heading back to Camp IV even if they had not yet reached the summit of the mountain. Hall’s team knew that at 2:00 they were to make their way to Camp IV. Hall provided his team with explicit directions and guidelines for their climb; his group likely had a clear understanding of what to expect during their climb.

Scott Fischer, on the other hand, took a different approach to the leadership of his group. Fischer practiced a more transformational leadership style. He was a charismatic, laid back leader who placed a lot of the decision making power into the hands of his group. Fischer set a few basic guidelines for his team but believed in letting people make their own decisions on the mountain. His personality and charisma led to the admiration of his team members – even the Sherpa, Lobsang Jangbu, idolized Fischer.

Both Hall and Fischer were legitimate leaders with legitimate power. Hall obtained his leadership position through rational means. He was selected by the team of followers to be their leader. He had more experience than any other with guiding people up and down Mount Everest. His previous successes were obvious and the belief that he would be successful again was present. To help his team achieve success, Hall chose a single high-altitude guide, Andy, to assist him on the climb. While Fischer did not have the experience Hall had with guiding people to the top of Everest, his charisma played a large part in obtaining legitimate power by inspiring others to follow him. People seemed naturally attracted to Fischer’s personality and confidence and were willing to follow him despite his lack of experience. To assist him, Fisher hired two high-altitude guides, Neal and Anatoli, to ensure his team’s success. Both leaders were confident that they had provided their team with all that was necessary to have a successful climb.

As the teams began climbing the mountain, the differences between the two leadership styles became more apparent. Fischer, and his transformational leadership style, encouraged his team to make their own decisions on the mountain. He didn't have a set structure, formula, or rule for getting his team to the top and back down. He relied on his ability and the ability of others to make quick decisions while climbing the mountain. Hall, on the other hand, had a preset formula, a set of guidelines that he would follow as his team ascended and descended the mountain. As suggested above, a major part of Hall's plan was the 2:00 turn-around time. Despite whether or not the people had reached their goal, Hall's plan required them to turn around at a specific time. Hall also provided his team with a structure to support change and decision making while on the mountain.

The differences between the two styles are evident. The transformative nature of Fischer's charismatic leadership inspired others to plan and change quickly. As Hall's turn-around time approached, Fischer's team was forced to make their own decision about whether they would turn around or continue the ascent to the summit. For Hall's team, the plan was understood and the turn-around time was a precise detail within the structure of this plan. The decision would be no surprise for the members of Hall's team that did not summit by the turn-around time.

As it turned out, Fischer's ability to inspire others had an influence on some of Hall's team members as they began to question Hall's set turn-around time. Therefore, the question is not are the two leadership styles different, but rather, which style works best in effecting change in a given situation? Fischer, as a charismatic leader, demonstrated an amazing ability to influence others, especially while on the mountain.

As they climbed the mountain, the individual groups became one large group, one society. This meant that there were now two leaders and only one group. The tension between the two leaders became obvious. Fischer's laid back approach frustrated the rational Hall. Both leaders had the same goal of reaching the summit, but each had a different style and process for achieving that goal. Their leadership styles conflicted with each other. Fischer's leadership style influenced Hall's team and, as the turn-around time came and went, Doug Hansen refused to turn around. Despite Hansen's blatant disrespect for Hall and his rules, Hall could not make himself leave Hansen behind. Hall stuck with Hansen all the way to the summit, two hours after the original turn-around time.

Another inherent tension during the climb was the group's desire to reach the summit of Everest coupled with their lack of climbing experience and the leaders desire to have people reach the summit coupled with their responsibility to keep everybody safe. The inexperienced climbers could not truly comprehend the full danger they could find themselves in on the mountain. They likely felt safer with the number of other people completing the same task around them. It was the leaders' responsibility to balance the desire to reach the top with the need to keep the climbers safe. When Hall let Hansen, one of the climbers, convince him to dismiss his preset turn-around time, Hall lost his power to lead and his plan crumbled. Fischer, coughing and desperate for breath, refused to acknowledge reason and go back down the mountain before reaching the summit. He ultimately lost his power to lead when he died in his descent from the top.

The decisions that had to be made on the mountain relied on absolute commitment to the leader and his decisions. However, instead of this commitment, Hall faced constant questioning of his ability to be an effective leader by his “so-called” followers. A group that, prior to the start of the climb was willing to trust Hall with their lives, was now, in the midst of the climb, questioning his authority over them. It was an obvious frustration for Hall to watch his team assimilate to the culture led and demonstrated by the revolutionary leadership of Fischer. He lost control and the ability to lead his group; the result was the blatant disregard for Hall’s plan and the continuation up the mountain after the turn-around time had passed. The ultimate result of this action was the death of three members of Hall’s group.

When everyone is working toward a common goal, progress is made. The climbers were all working hard to make it to the summit of Everest. However, when goals shift, the leader must be able to lead the change or the people will continue to follow the original goal. Going back to Camp IV was a less appealing goal than reaching the summit. It was easy to encourage the climbers to follow when they were being led to complete a task they desired to accomplish. Greater leadership is demonstrated when you can lead a group to complete a less appealing task. Hall developed a plan but was unable to demonstrate the leadership needed to inspire others to accept the plan. He was unable to inspire the followers to abandon the original goal and begin working towards a less appealing one. Instead, Hall was inspired by his “followers” to abandon his plan for necessary change and simply continue with the same goal they’ve had since the beginning.

It is not uncommon for apparent followers to become leaders when the supposed leaders are unable to maintain power. When a leader, even an experienced leader, lacks the ability to effect change in the hearts of the followers, the followers will resist change and potentially drive the initiative in a new direction. When a leader allows his guidelines to be compromised by another leader or follower, he or she allows their power to dwindle and the identity of who leads and who follows to be compromised. As mentioned above, Hall was climbing to the summit with Hansen, the weakest climber on his team, when the turn-around time came. Hall told Hansen it was time to turn around, but Hansen refused. Hall, feeling the responsibility of being a leader, could not leave him ascending to the summit alone. Hall violated his own rule and continued the climb with Hansen. It was at that point Hall lost his power and put it in the hands of his weakest follower. A follower influenced the leader; a follower became the leader. The boundaries had shifted and new identities emerged.

Reaching the Summit

The two guides that Fischer hired, Anatoli and Neal, were of the first to reach the summit of the mountain. They waited until the clients from their group reached the summit and then began leading them down the mountain; Anatoli took the first group to reach the summit and Neal waited a little longer for the stragglers. Because Fischer, the apparent leader, was struggling to reach the summit, the two guides had to lead the less-experienced climbers back down the mountain. Because their leader was not with them, the climbers were forced to follow new leaders.

As they descended down the mountain, the groups were met by a storm that blinded them with snow. It was at this point, a point of desperation, a point of necessity, that Anatoli’s and Neal’s leadership took root in the hearts and minds of their followers.

The groups found themselves lost, unable to find the path that led to Camp IV. Afraid of walking off a cliff of the mountain, many waited for someone to come and save them or for the storm to quit raging. Anatoli found his way back to Camp IV and then tried to go back out to save others – unfortunately, he could not see so he returned to Camp.

Later that night, Neal arrived with the strongest in his group; he told Anatoli where the others were. Anatoli went out looking for the lost climbers. He eventually found a group of climbers and began the process of leading them to Camp IV – he took the strongest first. He made a total of five trips to look for survivors during the storm. In a situation that required leadership, he took hold of the reins. Anatoli was no longer a guide, a hired help; he was the leader, the one everyone looked to for direction. Originally, Anatoli did not want to be the leader of this group of inexperienced climbers. His lack of interest in helping the clients was expressed by his arrival on the summit before any of the clients made it to the top. He was not there to assist them in reaching their goal; we might even assume his reason for being a guide on the trip was his own selfish desire to climb. However, after the storm arrived, Anatoli found himself in a situation that required his leadership.

Leadership Challenge

Many leaders find themselves “accidentally” ending up as leaders due to the situation around them. Whether or not they want to be leaders, they emerge as such due to their experience, understanding, or ability to organize a group to move in a certain direction. In Anatoli’s case, his goal was not helping others make it to the summit, but to get the climbers to safety at Camp IV. This was the new goal of the group – no one had a desire to go back up the mountain – that goal had already been accomplished and now a new goal was before them. Anatoli was there to help them achieve this new goal, a goal that all were willing to follow him towards.

Before the storm ever hit, before the group ever reached the summit, before a single climber ever set foot on the mountain, Hall had likely spent months perfecting his plan to safely climb Everest with his team. He allowed that thought-out plan to be changed while on the side of the mountain. Hall’s reaction and ultimate acceptance to making this change in his plan directly corresponds with the SARA model for organizational change. First, Hall was **shocked** that Hansen refused to continue with the plan that Hall had originally put in place. Then, Hall became **angry** with Hansen for his refusal to listen to him and continue to follow the plan. After that, Hall **resisted** the change and worked to convince Hansen to turn around and begin descending down the mountain. Finally, however, Hall **accepted** the change and continued to climb up the mountain with Hansen.

In the end, five climbers died, including Rob Hall and Scott Fischer. The others that died were members of Rob Hall’s group. While all of the climbers were able to make it to the top, they were not all able to return home to their families. The failure of this climb was a direct result of the failure to lead. Both Hall and Fischer had two different leadership styles that worked against each other when climbing the mountain. Fischer’s laid back attitude led Hall’s group to believe that Hall’s plan and expectations were ridiculous and able to be modified. Hall was relying on the structure he set up prior to the climb to be supported by his team during the climb. However, once on the mountain, both groups seemed to be influenced by Fischer’s charismatic personality. Fischer’s disregard for Hall’s rules made it easier for Hall’s followers to disregard them as well. The groups trust in their chosen leader was compromised with the introduction of another leader with a different approach to the same task.

In the end there are some changes in leadership that might have made a difference to the outcome of these events. The major problem that led to the tragic end to this story was the fact that the individual groups essentially merged into one large group. There was originally a leader for each group, but when they began to climb the mountain, the followers were influenced by others.

From this case, one can better understand the roles of leaders and followers, group dynamics, and the influence of a given situation. The mountain represents any organization. The summit can represent a goal the organization is trying to achieve. The turn-around time can represent a time when a goal is to be shifted to meet the new needs of an organization. The storm can represent what happens when employees and leaders are not focused on the new goal and continue in their “old” ways. The struggle all the climbers had when trying to reach the “new” goal – Camp IV - can represent all the hard work and extra work that will go in to changing the organization when everyone is not involved in the decision-making and change process. The death of some of the climbers can represent the failure of some in an organization who refuse to change or fail to accomplish the new goal or purpose of the organization. It is inevitable that all organizations will go through change. It is *how* the organization makes this change that will determine its success.

(For information on managing change and transition, please see our previous white paper entitled: “There is only one thing constant in life ...”)