
Reaching New Heights!

Six key tools your team can use to conquer their Everest

by Cathy O'Dowd



Introduction

Everest is a giant - both in its physical presence as the highest point on the planet and in the way we use it as a metaphor for tackling the biggest challenges in our lives.

However, its sheer mass of rock and snow and its towering size is deceptive. It leads us to assume that what must be needed is enormous physical effort - Olympian levels of fitness and strength - and what has to be avoided are the catastrophic forces of nature - the avalanches and the blizzards.

The truth is more complicated. Everest climbed by one of the two standard routes is not very difficult. (These are the south col route which was first completed by Hillary and Tenzing in 1953 and the north ridge route which was pioneered by George Mallory in 1924 and finished by the Chinese in 1960.) That lack of absolute technical difficulty is one of the reasons why it is now a popular commercial mountain, with guides and Sherpas escorting paying clients up a pre-prepared route to the summit. And yet the failure rate remains high, and not just among the punters. Experienced independent climbers come home disappointed too.

What goes wrong on Everest?

Technical ability and physical fitness are simply the starting point for the Everest hopeful. Just as in any industry sector, you need the basic skills and knowhow to enter the fray. But basic level skills will not be enough to set you apart from the competition, they will not be enough to keep you moving forward in the face of inevitable set-backs and disasters, they will not be enough to hold your team together as the stress and the risk rises and the prize doesn't seem to get any closer.

It is true that many of the things that can and will go wrong are entirely outside your control - whether you are facing storms and avalanches or a macro economic or regulatory environment. Those things can be frustratingly difficult to predict accurately and therefore to factor precisely in your planning.

How do you improve your chances of success when basic skills are not enough and many of the likely obstacles are outside your control?

The good news is that there are a set of factors that are under your control, both obstacles that you can avoid and tools that you can use to improve your effectiveness. They are factors that are easily overlooked, but if you can utilise them effectively, you are well ahead of the competition, not matter how muscular they may look or how impressive their past experience may be.

In this ebook I want to share with you six key tools that will make you more effective, both as an individual and as a member or a leader of a team.

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” - Reinhold Niebuhr

Much of what will happen on the mountain, or in your life, is outside your control. Recognising that and acknowledging that you are neither responsible nor liable for it is liberating. Like King Canute, you won't stop the tide and you won't hold back the avalanche. However, over things are within our control and changing those things can require courage, as well as patience and humility. Much of what we can influence is frustratingly amorphous, because it is embedded in our feelings, our attitudes and our behaviours. For leaders, this is a dreaded 'soft-skills' stuff about personal behaviours and team dynamics, things that are difficult to quantify and difficult to explain, that don't fit on to spreadsheets and that can't be easily measured to track improvement.

Experienced climbers are as likely as any to fall into this trap. I can recall many discussions at Everest base camp where hopeful climbers were asking each other about their strategy for tackling the Hillary Step. The Hillary Step is a giant boulder that lies across the knife-edge snow ridge that leads to the summit of Everest. From base camp many parts of the climb can be spied out but that final ridge - and the famous rock step - remain hidden until you cross the south summit on your summit day and discover whether the reality meets or exceeds its reputation. It is true that a strategy will be needed for the Hillary Step and there is a certain gratifying drama in discussing it. It is so tantalisingly close to the summit, it makes you feel as if you are almost there!

However, that step lies at around 8600 metres. Base camp is at 5300 metres. A strategy is also going to be needed to stop sitting around talking to other climbers in the comfort of base camp and start tackling the 3600 vertical metres of climbing that lie between the climbers and the problem. In truth, you are very far from being almost there.

It is a valid strategy to say that by the time you get yourself to the foot of the Hillary Step you are likely to be good enough to work out how to deal with it. Standing at base camp there are many more immediate challenges that you should be tackling.

This ebook is about what some of those immediate challenges are and how you might improve your chances of overcoming them.



1. One team - one aim

This is irritatingly obvious and yet frustratingly hard to implement well. No amount of mission statements drawn up by the communications department or objectives presented by the management team are going to make this a reality. For this to actually exist we need to invest a lot more thought and lot more effort than most teams are prepared to do.

In my experience on Everest, our status as a team and our agreement on our aim seemed utterly obvious. We were the 1st South African Everest team. We had a logo, we had t-shirts, we travelled together, the media called us a team. Clearly we were a team. And our aim was equally obvious. The first South African ascent of Everest. The summit is the size of a dining room table. Everest is not a table-top mountain, the peak is a pointy as a child's drawing. The aim was not in doubt.

And yet in practise both the team and the aim turned out to be utterly amorphous. It quickly became clear that some of the members simply viewed the team as a forum for competition as they sort to establish a pecking order of importance. And that pecking order then influenced the aim, which became that individual members should establish their obvious right to be part of the eventual summit group. The aim became a personal one, achieved at the expense of the rest of the team, rather than in collaboration with them. The negative effects of that competition and the attempts to undermine fellow team members that accompanied it, quickly weakened the chances of any team member getting

anywhere close to the top. The team collapsed into a cesspit of infighting before we had even reached Everest basecamp.

The team: forum for collaboration or for competition?

This problem with competition is not confined to mountain climbers. Any activity that attracts the sort of self-confident, ambitious, competitive type-As that fancy they can climb the world's highest mountains or run the world's biggest companies is going to be caught up in this problem. Ambitious individuals tend to be competitive by nature and are likely to measure their self-worth in relation to those closest to them - which are going to be their team-mates, rather than the the rival company or climbing team!

I have spent many years using my Everest experiences to talk about team dynamics to senior executives in large corporations and I am fascinated by how quickly everyone considers themselves to be a leader. They are the pinnacle of their team, the leading light, and they want my help in getting their followers - their team members - to be more effective and better behaved. So few of them think of themselves as also being a team member, whether it's a member of the team they are leading or a member of the executive management team, or even of the Board. They are in competition with their fellow executives, competing for resources, for recognition, for promotion. They are jealously guarding their knowledge, their time and their assets, their people are kept apart in isolated silos, and the entire enterprise is held back by the very competitiveness that ought to make it so effective.

Keys to a culture of collaboration include open communication, transparency, a public commitment and constant vigilance to maintain the culture. Also of great importance is an aim that is shared across the team and that requires collaboration to achieve.

On an Everest expedition that kind of aim can be difficult to create effectively. Even if your intention is to get all your team members to the top, the reality is that some are likely to fall sick, become injured or fail to acclimatise. And the truth is that, within limits, that natural wastage is beneficial to those who remain. Most obviously, we only have so many bottles of oxygen - oxygen only being used in the so-called 'death zone' above 8000 metres. If fewer team members join the final push to the summit, each of those members gets more oxygen to use and therefore improves their chances of getting to the top. And we only need one member of the team on the summit to claim success - the 1st South African ascent of Everest. If you suspect you are not going to be that one, it can all start to feel like a hard of hard work for little return.

When we had to regroup as a team after the failed 'leadership coup' that saw three of our strongest climbers resign from the team, demand concessions if they were to rejoin, and be rejected by the rest of the group who no longer trusted them, we were forced to articulate an aim in a way that we hadn't done before, back when we all just assumed that the summit of Everest was obviously our goal.

The aim: why should it matter to you?

We came to articulate that goal as taking the new flag of South Africa as high as we could up the mountain. Simple though that sounds, it had several key elements that made it powerful.

- It was not about any one individual.
- It could be measured.
- It was not all-or-nothing. Less than the summit was not failure. We were after 'as high as we can get'. So every extra metre we can gain matters, even if the summit feels impossible to achieve.
- It was an 'emotionally sticky' goal.

Emotionally sticky is a powerful idea but can be tricky to create. Goals in business are often expressed as numbers - financial targets to be reached, or user numbers, or something similar. Such goals are easy to think up and fit the challenge of being measurable and objective. But they seldom have emotional resonance for most of the team. The power of the new flag of South Africa lay in its connotations. We were all South Africans who had grown up under apartheid and had all chosen to stay in the country through the years of turmoil and economic sanctions and civil war. We had been there when apartheid fell, we had voted in the first free elections, we had celebrated when the new flag was raised for the first time.

The first South African ascent of Everest was happening 43 years after the mountain has first been climbed. We were late to the game, but the fact that we could play the game at all was a symbol of our return to the world's community of nations. Our flag on the highest point of the planet was a powerful symbol of all that we had achieved as a country and that emotional connection kept us on the mountain side long after other teams began to give up and go home when the going became difficult.

Not every project is going to be able to articulate a goal of this kind. In all my climbing expeditions, the other one that had the same kind of power was the first ascent of Nanga Parbat via the Mazeno ridge. There we were trying to do something that had never been done before, where ten teams had failed before us, in a time where world firsts

are getting ever harder to achieve in the high Himalaya and we had this one extraordinary opportunity to contribute to mountaineering history.

If you can find a way to create such goals, and then pursue them with a team consciously founded in a culture of collaboration, you are well ahead of most of your competitors.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- ❖ **Consciously foster a culture of collaboration through:**
 - open communication
 - transparency
 - public commitment

- ❖ **Seek out clear, team-based, emotional sticky goals**



2. Passion for the process

The popular mythology of mountain climbing assumes it is all about standing on the top. It is embodied in the language we use. Media and the public and commercial client climbers revel in speaking about ‘conquering’ the summit. It is fundamental to the way we use Everest as a metaphor - it is this oversized example of goal achievement.

And yet, I would argue that this is not only a profound misunderstanding of why most climbers tackle mountains, it is actively detrimental to our chances of success. Everest is the new midlife crisis for the wealthy, high-achieving professional. Where once he (and it is generally, although not always, a he) would have bought a fast sports car, now he buys a place on a commercial Everest expedition in order to be escorted to the top by a guide and Sherpas. What he is most interested in is ‘having done’ Everest, rather than the process of actually doing. Some will summon the grit to suffer through the challenge and will get that prize morsel to drop into dinner party conversation forever after: *when I was standing on top of Everest....* Many others will wilt in the face of grinding discomfort spread out over weeks and limp away unsatisfied.

No one will have conquered anything, other than perhaps some of their own inner demons. The claim is as nonsensical as an ant crawling laboriously to the top of the fridge and announcing it has conquered the fridge. The fridge, and the world around, are quite unmoved by the experience!

Climbers who find their joy in the process of climbing approach the enterprise in ways that are at odds with the popular mythology of Everest. We approach mountains knowing that there is always a significant chance of failure. Your reasons for turning back may be as concrete as an uncrossable chasm in the ice or as nebulous as an uneasy feeling in your gut that maybe you should retreat.

Part of the interest of the challenge is the knowledge that you are entering an environment that embodies a variety of risks, that you cannot control completely, that you cannot understand fully. You need to weave your way through this fascinating landscape, managing and mitigating those risks, seeking out a safe return to base with - if you can get it, the cherry on the top of your enterprise - a summit en route.

Ten minutes on the summit of Everest does not balance out five to nine weeks of grinding repetitive work with chilly, grubby living conditions and mediocre food, if you find no joy in the act of being on an expedition, in the challenge of weaving a way up a snow slope, through an ice field, over a rock cliff.

Without a profound interest in the process of the climb, we are much less likely to stick it out long enough to get anywhere close to the summit. In other aspects of life this may be harder to achieve. We do, after all, choose to spend our free time scaling mountains. Elsewhere in life you may be doing things in far more constrained circumstances, or leading people who have little choice about the project they are engaged in. Nevertheless there are ways to build a passion, not just for the hoped-for outcome, but for the process that takes you there.

As a climber, I use techniques like this to carry me through the periods of grinding monotony and frustration that exist within any challenge, chosen or not. Even when out climbing for fun, it is not all skipping up some magnificent glacier to the tune of the Sound of Music.

Here are four ideas that can help you find a passion for the process:

1. Know why you are doing this

This is a tip for your big picture. Every undertaking will include periods of dreary work. You want to be able to stand in the middle of that frustration, lift your eyes to your horizon and say: *I do this because....*

I get enormous satisfaction from stepping up onto ridges and seeing unexpected new vistas opening out below me. I have ground my way up many a long, boring, treacherous mountainside because I know how much I will appreciate the place I will reach by investing this effort at this time.

That being said, I have also turned away from mountain tops because the circumstances were such that all joy had been lost from the enterprise, or because the reward was never going to outweigh the price I would have to pay to get there.

I believe in turning away from challenges if they turn out to not fulfil your requirements. Leave the project. Quit the job. Beware the sunken cost fallacy, the belief that you must continue because you have already invested so much, in time or effort or money. Beware the vapid quotes that tell you that *winners never quit*. In fact winners generally quit early, quit often, and quit decisively. Then they can turn their time and attention to a more productive avenue towards success.

However, many of us go through life without ever having articulated to ourselves what our real whys are. *Why* we do this. *Why* we don't that. *Why* this matters to us. *Why* this is a valuable use of the limited time offered to us by a single lifespan.

If you can articulate your *why* and choose projects that feed it, you can keep going for much longer, through more hardship that you would ever have imagined.

If as a leader of a team, you can articulate a cogent *why* for your team members, and help them keep it at the front of their minds through the tough times, you can take them further for longer than any of you would have anticipated.

2. Set intermediate goals

Climbing big mountains lends its to this metaphor, as you work your way from base camp, up to camp 1, on to camp 2, and so on. Many people don't realise you also spend a good deal of time going backwards. You may need to return to base camp for more supplies, or to wait out bad weather, or to aid acclimatisation, or recover from illness or injury. There should be many kinds of intermediate goals in play - camps reached, supplies shifted, acclimatisation cycles completed.

It is also worth having entirely other kinds of goals as well. Years ago I attempted a new route on the east face of Everest. (The challenge of Everest is not over, there remain at least two new routes to be climbed on the gigantic and isolated east face.) Circumstances dictated that we were a very small team on a very tight budget and our chances of success was minuscule. We knew that, and it can be hard to be motivated to try in the face of that knowledge.

I set myself another goal. This was at the dawn of the communication technology that allows an isolated team in a remote corner of Tibet to share their story with the world on an almost daily basis. My other goal was to share our story as it unfolded, the successes and the failures, the tough choices that had to be made, the risks we had to weigh up. In some senses the two goals contradicted each other. The more easily the climb

went, the less interesting the story would be. The more difficulties we faced, the more we agonised over whether to push forward or retreat, the more compelling the story would become. That had its own frustrations.

A huge windstorm destroyed our base camp and nearly wrecked our communications equipment. I managed to nurse both the laptop and the satellite phone blinked back to life, and then filed a report for the Daily Telegraph website in Britain, describing the avalanche we had survived at the advanced base camp while the wind was flattening base camp. Although they had expressed interest in the project before we left, since then they had more or less ignored us. Now their news editor promptly replied to say that that was great stuff and could they please have more of the same.

Although illness, poor conditions and the route being much too hard and too dangerous led to us giving up, my secondary goal was handily achieved.

I have agreed to participate in various projects over the years, often being sceptical of whether the ultimate goal was possible but having decided that there were things I could achieve just by taking part that would be worth my while. That way I have walked away from what was an overall failure with a string of successes that would feed into the next project.

3. Look back and celebrate success

We can be so focused on pushing forward and visualising our eventual success that we lose the momentum of the journey. Few of us actually use visualisation the way professional athletes do, a total mental recreation of a physical activity. We call it visualisation but it is mostly wishful daydreaming. How good it will feel to be successful in the future! It takes us away from thinking how stuck we feel in the present. Studies also seem to show the visualising success in this way is not helpful, it gives us the feeling of already being done and so reduces our motivation to keep on doing.

Everest climbers gaze up endlessly towards the summit and become demoralised by how far away it is, or ignore the difficulties still to be overcome in favour of daydreaming about their anticipated 'conquest'.

There is more to be gained by taking the time to stop, turn round and look back. By appreciating the distance we have covered, the obstacles we have overcome and the effort we have invested, we build up our confidence and our pride and that in turn feeds into our motivation to do more and push further.

As individuals and as leaders of teams, we need to remain conscious of our achievements, we need to allow time to celebrate those intermediate goals and we need to

move forward by collecting successes rather than chasing a goal that seems endlessly out of reach.

4. Turn to your team

Sometimes there really is no way to be excited about your situation. Sometimes you have to laugh because if you don't, you'll start to cry. For me this is one of the most important aspects of a successful team, or partnership. Everyone cycles, physically and mentally. We have days when we feel strong and days when we battle just to keep going. To be able to turn to someone else and say: *I am all out of motivation for this, you take the lead for a while*, that is very helpful.

Clearly there is a level of stress and despair that is a real warning sign, a call to action to change your circumstances. But before that, there is a place where your motivation is gone but the project is still worthwhile. At that place, if you can ask someone else to remind you why this matters, to joke with you about the horror of the situation, to help you keep moving forward, you can make it through to a better situation.

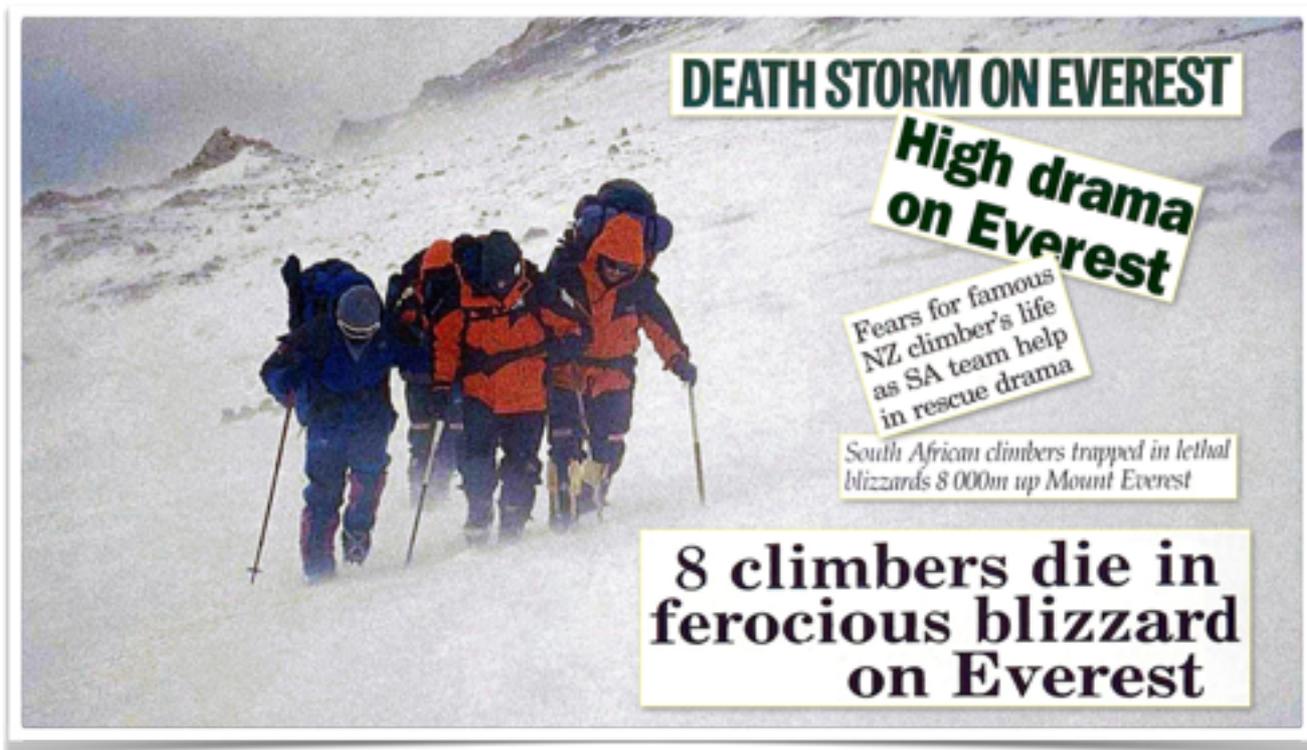
Two of the simplest solutions to the sensation of being overwhelmed are the feeling that you are not alone in this mess and that you have the ability and the right to expect help in moving onwards.

And anyone who can crack the tension by laughing - not at you but with you - who can help you find the absurdity in your plight and through the laughter help you visualise a way forward, is an invaluable asset on a team.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Find a passion for the process:

- ❖ Know why you are doing this.
- ❖ Set intermediate goals
- ❖ Look back and celebrate success
- ❖ Turn to your team



3. Courage of your own choices

There is safety in numbers. There is some truth in that, the majority of us do better as part of a supportive team than we do alone. We like to group together. But there is another very human tendency, which is to look to our neighbours when we are unsure what to do ourselves. We hope they may know more than we do, and we think that if we fail, at least we fail as part of group. We won't be left standing alone, the fool to be pointed out and laughed at by all the others who made a different choice.

This instinct to herd together can be deeply counterproductive. Others may well know less than we do, they may not be as well prepared or well informed, their apparent confidence may simply hide profound ignorance, not even knowing what it is that they don't know.

Or they may simply be on a different path from us, with different goals and priorities. When faced with a wilderness of virgin snow, it can be very tempting to follow a set of tracks. But there is no knowing where they will lead and whether they were put in place by people who may have been even more lost than we are. Other people's tracks and other people's choices can be useful information to us, but only if they are added to our own priorities and goals.

On Everest we sat at 8000 metres, paralysed with indecision. On one hand we faced a barrier of our own making. We had agreed before we left home that one thing we would

not do was climb on into unknown ground in unstable weather. It was a cautious choice, but a safe one, and sensible given our relative lack of experience. On the other hand, we were in place at the top camp on Everest, in the company of three other teams, all with more experience than we had and all committed to climb on that night in the hope of reaching the summit the following day.

Putting certain absolute parameters in place before you start can be very useful, certain things that you do not do, whatever the temptation. It helps you to draw a line in situations where circumstances may be dragging you forward inch by inch, much further into a danger zone than you ever imagined going.

But each set of circumstances is unique, you can't predict them all. Sitting a 8000 metres, the flurry of snow that had met us as we arrived seemingly over, the wind shifting restlessly, it was hard to know if these specific conditions matched our category of *unstable weather*. And those other three teams were going, teams who were better than us, led by men who - unlike us - had climbed Everest before. It was so tempting to follow....

What happened is now famous in the history of Everest. We decided, reluctantly, to stick with our parameters, keep the team together, wait for the weather to settle. The other teams went, reached the top, and then on the descent were caught in what is now called the worst storm in the history of Everest. By the time the storm finally died out, eight climbers were dead, five on our side of the mountain, three on the other side.

We, along with all the other teams, retreated back down to base camp and tried to decide what to do next. Now the collective voice was overwhelming in voting for going home - cut your losses, get out while you can. The weather was said to be too unstable, the season was called unlucky. Back home family members and media added their voices to the din. The fact that when we had said people might possibly die on Everest, we had actually meant it, seemed to have taken many people by surprise. It was a truth of the risks we were taking, not a dramatic exaggeration to stir up media interest.

And yet.... Within our team we felt strengthened by surviving the storm. We had not done anything dramatic or heroic. But we had made cautious, safe choices and then survived the chaos of the storm without making any catastrophic errors. If anything, that process had brought us closer together as a group. Quietly, privately, we had to come to believe that if we could survive that storm, then we had a good chance of being able to get to the summit in good conditions. Two more weeks remained of the season, with luck and determination we could make good use of that time. But to do that we had once again to walk in the opposite direction of the voice of the crowd.

We would make our slow, careful way back up the mountain and we would end up being the very last team left on the mountain - and we would make the summit, eventually.

Making the choices that are right for you and your project, rather than the choices favoured by the crowd, is an obvious thing to say. The challenge lies in the fact that it is hard to do. When you are uncertain what to do next, yet you have to make a choice, and all around you seem to have a clarity of purpose that you lack, following along seems both sensible and safe.

Tools that can help you forge your own path include:

- clarity about what your particular goal is and about what level of risk you are prepared to take to reach it
- parameters established in advance that lay out the things that you do not do, whatever the temptation
- acknowledgement that the path taken by others may not be your path

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Find the courage to make your own choices:

- ❖ **Articulate your goal.**
- ❖ **Clarify what risk you consider acceptable.**
- ❖ **Establish in advance what you do not do.**
- ❖ **Do not let the voice of the crowd drown out your focus.**



4. Discipline, determination, drive

It is often assumed that Everest is a one-way street. You start at base camp and then make your way steadily upwards until you reach the summit. The reality is that you climb the mountain like a yoyo. Up to the top of the icefall to establish the site of camp 1. Back down to base camp. Up to camp 1 to dump of load of supplies that will later be moved higher on the mountain. Back down to base camp to get more supplies. Up to camp 1 to sleep at 6000 metres. Back down to base camp to sleep low and let your body recuperate and adapt in the gradual process we call acclimatisation. And so it goes.

If a front of bad weather comes in, you are likely to retreat back to base camp (if you can) so as not to eat up precious supplies higher on the mountain. If you get sick or injured, you will need to go down, where the extra oxygen will speed up the healing process.

And then of course if something catastrophic happens, like the great storm, you may find yourself back at base camp, your supplies used up, your tents damaged, trying to decide if you have the energy and the equipment to start all over again. This is why you arrive at base camp expecting to be there for at least six weeks and having supplies to carry you through for eight or nine weeks.

Projects almost always take longer than planned, involve more work than anticipated and are more complicated than expected. We help ourselves to settle in for the

long haul if we acknowledge that. Long after the first flush of enthusiasm has passed and long before we approach the final strait, there is a bleak passage of hard work, slow progress and continual setbacks that we try to work our way through with team support, with humour, with incremental goals, with celebration of successes, with focus on our aim - with all the tricks we can think of to keep ourselves moving.

But for some of it the most powerful thing we can do is acknowledge that it is hard and boring and frustrating and muster the discipline and the determination to do it anyway.

Achievements that are truly worthwhile are seldom won easily.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

It won't be easy and it won't be quick. Acknowledging that helps us to stay the course.



5. The talent of the team

Once again, this is blindingly obvious in theory but difficult to execute effectively. We know that we need to make use of all the resources within our team and we probably do that with all those that we recognise. Where we can set ourselves apart from the competition is in actively trying to find what it is we don't automatically see.

We can be blind in many ways but two are particularly common. We are dazzled by status and authority. Senior members of our team are given an authority they may not deserve while those who are considered junior - whether that is defined by age, by gender, by skin colour, by cultural background - tend to be ignored. They are there to receive orders, not to contribute ideas.

And we recognise expertise within our own cultural context while being blind to things we have not been brought up to see. While it may seem easier to run homogenous teams, made up of individuals with the same expectations and outlook, and such teams do allow for more fluid communication and easier alignment of goals and expectations, such teams are also simply a repetition of the same limited skill-set. Heterogenous teams - made up of individuals from a variety of backgrounds and cultural contexts - are much harder to keep together but when well run they offer a much greater depth of skill and expertise.

On an Everest expedition the Sherpas are the obvious junior partners. Where the 'members' - as the foreign climbers tend to be called by the Sherpas - are there for the thrill of the challenge and are paying their own way, the Sherpas are there because they are being paid. They are hired to do a specific job. On commercial teams they may be acting as guides but on most private teams, they have been employed to move loads of equipment and to fix safety lines. Their value is seen to lie in their high mountain physiques - fitter and stronger than most foreign climbers and quicker to acclimatise.

We are blinded to what else they can offer by a set of assumptions. Assumptions about people who work as 'porters', who have limited education, who have grown up in rural villages in poverty-stricken third-world countries. In fact the Sherpas, whose ancestral lands lie around the foot of Everest, have knowledge about snow conditions and weather patterns that can be invaluable to a team. But our upbringing tells us to prioritise high-tech solutions like satellite weather data over local knowledge.

The best decisions our team leader made had to do with Sherpas. Possibly due to his time serving with Gurkha soldiers in the British army, Ian was well aware of the valuable store of knowledge that Sherpas could provide, but also aware that active steps needed to be taken to access that knowledge.

He made three important choices.

Firstly, he made sure to include the Sherpas in all team meetings, took the time to ask their opinions and then to be seen to act on their advice. He made sure that they knew that their opinions were welcome and their ideas would be listened to.

Secondly, he was adamant that everyone contributed to the hard, repetitive work of setting up the mountain, the set-up that would eventually allow us to bounce from camp to camp from the base to the summit and back again. The Sherpas carried more than we did, being stronger, but everyone carried equipment. Everyone contributed to the work of pitching tents, melting snow for drinking water, cooking meals. The 'members' did not get to lounge around at base camp in the sun, waiting for the Sherpas to do the work on the mountain. Language, culture and being paid a salary was always going to create a significant gap between members and Sherpas, but Ian did all he could not to widen that gap any further.

Thirdly, he acknowledged that while the Sherpas might be there because they needed to earn a wage, that did not mean that they were without enthusiasm or ambition for the challenge of climbing Everest. The higher a Sherpa goes, the more he gets paid. Getting to the summit earns him a bonus. Team leaders, tight on cash, may chose to save money by asking their Sherpas to do the work of setting the camps but then not allow

them to go the top. Certainly it is generally accepted that if all the members give up, the Sherpas automatically give up as well, whether they wish to or not.

Ian made it clear that even if every one of the South Africans gave up, the Sherpas on our team could use the team equipment, the tents and food and oxygen, and go for the summit anyway.

The result was a group of able, intelligent, knowledgeable local men who were as interested in and committed to the goal of getting to the top as we were. And when we were sitting in base camp after the great storm, being sucked under by the rip tide of panic and fear that was causing many teams to give up and go home, it was the Sherpas who quietly convinced us that it was worth trying again.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Make use of all the knowledge and talent within your team:

- ❖ Make sure junior members and support staff can pass ideas upwards.
- ❖ Ensure that everyone is being seen to contribute.
- ❖ Take the time to solicit ideas and share credit widely.
- ❖ Actively look beyond your own cultural context in pursuit of good ideas.



6. The power of recognition

We are well aware that effort needs to be rewarded and we often have structures in place to acknowledge the exceptional - award ceremonies and bonus schemes. What this overlooks is that most of the time we are required to do our activity with excellence day after day - that is what we have been hired for. That is the minimum requirement. But such continuous excellence is challenging to achieve and the realisation that there is immediate blame if we fall short but little praise if we succeed can sap the morale of all but the most self-motivated worker.

There is a tool that can help with this, a tool that is cheap and quick and requires little beyond a few minutes of our time and some attention to implement, yet it is commonly overlooked. That is the power of recognition.

Once we had decided to try again on Everest after the great storm, against the opinion of many of the other teams, against the collective voice of our home media, our confidence in our choice was challenged by the sea of negativity. Not in that we were likely to be persuaded to give up, but in that we were spending precious energy in buttressing our confidence in our decision to try again. One important motivator was the confidence of the Sherpas that this choice made sense.

And then we received a second invaluable vote of confidence. We were at camp 2 when we received a radio call from base camp to tell us that President Nelson Mandela was on the phone. He had called up to say that he was proud of us for trying again.

“I am so happy that you are attempting to climb Mount Everest again. I am fully behind you. I have a lot of confidence in you and I know you are going to succeed.”

- President Nelson Mandela

That telephone call was also transmitted on radio in South Africa, it was a very public vote of confidence. It wasn't something he needed to do, it had little bearing on running South Africa as a country, it was precious minutes taken up out of a very busy life. But its impact that it had on us was enormous.

Even that is interesting. He was an astonishing human being, a leader in the peaceful transition in South Africa, a statesman on the world stage. But he knew nothing about mountaineering. He had no idea whether or not we were capable of succeeding. But with his public vote of support, we were inspired to try our very best. And we did know something about how to succeed.

“I just want to say that the news came to us as a real surprise, and also a cause for jubilation because the conditions on top there were not conducive to this achievement.

Our children did very well indeed.”

- President Nelson Mandela, after our team reached the top

I met Nelson Mandela after the expedition, the highlight for myself was getting to sit on a sofa next to him in his official residence in Pretoria, show him photographs from the expedition and tell him some of what had happened during those terrible, magical, unforgettable weeks.

Over the years I have often been asked if the reality of man lived up to his almost saintly reputation and I have to say that, as best I could judge, yes it did. He had instinctive understanding of the power of his presence, how important his acknowledgment could be in reaching out to the many different constituencies that made up South Africa. But a meeting with him was more than such a public relations opportunity, staged for press cameras. He had palpable personal charisma, and most importantly, he came across as intensely, genuinely interested in the person he was meeting.

Unlike some famous people I have met, it was not about him being conscious of how honoured you were to be in his presence. It was about him, for the short time you spent with him, being completely invested in who you were and what he could learn about the world by knowing you. It was an intensely heady experience, to be offered that focused attention by such a man.

Apart from his genuine interest in who people actually were, his other great talent that I actually saw in action was his ability to see what other people did not. Another occasion when I met him was when Ian and I attended some fancy business dinner, where the great and the good of Johannesburg society (then still largely white) were attending a gala dinner where President Mandela was the guest of honour.

I remember there as being some two hundred guests and there was a receiving line, Mandela had to shake hands with each one and listen to them gush about what an honour it was to meet him. All the while the kitchen staff (entirely black) were clustered at the service door, trying to catch a glimpse of this man who was a hero to all South Africans.

When he had finished with the receiving line, he indicated to the hosts that he would return in a minute, and then he walked into the kitchen. There he shook the hand of every worker there, from the chefs to the dishwashers, before returning to the hall to rejoin the guests. He had the ability to see the things – and the people – that most of us simply don't notice around us.

He had the political acumen to understand the power of his presence to inspire others. And he had the generosity of spirit and curiosity of mind to give of his presence freely, willingly – always giving the impression that what he learnt from meeting you was more than fair recompense for the time he gave to you.

Sharing this idea over the years has always been met by an immediate strong response. *Yes! If only I got more recognition for all that I do.... If only the Mandela in my line of work would take the time to acknowledge me.* The one-sided nature of that response shows exactly why this obvious idea is so seldom actually implemented. Everyone is too busy looking up to those they respect, yearning for acknowledgement, to take the time to look down and see whose shoulders they are standing on, whose input they could take the time to recognise.

I was about nine the first time I encountered the generation gap, when a child of five called me *Tannie* (a respectful form of address for older women among South African Afrikaners) while asking if I knew the time. For the first time in my life I felt old! Within a few years of birth, you already have experience and knowledge that others are still striving to obtain.

The key idea here is to look to those who work for you, reward them with your focused attention - know their names, what they do, how it matters to you. Model the behaviour you would wish to receive yourself and reap the benefits of those who work for you being more motivated in their jobs and more committed in their loyalty to you.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Take the time to acknowledge the work of those below you:

- ❖ Do it during the times of maximum stress, rather than only after successful outcomes
- ❖ Know people's names and what exactly it is they do
- ❖ Acknowledge the effort needed just to do the job well day after day
- ❖ Be interested in them rather than simply let them be impressed by you

Your Six Key Tools on your Everest climb

1. One team - one aim
2. Passion for the process
3. Courage of your own choices
4. Discipline, determination, drive
5. The talent of the team
6. The power of recognition

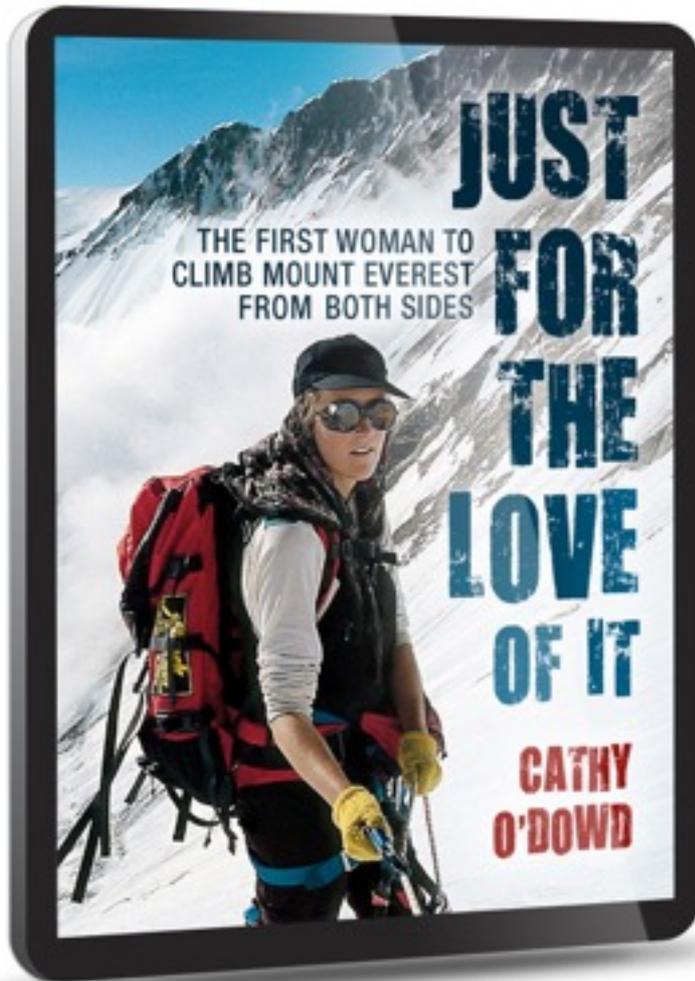


Conclusion

Nothing in this ebook is surprising. These are all ideas most of us know and will agree are useful. Just as we know that the dispirited fractiousness of a tired group of hikers who have found their goal to be further away than expected is the most common cause of simply giving up. Yet in planning for our project, it is easier to focus on the objective external difficulty than on the shifting interpersonal dynamics within the group. In looking at ways to improve the dynamic within the group, it is easier to pay lip-service to the general ideas than to take the time to examine why we fail to effectively implement ideas that seem utterly obvious.

A team united in structure and in aim, with a shared culture of determination and vision, will be far more effective in good times and more resilient in difficulty. The act of building such a group is a not a set-it-and-forget-it exercise. It is a daily investment in assessing and acting, modelling the behaviour we value in others and encouraging its adoption by others.

To learn more about the Everest expeditions on which these ideas were based, look for my [Just For The Love Of It](#) book online at Amazon.



To book the [Reaching New Heights!](#) speech which shares the stories behind these ideas, as well as unpacking the three key obstacles that lead to 75% of teams failing (hint: it's not avalanches and storms - it's about obstacles we can control), please contact me.

Email: cathy@cathyodowd.com

Tel: +376 351871

Meet me on social media and let me know about your challenges with teams in tough times, and your top tips for climbing mountains in life.

Twitter: [@CathyODowd](https://twitter.com/CathyODowd)

Facebook: [CathyODowdEverest](https://www.facebook.com/CathyODowdEverest)

LinkedIn: [CathyODowd](https://www.linkedin.com/in/CathyODowd)