

Parallels between Mountaineering and Business

By Patrick Hollingworth



You've no doubt seen it before, at a business conference or perhaps a leadership offsite. The 'motivational' speaker who has climbed a mountain and thinks that their success is relevant to yours. They are rolled out and tell you inspirational stories about the difficulties they overcame to reach their summit. They exhort superficial colloquialisms about setting goals, never giving up and overcoming all odds. Inspirational? Perhaps. But relevant to your own workplace? Not so much.

Despite the worlds of business and mountaineering sharing a number of parallels (decision making, managing risk and collaboration, to name but a few), they have never been meaningfully explored in the business. Such simple messages and lessons are no longer relevant in today's increasingly uncertain and complex business landscape. So what is relevant then?

A remarkable parallel

It just so happens that there is a remarkable parallel between

the way that most mountaineers climb mountains and the way that most business leaders run their businesses today—it's called expedition style. Expedition style has its roots in the Himalayas, the highest mountain range on earth. The inherent difficulties associated with incredibly low levels of oxygen and the extreme cold make it nearly impossible for climbers to stay alive up there. To mitigate these difficulties, expedition style is an approach which uses considerable equipment and manpower.

A reliance upon fixed infrastructure and massive manpower

Much of the equipment used is fixed infrastructure—things like fixed ropes and stocked camps which are left in-situ on the mountain for the duration of the climb (sometimes up to two months). Expedition style also relies significantly upon people power—and lots of it. Typical Everest expeditions these days are comprised of an expedition leader, three or four western guides, up to 40 climbers, and at least that number again of Sherpas (an indigenous ethnic group, widely regarded for the climbing skills, who do most of the hard work by carrying all of the equipment up the mountain).

Climbing expedition style can be quite a powerful way to climb a mountain, but it's also very expensive, very inefficient and not particularly good at adapting to changing circumstances (such as the weather). Furthermore, whilst expedition style is quite robust, it tends to break apart when unexpected events happen. For example, in 2014 an avalanche which killed 16 Sherpas resulted in the Mount Everest being closed to climbers, and it was closed again the following year when an earthquake struck Nepal and triggered a massive avalanche at base camp, killing 20 people.

Many organisations are expedition style

It's the same way in which most organisations operate. Reliance upon (and preferably ownership of) fixed infrastructure is seen as advantageous (it enables the organisation to dominate their

market), and a linear, hierarchical structure which features centralised and top-down leadership. Just like on the mountain, organizations which operate in this manner can be quite robust, but tend to suffer from chronic inefficiencies, over-bureaucratisation, slow response times to change, and a tendency to fail when significant unexpected events occur (think any number of organisations which failed during the GFC, or which are starting to fail now through disruption and disintermediation). So, what's the alternative?

The solution: it's called alpine style

It's called alpine style (colloquially it's known as light and fast). Practiced by a relatively small subset of highly-skilled mountaineers, the solution is to move quickly through the mountain environment, carrying as little equipment as possible—only the bare essentials needed for the climb. By restricting their reliance upon equipment, two things happen: firstly, they are much lighter, and therefore faster and more able to respond to sudden change, and secondly, they become self-reliant. Rather than depending upon infrastructure to assist them in reaching their goals, they only have themselves to rely on. And so the more an alpine style climber climbs, the better they become.

Light and fast is the future

When climbing alpine style in a small team (usually only two or three climbers on one rope, or perhaps four climbers climbing in roped pairs), there is no structural hierarchy and no central leader; rather there is shared decision making responsibility. Each climber

brings a skill set which compliments their fellow team members, ensuring that as a whole, the team is able to respond to the vagaries of the terrain. The high levels of skills then mean that each alpine style team can operate autonomously, and does not require guidance from a central leader and decision maker.

We all know that business competition and instability has increased, whilst barriers to entry have fallen, chronic employee disengagement is on the rise, and the global economic recovery is incredibly fragile. We are often being told that the solution to this seemingly chaotic landscape is to be agile and innovative. But few can actually articulate what that looks like in an organisational context. That's what alpine style, or light and fast, provides. A new way for business to deal with this increasingly uncertain and complex business landscape.



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