



*Developing
Human Assets*

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Sharon Wood To the Summit and Beyond

This is a story about a small Canadian Team that shared a vision to climb Mount Everest; by a difficult, unclimbed route, with less resources and to doing it better than it's been done before.

Sharon opened with a story about speaking to a group of kids about Everest. A little boy asks when the mountain climber is going to come and speak to them. I say I am the mountain climber. He exclaims, "No you're not, you're just an ordinary girl!" This story shapes and supports the premise that. *Ordinary people are capable of accomplishing extraordinary results. We all possess extraordinary potential.*



Passion

The very underpinning of realizing this dream is passion. Passion fueled a level of commitment and performance that no other source of motivation came close to.

Passion and an insatiable curiosity. As I see it, we are born with an 8-cylinder engine. Most of the time we're idling, just firing on a few cylinders. What I am curious about is: What am I truly capable of? What is possible? How much difference can I make?

Climbing increasingly more difficult challenges provided and imposed the need to fire on more cylinders. The passion and curiosity fostered the essential motivation.

Through this challenge I discovered and developed strengths I never knew I had.

Each new climb/new challenge promised the realization of more potential.

There were four reasons for me to go to Everest.

1. The most compelling reason was a personal dream of performing better than I ever had which would have to be the case if I wanted to get anywhere near the top.

2. Another was Jim Elzinga... Jim was the leader and visionary of this Everest expedition. Jim was a member of the first Canadian team to climb mount Everest in 1982. *His previous team had climbed it in traditional style, by an*



established route with 62 men, a \$3,000,000 budget and 27 tons of supplies. This time he wanted to climb it differently. He wanted to climb with a \$300,000. Budget, 5 tons of supplies, 11 men and 2 women. By a harder route, one that had never been climbed in its entirety, with less resources and do it better

3. The third reason to go was the compelling notion of going somewhere and doing something that had never been done before.

Jim did not just want to bag the summit, what was even more important to him was to climb it in good style. Good style in climbing, like in business, is about solving the problem with the least amount of resources and maximum amount of efficiency. The key to realizing this dream was this, *the team.*

4. The fourth reason I wanted to go was it was an opportunity for me to run with the best.

Jim chose us based on two essential pieces of criteria:

1. Our **track record** as a team player
2. Our commitment to his vision and our **desire to make it ours**

Good climbers are a dime a dozen, but high skill level and strength is pretty useless if you have a poor attitude or can't get along with others.

Team building – Aligning personal goals with team goals

Good climbers are difficult people. What made a bunch of strong willed, egotistical, independent climbers want to follow Jim? Because he was there to get us, not get himself, to the top.

One of the most powerful exercises we did in terms of team building was to respond to three questions:

1. Why did I want to climb Mt. Everest?
2. What strengths did I bring to the team?
3. What was in it for me in being a part of the team whether or not I made it to the top or not?

The answers and discussion following this exercise:

- Served as the catalyst for our team culture.
- Turned good intentions into a contract.

It takes a long time to climb these mountains: 90% of time is spent nowhere near the mountain planning & preparing.

In the middle of march of 1986 we began the final stage of our climb - physically climbing it. Our starting point was 17 miles away from the mountain and 17,000 feet above sea level just 12,000 more feet to go.

At 17000' above sea level we are already at less than ½ atmosphere.



Despite the fact that every climber on the team has a chance to stand on top, in the end, our ability to adapt to the ever-decreasing oxygen will be what determines our success. Some will only get a few thousand feet above base camp before they are forced to turn around because of their body's inability to adapt to the ever-decreasing oxygen supply.

We'll spend the next eight weeks stringing out over five miles of rope and carry 2 tons of equipment up mountain spread out over 6 camps.

By the time we are positioned within a day's reach of the summit we will have climbed the mountain an average of 7 or 8 times each.

Maintaining the Momentum

What starts out as a romantic vision of climbing on the shoulders of the highest mountain in the world rapidly deteriorates into one of becoming a pack mule in a fancy suit.

Repetition, slow progress & monotony lead to lack of momentum. We remedied this by way of:

- *Celebrating the attainment of each camp and daily goals*
- *Regular communication of progress between teams*
- *Giving every climber a chance to work at his or her edge by rotating everyone through the lead team position.*

Choosing to Thrive over Survive

The only constants on this mountain are change and adversity

Each new camp/altitude presents and increasingly more demanding set of variables.

Adverse weather conditions, time limits, work quotas, physical and health constraints, ever decreasing O2 supplies.

Overwhelmed by onslaught where it's easy to slip into a reactive state, we call it survival.

- bracing self for next thing to come at me
- primed to noticing the obstacles/difficulties.



Survival squanders energy, energy is precious. You come with a limited budget. We have so little to spend we can't afford to waste it. Base line is thriving – thriving is not about working harder carrying heavier loads or longer days. *Thriving is about using what little you do have very well.*

Thriving starts with;

- **recognizing** the things we can't change
- **focusing** on what we can change
- **primes** us to noticing the opportunities.

It starts and ends mostly with the day-to-day small stuff and spills over to the bigger picture. For example, dehydration is a very serious problem and can lead to life threatening consequences in a very short time. To stay hydrated we drink 6 – 8 litres of water per day.

Choosing to thrive over survive is prompted by a single statement, “**better is possible**”.

This triggers optimism, raises my expectations, raises my aim and raises my results

Examples:

- Learning from failure –Asking the right questions. Speaking to teams that have failed on the route we are attempting. Asking them what they would do differently next time, has been one of the most valuable uses of time.
- Discarding old success formulas to make room for new solutions. Thinking outside the box.
- Being an expert can be an asset and it can be a hindrance. The challenge is to let go of old success formulas to find the solution to a problem that is specific to where we are now.

Interdependence

Up here your health and performance is everybody's business. You miss a carry and the next team up the line doesn't get the supplies they need. The team doesn't just lose one man-day it loses several. If you fall ill with critical altitude sickness you become a liability not only to yourself but also to the whole team.

How do we deal with this? One of the things good climbers are best at is anticipating the worst that can happen and working backwards to avoid it.

- We know acclimatization is the #1 problem.
- We know the attrition rate is extremely high.
- We know that not only our progress but also our safety is often in the hands of another team member. (We are always checking and replacing the anchors and retying the fixed ropes that we trust our lives to).

I know that I can be one of the strongest and most alert one day and useless the next.

The essential solution is to look after one another. Easy as this sounds, most teams don't do this well and can lead to failure or disaster.

- We set an unofficial weight limit for loads we carried and would go as far as checking the weight of one another's pack.
- We monitored one another's pace to avoid the looming hazard of over-extending ourselves (The temptation is to get more done in a day or play the hero by carrying more or skipping a camp).
- We monitored one another's health for the often insidious symptoms of altitude sickness.

These strategies not only prevented disaster but also fostered a high level of trust – knowing you weren't alone significantly reduced stress levels.

My chances of reaching the top of the highest mountain hinged on my willingness not my ability to shift my perceptions and attitudes always toward the goal of thriving.

No technology for motivation

People often ask if modern technology improves your chances of getting to the top compared to the old days of hob-nailed boots and woolen blazers. The answer is yes, it is more comfortable, relatively speaking.

The answer is also no. Because it all still comes down to your motivation to get out of bed in the morning and shoulder a load no matter what the conditions.

We've now been on the mountain for 2 months...

Time's up, out of manpower, weather is deteriorating, been too high too long; must make a summit bid now.



Dwanye Congdon and I have one try at the summit, we know that's all we have left in us. In four days the fate of this three-year project will be sealed, we will have either reached the top or have failed...

As we start our leader Jim cautions us with advice to, "treat it like any other mountain, it's not worth dying for".

Our first day climbing is difficult and within a few hours we are seriously thinking of calling it off.

Half way up to our destination we reassess our decision to go on. We recount the advice Jim has given us, "treat it like any other mountain, it's not worth dying for." We wouldn't be climbing any other mountain in these kinds of conditions. ..

It's because of a person I least expected to rally that we go on...

My vision of what support looked like was people that made me feel confident and comfortable. It turned out that the person I had the least confidence in came through to provide my own greatest motivation to move forward. This person knew he would not make the summit, but he continued to carry loads and push himself - to support us – so the team could win.

What can you do when you're the lead team and he's the support team but follow him? It was everything I didn't like about Kevin Doyle that made us go on.

What **success hinged on** over these next four pressing days was **recognizing resources and support wrapped in very strange packaging**. Stretching your vision of what support looks like.

Success was much bigger than me, in this case, it encompassed Kevin. Just because I was ready to give up didn't mean the rest of the team was.

I saw Kevin's level of integrity and commitment to the vision and that changed our relationship, changed the fate of the climb.

Day 2, we arrive at camp 5, late, exhausted. But it's a special day, it's my 29th birthday.

I'm done, I've resorted to survival mode, I know this because all I can think about is:

- The **4000' of mountain between us and the summit**.
- All we know is the **hardest climbing is yet to come** and the ropes we strung out end before we reach it.
- I **assume that one out of the four of us will have to turn around** like James did.

- Besides, **how are we going to carry over 200 pounds** of supplies and install the last camp in this condition?
- I'm **focused on the obstacles**, the worst case scenarios.

Day 3; I crawl out of the tent resigned to turning around.... Kevin says, “Well what is the worst thing that can happen to us by trying this? I don't know about you, but if I turned around now, I'd be wondering for the rest of my life if we could have gone on.” What can you do but follow him?.

With in a few minutes all of us are out there packing up and jettisoning any extra bulk and weight. One of the items I was given to carry was a walkie-talky radio. I want to just chuck the thing. What good is a radio going to do up there? Rescue is not an option. But, there's Kevin, glaring at me - so instead I do as per instructed, turn it on and tuck it deep down in my jacket.

We are moving but barely. To me it becomes an exercise in futility and at what was the lowest point of hope. All of a sudden cheers waft up from inside my jacket. The radio becomes one of those resources wrapped in strange packaging. With this kind of support it, it is **amazing how slow you can be moving and still be convinced that it's progress.**

Other team, different style. Another team is packing up to go home while two of their climbing members are still up on the mountain. Our team is cheering us on, our win is their win.

What (competition) I had once seen as a liability and unnecessary distraction becomes the reason I am here today and pushing on to the summit.

Day 4; summit day, 27000' above sea level

We started out for the summit at 9:00 am. I have all but stalled in doubt and fear.

Exhausted and fearful I want to turn around. Dwayne feels the same, but, spurred on by a brief moment of resolve encourages me to at least try leading on.

I imagined turning around now and being plagued with the question of, “could I have done it, if I had tried it”. To fail without trying was not acceptable. I committed to making the first few difficult moves upwards. A very intense level of concentration prevailed overpowering the doubts and fears. I realized that a lot of strength was being squandered to indecision. I recognized the greatest obstacle between me and the top of the mountain – it is me. I finally got self doubts out of the way.

‘Climbers don’t conquer mountains. The battle is not with the mountain but with themselves. The conquest occurs within the climbers' mind in penetrating those self-imposed limitations and fears and getting through to that good stuff, that stuff called potential - most of which we rarely use - and it is only in that rare state of total commitment we begin to scrape the surface.

You want to know what really happened? There we were on our hands and knees panting for breath when we simultaneously said to one another, let's tag the top and get the hell out of here.

But that is what a team is for; to fulfill that which you would like to do but are unable to do. After all it wasn't just Dwayne and I that reached the top, all of us did.

How can you fail to win with support like that? This story has been about team success and individual success. One cannot exist without the other.

This was considered by many as an impossible dream. But as I have found, impossible is a relative term; relative to how much commitment, creativity and hard work a group of people puts into that so called impossibility.

There is an old Buddhist saying that goes 'once you reach the top of the mountain keep climbing'. I believe there is great wisdom in this. As it is in the climbing, that we find out what we are really made of - what is really in there, the opportunity to realize and be our potential.

It's in the struggle when we reach and go beyond our perceived horizon of limitations that we are transformed. Transformed from being confined and defined by our limitations, to instead becoming more defined by our possibilities.



END