

# **CASE STUDY:**

## **Leadership under fire**

### **Keywords:**

- risk
- leadership
- stress
- conflict
- power struggle
- teambuilding

### **What happens when a leader's authority is contested under extreme conditions?**

*Leading under extreme conditions is a test of influence; positional status is rendered meaningless in the midst of confusion, chaos, pressure and stress. Leaders must be able to make split second decisions, and even more importantly, foster a genuine trust and compliance in followers.*

### **Moving beyond power struggles to identify leaders with the expertise to navigate the unpredictability of Mother Nature – and to keep clients safe.**

On May 10, 1996, five expeditions – 40 climbers in total – started their assault on the summit of Mount Everest. In one of the worst mountain climbing tragedies ever, eight climbers, including two of the top mountaineers in the world, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, died. A sudden storm emerged that created white out conditions. Yet it wasn't just the storm that took their lives, but the snowballing of poor teamwork, bad decisions, and the pressure to reach the summit. In the wilderness, as in any volatile and complex situation, it only takes a couple of missteps to snowball into a disaster. While leading under fire may not always have life and death consequences, it does mean that the line between success and failure is a very thin one.

### **Background**

Access to outdoor recreation and the popularity of extreme sports has surged in the last two decades. The increasing commercialization of wilderness adventure means that for a fee, anyone, regardless of experience, can participate in adventures that had previously been accessible to a small fraternity of elite adventurers. The business of wilderness adventure is caught in a classic conflict of interest: profit vs. safety.

This case involves a small mountaineering expedition company. The company operates mountaineering trips into rugged, wilderness mountain terrain. The owner and director asked for help dealing with conflict and communication difficulties in the organization.

There were three main areas of tension

1. between expedition leaders
2. between expedition leaders and clients over issues of safety and responsibility.
3. between the director and the expedition leaders

### **The challenge**

**The company faced several interrelated challenges. First, the company and guides are liable for the safety of the group.** And that may mean cutting a trip short, or avoiding a route due to rock slides, avalanches, or other dangers. Yet clients all too often put themselves and others at risk by ignoring instructions, or attempting a climb or route they have been told to avoid.

**Second, relationships between clients can break down.** Some clients want an easy tour, others want more extreme climbing. In the wilderness, a rule of thumb is to let the weakest member of the party set the pace, but in a pay-for-adventure company, people don't buy in to group responsibility. Groups splinter, and put their needs first rather than the safety of the group. In any other situation group conflict and individualist behavior might be uncomfortable or disturbing; in the wilderness, it can be fatal.

**Finally, expedition conflict, competition and power struggles between guides put lives at risk.** There was a critical incident in which a power struggle on the team got out of hand. During a winter scouting trip a group of guides got temporarily lost. Darkness was falling, and the weather was turning bad. The guide with the most experience was a woman younger in age than the three other guides. One of the three walked off by himself, insisting her route was incorrect. The three other guides continued on towards camp with the woman, and the man who had refused to follow came along later.

**Positional status, mountaineering experience, and familiarity with the local region was not enough to give the leader the power in the moment she needed it.** The power struggle concerned not only levels of experience but also age, gender, social class and background. And the confusion over leadership also involved the director. The woman thought she was assigned to be the leader of that trip; the director agreed that he told her she would be the leader, but probing further, no one knew for sure if this had been communicated to everyone in the party. When I interviewed the director about the event, he said he did not like being hierarchical, and thought they should all operate cooperatively as a team.

## **The Intervention**

1. **Team coaching and facilitation session** to address and resolve issues of power, rank, and teamwork.
2. **Teamwork training and conflict management training** for use with clients and also to enhance teamwork .
3. **Coaching the director, and creating new attitudes towards and procedures for designating leadership.** The non-hierarchical style of the company was ill-suited for the dangers involved. I worked with the director on his approach to leadership. He saw strong leadership as autocratic, and we worked together on developing new ways to view leadership and creating procedures for designating leaders based on skill level and experience, not only technical skills (mountaineering, avalanche safety, first aid,) but leadership, communication and conflict management skills as well. Furthermore, I recommended that there be ongoing continuing education courses available for guides in these areas.
4. **Revise printed materials to address risks and emphasize guides as final decision makers.** The promotional materials and orientations with clients did not sufficiently emphasize the dangers and possible limitations of the trips. As a

preventative conflict step, we revised the materials and briefing process to more accurately reflect that wilderness conditions and not clients' wishes dictate the pace, route, length of trip, and possibility for summiting. Guides make final and binding decisions concerning the route and summit opportunities

### **Observations and insights**

**Leadership training under fire.** Teamwork and leadership training itself has to simulate the demands and challenges of the wilderness. That means that skills have to be useful under extreme pressure, and that the training methods themselves created the same sense of urgency and pressure.

**Power, authority and conflict.** The relationship conflict between the guides and the power struggle underlying it was complex because various types of social status or power collide: seniority, experience, gender and age. With power problems there is always the issue of legitimacy. How can someone lead if their power is not deemed legitimate? In a wilderness setting, there are no senior bosses to turn to, no future consequence to use as coercion or to gain compliance. Authority derives solely from being respected and admired. This kind of power is earned. While someone may be promoted into a position, if they haven't earned the respect of their team, their status is empty. Under extreme conditions or life or death circumstances, leaders must have exceptional interpersonal skills in order for their leadership to be acknowledged and their directions followed.

**The solution is the 'ghost' – the role of nature in the organization.** Nature may not have a role in the organizational chart, but it is a significant player. Avalanches, storms, getting lost, accidents are a constant threat and possibility. Such unnamed pressures in an organization are 'ghosts,' exerting a great deal of influence and often holding the key to the solution. In this case, nature was not just a potential problem, but contained the solution to the company's problem. It represents a model of authority that is free of human sentiment, morality, and subjectivity. It is non-negotiable and impersonal, and imposes limits on possibilities. .

The team members and company director needed to step into this kind of authority more, to be more factual and unsentimental about power. Authority and power became a problem because it was disavowed, outside their value system. The director wanted a flatter, more egalitarian organization, but in the context of extreme conditions, this was dangerous. Picking up the 'ghost' of nature meant using authority and leadership more openly to create a safer organization and better teamwork under extreme conditions. .