

Everest Tragedy 1996 – A Case Study in Leadership Lessons

Lesson 1– Pursuit of Destructive Goals

When leaders identify themselves too closely with a goal, there is a danger that their obsession can lead to disaster. This condition is known as goalodicy. In relationships this is the equivalent of fatal attraction! The phenomenon of pursuing a destructive goal raises a larger issue; the difference between **passion and obsession**.

Passion is an intensity of feeling about doing what you are passionate about. To say you are passionate about this or that is not being passionate. Passion is when you go and prove you can. Passion is about doing and not merely feeling.

There is a thin line of difference between passion and obsession. Passion is intense belief in something but at the same time being balanced and aware of one's surroundings. Obsession, on the other hand, is when you block out the rest of life. It is obsession or nothing else! Passion may get you there but may not get you back. Obsession will most certainly get you there, but it is doubtful whether you will get home.

This is an aspect of leadership in goal-setting that has not received adequate attention. We call this the pursuit of a destructive goal.

46 year old **Doug Hansen's** condition deteriorated considerably on 9 May at Camp 4. The previous year he was forced to turn back when he was just 300 metres short of the Everest summit. He was now determined that this would never happen again. There is a *Two O'clock* golden rule on Everest; climbers must turn back latest at 2 pm. This is because the descent is tough and climbers must get back to the advanced base camp for safety and bottled supply of oxygen.

Doug summited at 4 pm two hours beyond the turnaround time. On his way down he collapsed and died. He is a classic example of **goalodicy**, a situation when a person continues to pursue a good goal with negative consequences. During the final assault Doug was emphatic about his life's mission:

"I have put too much of myself into this mountain to quit now without giving it everything I've got."

Dr Beck Weathers, a pathologist from Texas, is another example of extreme goalodicy. Suffering from bouts of depression, and an unhappy marriage, he desired to scale Everest to find inner peace. Despite blindness he continued climbing and described his physical condition.

“One eye was completely blurred over. I could barely see out of the other, and I’d lost all depth perception.”

When the expedition leader Rob Hall tried sending him back, he convinced him to allow him to continue climbing. Beck finally did scale Everest but on his descent gave up. His survival is a miracle, possibly the only person even to have woken up from hypothermic coma. He was given up for dead twice before he was airlifted to safety. Although Beck Weathers survived after being left for dead, his frost bite condition paid a heavy price: amputation of the right arm between the elbow and the wrist, four fingers and thumb of the left hand, and an amputated nose that had to be reconstructed. Was this price worth it?

Theodicy provides explanations in times of adversity to create an illusion of success. Ancient literature is replete with examples where theodicies given by philosophers try to explain the problem of evil in a just world, for example, *“Why do evil people prosper?”* The *karma* theory explains that a person is suffering for the sins of his last birth. I have heard people justifying poverty by saying that *“people are poor because they want to be poor.”*

The phenomenon of goalodicy was palpably visible on Everest. As the weather deteriorated the professionals ignored the amateur’s lack of experience and continued leading them towards a narrow goal – Everest. The Everest teams created their theodicies to remain obsessed with their narrow goals:

- a. **Sandy Hill Pittman**, a New York socialite who became the 34th woman to scale Everest, and Neal Beidleman, a mountain guide, minimized their painful coughs justifying that they were necessary discomforts in high altitude.
- b. **Beck Weathers**, unable to see even a metre ahead due to effects of high altitude on eye surgery, strongly believed that as he neared the summit; his vision would improve with the warmth of the sun. He commented:

“Fortunately, I didn’t really need to see the route, because deep steps had been kicked ahead of me.”

- c. **Sherpa Lopsang Janbu** stated vomiting near the summit, a sign of high altitude sickness, but justified his condition by stating that this was his body’s natural reaction to high altitude.

requires the interplay of emotions. It is now widely accepted by the scientific community that, decision-making involves both logic and emotions.

The debate between intuition and rationality has brought to the fore that, there are two families or systems of mental processes. These are given at Figure 1 below:

- System 1: Intuitive, uncontrolled, and associative.
- System 2: Rational and process-based.



Figure 1: Systems of Mental Processes

The Everest tragedy of 1996 unfolded itself under extreme conditions, and these conditions are quite common in life. They are quite common in professions like the military, medical emergencies, fire fighting services, or in situations characterized by the following conditions that demand speed in decision-making;

- Uncertainty
- Lack of accurate information
- Too much or exaggerated information
- Rapidly changing environment
- Stress and fatigue
- No time for rational process

Under any one of these conditions, only intuition helps. In the words of Carl Jung: *“Intuition is perception via the unconscious,”* that is to say, sense perception and not rational judgment. Intuition is a pattern-recognition process where we match existing

Subordinate Autonomy

Think of a leader you admire. Does he or she create dependency in any way? Does this leader increase autonomy of the followers?

*How do you create **subordinate autonomy**?*