

Lessons for the CEO from Sir Edmund Hillary's expeditions

Sir Edmund Hillary has been credited with many things yet few have realised what a great CEO he was. Having climbed Mount Everest as a team member he subsequently achieved everything else as the CEO. I have been fortunate enough to read "View from the Summit", by Sir Edmund Hillary and "Hell-bent for the pole" by Geoffrey Lee Martin. . The lessons from these books, I believe, are ones we can apply in the business environment.

Lesson 1 If you want to be picked for the "summit" team, ensure you don't just rely on reputation.

How often are we surprised when we are not chosen to lead a special project or are passed over for that GM position when it was there for the taking.

Sir Edmund Hillary knew there were at least three pairs of climbers capable of making the summit in Sir John Hunt's successful expedition. He wanted to make sure that Sir John would not overlook the new team of Sir Edmund and Tenzing, so he devised a test of stamina that would, without any shadow of doubt, show they were the fittest team.

They succeeded in ascending from base camp to advanced base and back in one day, a task previously carried out in two days.. The test had, I understand, little purpose other than to be a thoroughly convincing demonstration.

In business one has endless opportunity to highlight one's strengths and to demonstrate to the CEO and/or senior team you are the one. If it worked for Sir Edmund, it can work for you.

Lesson 2 Having the best "team" does not necessarily mean you will be successful if you have ignored the politics.

Sir Edmund had successfully climbed endless peaks with George Lowe in the 1952 and 1953 climbing seasons. They were clearly the best Himalayan climbing team based on current experience.

Having joined the Hunt expedition and already halfway to Everest, Sir Edmund realised that Lowe and himself, two New Zealanders, would never be allowed to the summit first. A take-over by two kiwis would never be allowed on a British sponsored expedition.

Sir Edmund changed his climbing partner, teaming up instead with Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, and together they succeeded in becoming the first to ever ascend to the summit of Everest.

You have hand picked the best project team and yet it does not gain the support of the top team.

In building a successful team, you need to take account of all the stakeholders. You may need to make alternative selections to take account of these. You will still get the job done, the team will still work, you just need to be flexible, and cognizant of the stakeholders' needs, perceptions and the "politics" they are answerable to. Only then will you be first to the summit.

Lesson 3 When selecting a team make sure they are multi-skilled and have a sense of humour

Sir Edmund was very careful on his selection of staff. He recognised that in times of difficulty you want to have someone who can laugh at adversity, as Sir

Edmund is famous for. The last thing he wanted is a team member going into a panic or worst a person who would rather look for an escape goat. In addition Sir Edmund looked for a collection of skills in an individual. He recognised that having more staff does not necessarily make the team a stronger team. The expedition's reporter also doubled up as a tractor driver, the doctor took a dentistry training course, the Cook learnt extra skills to both be able to cook for the masses and to deliver gourmet meals, the geologist was naturally a mountaineer, the list goes on.

Why as a CEO do we appoint staff who are so one dimensional, they are excellent when the going is easy but the first to throw their arms up in alarm when the stormy weather arrives.

Lesson 4 Small deeds of kindness

Sir Edmund is legendary for his small acts of kindness. One that hit the obituaries was on hearing that a young child was seriously ill in hospital he, without pausing, wrote an inspirational note to a two year old. Naturally it was inspirational to the parents and now to their teenage son.

When a CEO never forget the small detail. It those small acts of kindness and consideration that will build your legend.

Lesson 5 Humility and drive are good bed fellows

Sir Edmund Hillary's obituaries without fail are mentioning how little he sought for himself. He achieved at everything he participated in yet never sort the limelight. As a legacy one would immediately recognise his contribution to mother earth. There are Sherpa pilots, doctors, nurses, lawyers all who were taught to read and write through the facilitation of his schools. There are children, including my daughter who, with a tear in her eye, said "he has taught me that anything is achievable".

Bill Gates is another great leader who is humble. While the press follows his every move he seldom seeks the limelight. In his recent trip to New Zealand he was asked by a Kiwi who did not recognise him "what do you do" he replied "I am in computers" The understatement of 2008!! Warren Buffet the greatest investor alive today always looks for a CEO who is a quiet achiever rather than the flash in the pan "show pony".

As a CEO remind yourself every day that humility is a strength not a weakness. Mount a picture of Sir Edmund on your wall as a reminder and spend time making the world a better place.

It is worth noting that the meaning of life maybe able summed up in one word "legacy". Some of us leave a legacy through our children, some through our inspiration of others, and some through our own deeds.

Lesson 6 Dreaming of your eventual goal

Sir Edmund was an avid comic book reader in his youth and on long walks would imagine himself as a hero. He read about and worshiped Shackleton and later on dreamed of being the first to climb Everest. Why you may ask was the first team unsuccessful, equipment failure was the line. Yet would they have been able to invent a new way for climbing with oxygen bottles when they came up against the "Hillary step". Hillary after Tenzing's negative thoughts about the vertical shaft improvised a shuffle, using the oxygen bottles on the back pack and his feet as a wedge, and inch by inch, in the thin air, using every bit of his legendary strength made it through the barrier, enabling Tenzing to follow up on an easier route, now followed by the thousands since, a roped course.

It was the drive to succeed that pushed Sir Edmund to "Knock the bugger off". As a CEO you need to dream of your eventual goal. To smell, see, feel, touch and hear what it would be like to succeed. You need to use the techniques of "Nero Linguistic Programming" to make dreams your reality.

Lesson 7 Sometimes "giving it a go" when your instincts are saying otherwise is not such a great idea.

How often in business do we continue on a path when everything around us is sending signals to stop or change course? We are compelled, like lemmings, to complete the task rather than listen and change tack.

It was interesting that Sir Edmund suffered a similar fate on his Antarctic Expedition. I recall reading that twice he attempted to cross over, with his Fergusson tractors, ice bridges that he felt uneasy about. As was proved later, these two failed attempts could have proved costly to his successful South Pole journey.

In each case he was able to later find a safer route, which no doubt would have been the better option in the first place.

When you find yourself about to say "lets give it a go" stop, and invest some time looking for an alternative route, you may well find the safe "ice bridge" you are looking for.

Lesson 8 Learn to know when you should seek help.

For some of us seeking help is a sign of failure or weakness, whereas in reality it can offer that critical leap up the ladder of success.

Sir Edmund Hillary sought the help of Admiral George Dufek on a number of occasions during his expedition to the South Pole. How significant that help proved to be and how rewarding it must have been for Admiral Dufek to see how useful it had been.

Admiral Dufek helped Sir Edmund choose the site of Scott Base, which has been used continuously now for over 40 years. Admiral Dufek also helped Sir Edmund at other critical stages of the expedition.

What is remembered today is that that expedition was successful and the gratitude Sir Edmund had for Admiral George Dufek is clearly stated in "View from the Summit".

In business many costly failures could have been averted if advice had been sort from a trusted and wise mentor. The key is the selection (and use) of your mentor/advisor and to realise that just because you have asked once does not preclude a second, or third, request for help.

Find a mentor and seek advice on those major decisions, you will notice the difference to your 'expeditions'.

Lesson 9 In all projects, or "expeditions", other goals can be achieved if you have provisioned for them.

It is not uncommon to be halfway through a project and to come to the realisation that more significant goals could have been achieved if some planning and provisioning had been done in the first place.

Sir Edmund Hillary, when asked by Bunny Fuchs to provide a Kiwi support expedition to his grand traverse of the Antarctic, had in the back of his mind the possibility of Kiwis also getting to the South Pole.

Right from the start the provisions and planning did not preclude this as a

possibility, albeit it was never on the official agenda. His successful South Pole expedition was not only a triumph of Kiwi ingenuity, but also a great vision (who would have put money on getting three converted tractors to the South Pole?).

Had Sir Edmund kept strictly to his 'project brief' the kiwi involvement would have long been forgotten. So remember, look for these other possibilities when planning your next project 'expedition', you may find that in time the only evidence or memory of your efforts will be the 'other goals' you achieved along the way.

Lesson 10 Do not start a project if you do not have the "stickability" to see it through to its end.

When ascending Mount Everest, driving tractors to the South Pole, jet boating up the Ganges, or building schools in Nepal Sir Edmund had a unique cluster of skills. In one person you have a great planner, a person who is focused, and one who completes the tasks that he sets out to do.

As New Zealanders we are an innovative breed of people who love to get on with a project, often starting with as little planning as possible, "she will be right" and will be committed until the next new interesting project comes up or when tying-up the loose ends gets too boring.

The result is that New Zealand organisations are littered with projects which are stuck in limbo. These projects are of no value to the organisation until someone refocuses on completing them.

Lesson 11 Get your base camp properly set up.

Many projects fail not only because of lack of planning but through a failure to get the infrastructure, resources, training etc in place at the outset. There is a tendency to be more interested in measuring the speed of early progress rather than the likelihood of completing the project on time, on budget.

If meticulous planning and testing of gear, on the Glaciers in South Island before the Antarctic expedition, worked for Sir Edmund then maybe we should invest more time, energy and money in setting up a "base camp" from which a successful attempt is possible on our own projects.