



## High Altitude Leadership

### What the World's Most Forbidding Peaks Teach Us About Success

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

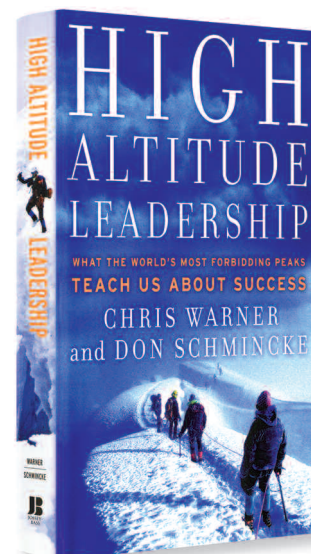
Expeditions to the world's highest mountains provide the perfect laboratories to examine the dangers every leader faces. At these extreme altitudes, success or failure is easily measured and simple mistakes kill people. When you are in the death zone, you can't grab a book to look for new theories, you can't dial a consultant and motivational speakers are finally short of breath. Up here, the best teams emulate behaviors seen only in the highest-performing organizations — and the worst teams wallow in their dysfunction.

In *High Altitude Leadership*, Chris Warner and Don Schmincke reveal their mountaineering experiences as a metaphorical leadership companion. Together, they present a new approach to leadership, based on groundbreaking scientific research, field-tested under the most brutal conditions on the most difficult summits, and successfully applied in the training of executives, management teams and entrepreneurs throughout the world.

To thrive in the face of today's business challenges and tomorrow's unpredictable risks, you need to become the type of leader whose career, team and company excel in the most extreme environments. You have to be the high altitude leader who uses every bit of your talent and every ounce of your strength to guide your team to peak performance.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- What dangers are encountered when getting to higher altitudes in the mountains or in the business environment.
- Why these dangers appear.
- What you can do to survive them and how you can prevent them.
- How to lead groups to perform at the peak of their ability in the most extreme circumstances.
- How to develop leadership skills to excel in the most extreme environments.



by Chris Warner  
and Don Schmincke

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: HIGH ALTITUDE LEADERSHIP

by Chris Warner and Don Schmincke

**The authors:** Chris Warner is a climber, an educator, an entrepreneur and an Emmy-nominated filmmaker. He has led more than 150 international mountaineering expeditions from K2 to Kilimanjaro. Chris has been teaching leadership and group development for more than 25 years. In 1990, he founded Earth Treks, a chain of climbing centers that serves more than 100,000 customers a year.

Don Schmincke is a dynamic keynote speaker and mad scientist turned provocative management sage. From CNN to *The Wall Street Journal*, his use of anthropology and evolutionary genetics to remedy the high failure rates of management theories established him as a consultant renegade and leading global authority. He is also the founder of The Saga Institute.

*High Altitude Leadership* by Chris Warner and Don Schmincke. Copyright © 2009 by Chris Warner and Don Schmincke. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint. 210 pages, \$27.95. ISBN 978-0-470-34503-0.

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## Danger #1: Fear of Death

*The Korean team struggles through the deep snow, barely 100 feet above us. Sucking bottled oxygen and teamed with three experienced Sherpas, they should be farther ahead. But at this altitude, simple problems become monumental challenges.*

*Suddenly the Korean team's professional leader, Nima Nurbu Sherpa, a highly experienced climber who had summited Mount Everest six times, slips and falls. He rockets to the bottom of the Bottleneck, but slows as he toboggans across the only flat patch on the newly vertical South Face. To our horror, Nima slides off the edge and tumbles into the darkness. At our altitude, he will fall for several minutes before hitting the glacier 10,000 feet below us. His body will never be recovered.*

— From the journals of Chris Warner

Whether on a mountain or at work, leading others can quickly become difficult and dangerous. You want so badly to influence positive change in your organization. You accept the title of leadership and purposefully trek upward, propelled by hope. In this exciting journey, you seek to be a great leader leading a great company to great altitudes.

Then you slip off the cliff into reality. Leadership becomes a burden as the world fails to cooperate with your dreams. In an instant, the threat of failure awakens you from the delusion. How you respond in the face of real dangers defines you as a leader.

### The Nemesis of Great Leadership

In a moment of great fear, action stops. Whether in an office or on a mountain, choosing to stay stuck in the

safe world ensures losses of great opportunities to the ultimate strategy killer: fear. It stops staff from making great decisions, stops change agents from disrupting the status quo and stops leaders from leading.

When faced with fear, most people freeze up. Among humans, fear becomes the dominant biological response, and an estimated 90 percent of us freeze up when stressed. We see the same effects of freezing up in teams. As fear races through a team, whether the fear of confronting co-workers or the fear of a failed project, team members withdraw, morale sinks, and whispered conversations and accusatory e-mails cause distrust.

As leaders, we have to combat the freeze response and prevent it from taking root in our professional lives and the teams we lead. When high altitude leaders identify the moment they overcame the great fear that could have frozen them, they tell you they focused not on whether they succeeded or failed, but on the very fact that they acted in the face of great fear. High altitude leaders tame fear in themselves, their teams and their organizational cultures by taking decisive action.

### Survival Tip: Embrace Death

Accepting death is choosing life. It grants us the power and freedom to act. Although the mountaineering teams face death in the most absolute sense, metaphorical death can also occur, from the boardroom to the production floor, and it can be just as transformative an experience. Leaders tell how embracing — versus avoiding or denying — the death of a goal, a project, a sale or a career, freed and inspired them to create new possibilities and actions.



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## Summary: HIGH ALTITUDE LEADERSHIP

High altitude leaders find that moments of imminent failure free them to take decisive action. The call to action from accepting business deaths drives problem solving, decision making and execution with greater clarity of vision. Acting in the face of death — not freezing up at the very thought of it — stops fear and allows you to continue climbing, pushing on past those paralyzed instead of giving up and descending.

If you and your team aren't regularly pushing limits, you won't be able to overcome the life-or-death challenges that every person, every team and every organization eventually face. Remembering the inevitability of death loosens the ego's grip. Then honor, bravery and integrity emerge in its place. This is the secret to high altitude leadership. ●

### Danger #2: Selfishness

*Descending into the mountain's shadow, we come upon two determined Italians still climbing upward. We are all surprised. I radio base camp, and their team there sounds equally shocked. Hours before, one of these climbers had been told to turn back, but they just kept going. When your ego drives you, the results are never pretty. They're committing one of the worst mistakes in mountaineering: summiting after the sun sets. I'm worried about the consequences this could have for all of us.*

— From the journals of Chris Warner

Selfishness kills people, profits and possibilities. You already know this persistent danger that stalks organizations at every altitude. It doesn't take long to smell it coming. Take a sniff:

- Someone thinks of his career as he abandons the team.
- Critical problems remain covered up until there's no time left to resolve them.
- Turf wars are funded at costly expense to the company.
- Someone takes credit for another's idea.
- An employee tries hard to look good to the boss, even if it means making someone else look bad.

#### How Selfishness Hurts Us

Whenever we find selfishness in a company, it shows up in an unproductive condition, or what we call dangerous, unproductive, dysfunctional (DUD) behavior.

The list of DUD behaviors is endless: protection of sacred-cow projects (continuing on long after they were told to turn back), blaming, avoiding accountability, back-stabbing, political maneuvering, CYA (a common vernacularism for "cover your butt"), turf wars, silo pro-

tection, hidden agendas, taking credit for another's ideas, trashing other ideas to promote your own, withholding information, looking good to the boss, playing favorites, finger-pointing, power plays, passing the buck, gossiping, entitlement attitudes and grin faking (smiling in agreement when you have absolutely no intention of supporting the project).

On the expeditions, clear risks of injury or death make detecting DUD damage easier and more important. One selfish act can kill a lot of people. In organizations, however, the damage often lies hidden. You'll never find it measured on the profit-and-loss statement, but selfishness lurks as the most dangerous blow to profitability.

Damage from DUD extends beyond day-to-day productivity losses and includes missed sales opportunities, quality erosion, higher legal exposure, lower sustainability of competitive advantage, increased waste, employee turnover and poor morale.

Scientists have concluded that selfish strategies are the most effective for species evolution. In the real world of evolution, any animal thinking this is a warm, cooperative universe where we could just talk things out and have a group hug eventually becomes food product for another species.

On mountains and in companies, this primal agenda gets in our way. It robs us of leadership power and usurps the freedom needed for producing great results. Employees naturally perceive a world of threat or fear in a company. Whether the threat is real or not, it still exists, because that's what humans are supposed to perceive. Today this human biological drive collides with the needs of modern organizations, bleeding profits and sending many companies off the cliff. How many times do selfish employees hoard or steal resources, ignore another in need of help, or fight to preserve their self-image at the expense of the organization?

#### Survival Tip: A Compelling Saga

It was noted that the Himalayan expeditions seemed to falter at the end of the journey, not the beginning. Without a challenge before them, everyone started putting personal desires ahead of the group's goals and reverting to their own selfish behaviors. Human selfishness can only be unhooked when a great passion overwhelms the selfish agenda.

Throughout history, great leaders constantly have focused on creating passion in their people by inventing stories of gods, kings and heroes. High altitude leaders throughout history knew that compelling sagas effectively inspire passion and give people something worth fighting for. The compelling saga leverages the leader's

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power in aligning people toward a higher cause than the agenda of their ego.

Compelling sagas bring the vision, mission, values and strategy to life. Sagas capture the epic challenge in what some have called a rallying cry or battle charge, and they provide that emotional trigger to focus on a cause that makes our selfish agendas seem trivial.

Humans need a compelling saga, a passion that overwhelms the selfishness common in humans. ●

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### Danger #3: Tool Seduction

*Cho Oyu has become such a popular mountain that the same level of infrastructure that is built on Everest is applied to climbs on this peak. Large commercial expeditions, employing dozens of Sherpas, set up a well-stocked base camp and three smaller but also well-supplied camps on the mountain. Thousands of feet of rope are strung between the camps, simplifying the commute. Each tent is equipped like a hotel room, outfitted with sleeping bags, ministoves, bags of food, and bottles of oxygen.*

*Two hundred feet below camp, a crack shot across the slope I was crossing. The crack became an avalanche, the snow rushing past my legs like water in a river. Curious, I watched the snow slide past me. Engrossed in the excitement of this little slide, I never imagined that my cute little avalanche could become so deadly. Suddenly, a silent wave of snow, 10 feet high, picked me up. Pure whiteness and complete silence engulfed me. I tumbled deeply inside this tidal wave, flipping and spinning like a white sock among white sheets in an arctic clothes dryer. The avalanche finally spit me to the side into the slower-moving snow at its edge, burying me to my neck and then, free of me, it plunged over a 300-foot cliff.*

*Other climbers waited for the storm cycle to play itself out, which it eventually did. Precious time was wasted because the Sherpas needed to move even more gear into place. Ten days later, the big groups were no farther along. And when the tiny window finally opened, a small handful of us, those not needing all sorts of tools and comforts, snuck to the summit. The largest groups watched hopelessly from base camp.*

— From the journals of Chris Warner

You want to have the best tools of leadership. And there are so many of them out there. Thousands of books, trainers and experts teach how to use them — tools like the best way to structure a team, motivate others, make great decisions, influence, serve, plan, inspire, set values, gain respect, take initiative, empower, achieve goals — and get people to follow you to the summit.

But in mountaineering, an overdependence on Sherpas, tools and infrastructure can limit talented climbers. Similarly, a parade of consultants packing the latest tools and theories can bog down progress and distract companies from focusing on the vital issues.

Of course, tools are important. Before climbing up to the death zone, a lot of time was spent testing gear and perfecting skills. But in critical moments, even the best tools break or fail in some other way, resources are lost, or circumstances counted on fail to materialize — yet still you must survive. The problem isn't with the tools; it's in how you relate to them.

Tools offer hope, and they make people feel that they have the right answer. But a problem occurs when employees use tools as crutches for safe answers. Both dead climbers and bankrupt companies are found grasping great tools.

### Survival Tip: Behavior and Adaptation

Remember two things: Behavior, not tools, drives results; and adapt or die.

High altitude leaders survive the danger of tool seduction by driving results from a behavioral perspective. Focusing on behavior and adaptation like appropriate decisions, actions, deeds and conduct replaces tool seduction on mountains and in companies.

Regardless of how much you spend on books, training, experts and meetings, it's all a waste if behavior doesn't change so that people start making different decisions and taking different actions. Most of the problems you're having in your organization are behavioral, not tool-based. Someone is either doing something unproductive or using tools the wrong way. You can equip a climber or manager with the finest gear and hours of training, but without the correct behavior, failure creeps closer. ●

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### Danger #4 Arrogance

*We spent days in base camp, spying the face with binoculars, trying to understand the patterns of avalanches and rockfall, and tracing the route, like a kid pencils in a maze. We convinced ourselves that the climb would take 36 hours, bottom to top. We were horribly wrong, and our overconfidence almost killed us. The route proved much more difficult than we imagined. On the second day, we ran out of food. On the third day, we ran out of fuel (so we couldn't melt snow for water). Vertical rock walls demanded that we climb using our bare hands, with the temperatures well below zero.*

— From the journals of Chris Warner

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### The Everest Laboratory

In the best spirit of a compelling saga, people voluntarily put themselves at risk to pursue their dream of standing on Everest's summit. In the 54 years since Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first summited, more than 4,000 others have followed. But only one thing exceeds the number of Everest's iconic achievements and personal successes: the number of dramatic failures. Between 1922 and 2007, more than 13,000 people have tried to climb the mountain. Seventy-three percent of them didn't summit, and 208 of them died.

With so much at stake, Everest may be the best laboratory to observe arrogance and how arrogance threatens organizations and profits. Arrogance places organizations and teams in danger of death every day. Analysts blame organizational failures on strategic missteps, poor market positioning, bad planning or ineffective execution. But we find that these usual suspects are just the symptoms, not the real cause. The real cause, arrogance, always lurks beneath the surface. Every time a passionate company at the top of its game falls, you find managers who think they already know everything.

Arrogant leaders ignore warnings on mountains and in boardrooms. Their destructive self-absorption as they pursue egocentric dreams is exceeded only by the damage they leave behind by putting others at risk. From pure hubris or some hidden fear, arrogant leaders act as if the rules don't apply to them. Because of this, they are frequently outmaneuvered by smaller, more nimble competitors.

### Survival Tip: Humility

A company driven by a compelling saga still needs a healthy dose of humility to keep it from veering off into an arrogance disaster. Humility allows leadership greatness to emerge. Instead of stepping over weak climbers or leaving them for dead, humble leaders act decisively; the instinct for rescue and recovery, not refusal and rejection, turns on.

When Johnson & Johnson removed all bottles of Tylenol from the shelves after the poisoning sabotage incident in 1982, it did so without hesitation. Its leadership knew that they had a sacred trust to uphold and that trust was more valuable than the profits they would lose. They knew that the rules of human decency applied to them.

### How to Bring Humility to Arrogance

Humility fuels high performance, but is it something that everyone is ready for? No. Not everyone has a strong, confident staff and consistent leadership.

Whether on mountains or in companies, we've learned that only solid teams grow stronger when humbled; weak ones become more dysfunctional. Humility causes the weak to question their competence and shatters their confidence. But it shouldn't make you less competent or confident. It should improve your judgment by tempering your ego. As the saying goes, bad experiences teach good judgment, and the better your judgment, the better your performance is. ●

### Danger #5: Lone Heroism

*I rolled him over and listened to his moaning. He needed two things: oxygen and a dose of the steroids that reduce this type of swelling. I knew that with help, he could swallow a dexamethasone tablet and wash it down with a sip of water. If this treatment didn't work, I would then pop a stronger, injectable dose into his butt.*

*He greedily ate the dexamethasone and let us help him stand up, but he wouldn't let himself use any of our oxygen. He was filming his ascent for Spanish television and desperately wanted this to be an "oxygenless" ascent. Purists look down on climbers who use oxygen when climbing. He wanted a "pure" ascent to prove he was among the sport's elite.*

— From the journals of Chris Warner

Lone heroism is dangerous. We're not talking about the lone challenge we sometimes take on for our own personal development, but the ego-driven, selfish, glory-seeking heroism. We see this in aspirant leaders as they use others to get to where they want to go, stepping all over people without even removing their crampons.

Who is trying to do it all, alone, without supplemental support? Who thinks it's a sign of weakness to ask for help? Or, worse, who thinks he or she is the lone hero — the only one who can do something right? You know the mantra: "If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself."

There's another problem with lone heroes: They're never grateful for the help they're given.

Lone heroes make for great cinema, but in death zone environments, they become frozen corpses. Lone heroism can be found contributing to higher operating costs, lower innovation, increased risks, delayed execution, higher turnover and missed sales opportunities.

### Survival Tip: Partnership

High altitude leaders know that partnership with peers, staff or outside stakeholders trumps lone heroism every time.

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Creating partnerships in your life raises different questions. How many projects are you leading alone? Where are you resisting support from others? Whom can you bring in to help you or your team summit bigger peaks? As you seek to bring partnership forward, remember:

- You don't need an equal or superior to create great partnership. Genuine partnership is never truly among equals. Partners can come from all levels.
- Pass the mantle of leadership to whoever is equipped to take it in the moment. In the face of life-threatening circumstances, who can afford to be hesitant?
- If you're the team leader or manager, sometimes you have to get out of the way. In true partnering, one "gives up" control by empowering key talent and letting accountability drive the results.
- Partnerships don't work well with leaders who are so afraid of losing control that they end up allowing only weaker people to work under them.
- Create and maintain vibrant partnerships by maintaining accountability. Allow partnership to drive performance. ●

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### Danger #6: Cowardice

*Our Italian teammate who had quit earlier heard us returning and crawled from the tent he borrowed to get the latest news. We told him all about the snow, at 25,500 feet: It was too deep and soft and likely to avalanche. We were stopped about 200 vertical feet from the col, from where the rocky ridge to the summit, especially at this early hour, would never be able to stop us.*

*Back at base camp, the Italian wrote authoritatively about the climb, the snow conditions, and the decision to turn around, sharing it with all the Web sites. However, he omitted the part about his quitting and crawling into someone else's tent for a nap.*

— From the journals of Chris Warner

Cowardice endangers organizations just as badly as its opposite cousin, lone heroism. Did you ever have someone in your company boast about their heroic efforts, when in reality he or she wasn't even close to the action? Unfortunately, such behavior infects all kinds of teams and cultures.

Is your company infected by cowardice? Do doomed projects move ahead because the cowardly don't dare reveal the truth? Do staff members talk behind their manager's back because their cowardice prevents them from confronting the obvious? Have cowardly politics overtaken performance? If so, you can bet some employees prefer crawling into a tent for safety rather than risking their necks by exposing the truth or challenging the status quo.

Fear of failure, or fear of consequences like retaliation, being ostracized, being blamed, or looking bad to the boss, propels cowards into the tent of safety. But not high altitude leaders. These leaders push the limits of performance and don't allow the friction of cowardice to jeopardize the future. In a world where innovation, competitive superiority and market growth are fraught with risk, cowardice is a danger few companies can afford.

Cowardice damages companies by stopping people from exhibiting high altitude performance behaviors like these:

- Challenging others on their lack of accountability.
- Exposing weak members of a team.
- Confronting arrogance.
- Uncovering selfishness.
- Divulging the state of doomed projects.

### Survival Tip: Bravery

High altitude leaders instill bravery by turning cowardice into bold action and profitable growth. The methods they use can be controversial and are often not taught in business schools. Only a few dare venture into this harsh environment that requires politically incorrect techniques.

• **Shame.** Shame induces bravery effectively. Cowards go into battle, even though they're scared to death, because they're too ashamed to turn and run in front of their peers. After a few battles, cowards find their own legs, and there's no discernible difference between the born brave and the learned brave.

• **Truth, not motivational speaking.** People want the truth, no matter how good, bad or ugly it is. Employees aren't stupid. They know the bad news already. They want to see if their leaders have the courage to acknowledge it.

• **Walk the talk.** Begin having leaders walk the talk and risk vulnerability. Can you bravely disclose the real problems in your organization? Can you demonstrate that it's OK to bring them up? ●

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### Danger #7: Comfort

*Three months after Everest, I was back on the crowded streets of Kathmandu. My plan was to return to Shisha Pangma, a mountain I had failed to climb in 1999. Now I wanted to try to climb it without any partners. It would be a lot more dangerous, with an ever-greater chance of failure. I figured that by fully immersing myself in a challenge of this magnitude and surrounding myself with that much risk, I would be forced to perform at my highest level of ability. I wanted to be so fully engaged that my self-confidence would rush back in, filling the void.*

— From the journals of Chris Warner

## Summary: HIGH ALTITUDE LEADERSHIP

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Great achievements sometimes require enduring extreme discomfort. And that's when real leadership is tested, validated and proven. Why do so many turn back when the going gets tough? Popular leadership trends easily seduce the unsophisticated when there's fine weather, an easy path and plenty of air to breathe. You look like a genius when you have lots of cash, an abundance of time and a simple agenda with minimal risk. Only when the path ahead becomes formidable and risky, when certainty wavers and your legs quiver, does real greatness emerge — or not.

There is nothing pleasurable, sexy or exciting about taking just one more step when your body is totally aching and exhausted, but on the climb it makes the critical difference between success and failure. You grow only when you're putting yourself in uncomfortable positions and taking on new challenges. High performers are used to being uncomfortable. Many get nervous when things get too comfortable for too long.

### **Survival Tip: Perseverance**

As a leader, you often won't have all the tools, resources or circumstances you need, yet you still must summit. Perseverance separates the high altitude leaders from the charlatans. Business history is rich with such examples — there are many Edisons who persevered through hundreds of failures in order to create their right lightbulb. No team or professional accomplishes a goal worth the pursuit without surviving the often uncomfortable and at times painful stretch called perseverance.

If you've been at this game for any length of time, you've experienced failure. In the natural course of life, your heart will be broken, your team will lose games and your attempts to climb higher will fail. Instead of stopping, high altitude leaders become greater as a result. Conflicts result in character development. If you avoid the conflicts or dwell on the associated pain, you will not grow.

### **Blind Persistence Is Not Perseverance**

On a snowy day in October 1999, Chris and his climbing partner arrived at a remote Tibetan base camp. Shisha Pangma is the 14th-tallest mountain in the world. They were headed for the South Face, an extremely technical, rarely climbed objective on this 26,289-foot-tall mountain. Two other teams were on the mountain when an avalanche bisected the entire face, sending hundreds of thousands of pounds of ice and rock crashing onto the glacier and burying two of the climbers beneath thousands of tons of ice and snow.

Chris and his partner chose to abandon the climb. It was clearly too dangerous. The storm system, by the time it finished crossing the Himalayas, claimed the lives of 13 climbers on three different mountains. It cost a few thousand dollars to walk away from Shisha Pangma.

How many times do you hold on to a dream too hard? Still pursue a project you've already sunk too much time and money into? Let the ego rather than the head drive the agenda? Retreat, not blind persistence, can sometimes be the only course of action. Walking away does not mean giving up. It's about maintaining a higher-level strategy that allows you to withdraw and then return again.

Perseverance does not mean continuing on in the face of impossible obstacles, but in having the capacity to retreat, rethink and return.

### **How to Inspire Perseverance**

Many times managers fail to inspire their people to persevere in the face of being stopped. They mistakenly focus on motivational speeches and posters to get people past the hard stuff. But people really want something more. They want the truth, no matter how hard it may sound. Avoiding the truth or covering it up with speeches only engenders distrust in an organization. In leadership, as in climbing, the higher you go, the greater the challenges become.

Telling the truth does something else: It prepares people to keep going even when they hit the wall. It's precisely when your confidence eludes you, when your physical and emotional capacity dries up, that you need to take one more step, then another and another. When leading teams in this situation, high altitude leaders lead by example.

People also have higher levels of perseverance if they're not handicapped by deadweight. It's the difference between summiting with a day pack or a yak on your back. People persevere better alongside those they respect. Of course, confronting deadweight behaviors isn't comfortable, but neither is the failure that results from avoiding accountability. Once you start removing deadweight, your best employees will be happier (while the losers will start to flee in a state of panic).

Finally, the most critical challenge may not be when you've successfully persevered and summited but what happens next. Comfort always seeks a way into your life and your company's life. Its best opportunity to strike occurs when perseverance is no longer necessary. After the greatest of companies have successfully achieved lofty goals, the comfort of the status quo consumes them. ●

### Danger #8: Gravity

*We were 50 feet apart. Despite the glacier being flat, we knew there were crevasses in this area. We stepped carefully and took all the normal precautions. When we did find a crevasse, the climber in the lead would probe the edges with his ice ax, and once we knew where the edge was, we would hop from one side to the other. All of this is standard practice. We had probably hopped over 50 crevasses so far this morning. Bruce took another step. He disappeared. The rope whipped tight. Two hundred pounds of climber and gear were pulling me by the waist. I fought with all my strength, but it was of no use. I was being dragged toward the bottomless crevasse he fell into. I was still on the surface, being dragged along the path Bruce had just made, when suddenly the snow exploded around me. I was hurtling into another hidden crevasse. The rope stopped my fall with a jerk. The impact forces slammed me into the crevasse wall. Looking up, I could see the edge of my hole, 5 feet above me. The tightened rope went straight from my harness, through that hole, and across the flat glacier, before bending over the edge of Bruce's crevasse, to where he lay dangling some 25 feet below the surface. Both crevasses seemed bottomless. We were alive: Two men fall into two separate crevasses, saving their lives.*

— From the journals of Chris Warner

High altitude leadership is an endless journey full of risk. You constantly tread in unfamiliar areas. Although plans are made and experts say the path is clear, you still may fall, and fall hard. Assumptions prove to be erroneous, data end up being flawed or commitments go unmet. All of a sudden, a cherished project, career move or critical goal appears to reach a point of failure.

#### Survival Tip: Luck

High altitude leaders accept luck as part of the success equation. The first type of luck is skill-based. We've already discussed many of these skills: Act in the face of real fear, subjugate your personal desires to the greater goal of the group, fight arrogance with humility, seek out and nurture partnerships, be seduced by passion and not by tools, and persevere. When you combine these elements, you appear to be one lucky leader. Being viewed as lucky, you attract even more good fortune. We know that all this luck comes from the application of hard-earned skills and a positive mental attitude.

The second kind of luck is pure luck. When the forces of gravity switch directions, let's just hope that the dial we spin puts us on a good luck, not a bad luck, square. There's no explanation for luck. Both good and bad luck occur as teams seek the summit. You can lead your team and do it all correctly with no mistakes and still be swept over a cliff by an avalanche. ●

### The Journey Begins

In mountaineering, rarely does the first error kill a climber. Death occurs when the third thing goes wrong.

On big peaks, we tell clients that the first mistake they made was joining the expedition. They are now in an environment where things can go terribly wrong very quickly. If they are going to make it home alive, they have to be more disciplined, more giving and more humbled than ever before. Everyone has to scan the horizon. Everyone has to examine themselves and each other for signs of weakness. Everyone is responsible for their own safety and the safety of everyone else. They have to prevent the small mistakes from adding up to a catastrophe.

Just as in mountaineering, business leaders make small errors almost daily. But how many does it take before the errors reach a deadly magnitude of bringing down a project or a career or a company? Both organizations and expeditions fail because a series of mistakes build on themselves — and before anyone notices. How many teams failed before anyone realized that the demoralized culture, increased customer dissatisfaction and hemorrhaging profits would combine into an inescapable landslide?

In the most extreme situations, true leadership emerges in the self-sacrifice that people exhibit for others. We call it altruism.

#### Don't Conquer the Peak, Conquer Yourself

Lose yourself and you have nothing left. Remember that high altitude leaders don't seek to conquer the great goals; these are the results of their conquering themselves. Don't lose yourself in the process, but dig deeper into yourself so that you can climb ever higher. This remains the timeless challenge of a leader.

Each day you must engage the dangers inherent in the trek to higher altitudes. Surviving these dangers ensures your personal success and the breathless views from the summits you reach. As a leader, you owe it to yourself, your team and your company to be ever-vigilant so that all may summit — and then make it safely back to base camp. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *High Altitude Leadership*, you'll also like:

1. **Leadership Gold** by John C. Maxwell. Maxwell shares a lifetime of leadership truths that can guide anyone currently leading a team or company.
2. **Crisis Leadership Now** by Laurence Barton. Barton applies his corporate insider's insight to numerous case studies concerning crisis management.
3. **No Substitute for Victory** by Theodore Kinni and Donna Kinni. The Kinnis turn the leadership lessons of Gen. Douglas MacArthur into 50 strategies anyone can use to get results quickly.