



Sir Ed HILLARY

LEGACY TO MANAGEMENT Sir Ed 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 Ed Hillary and *Hell-bent for the Pole* by Geoffrey Lee Martin. There are lessons there for business. by David Parmenter

Lesson 1 If you want to be picked for the 'summit' team, ensure you don't just rely on reputation. Sir Ed 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 himself 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 camp 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 you have endless opportunity to highlight your strengths and to demonstrate to the CEO and/or senior team you are the one.

Lesson 2 Having the best 'team' does not necessarily mean you will be successful if you have ignored the politics. Sir Ed had successfully climbed endless peaks with George Lowe in the 1952 and 1953 seasons. They were clearly the best Himalayan climbing team based on current experience.

Having joined the Hunt expedition, and already halfway to Everest, Sir Ed realised that two New Zealanders would never be allowed to the summit first. A takeover by two Kiwis would never be allowed on a British-sponsored expedition. Sir Ed 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 handpicked 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.

Lesson 3 When selecting a team make sure they are multi-skilled and have a sense of humour. Sir Ed was very careful in his selection of staff. He recognised that in times of difficulty you want to have someone who can laugh at adversity. The last thing he wanted was a team member going into a panic or looking for a scapegoat. Sir Ed also looked for a collection of skills in an individual. He recognised that having more staff does not necessarily make the team stronger. So his expedition reporter doubled as a tractor

driver, the doctor took a dentistry training course and the cook learnt to cook gourmet meals for the masses.

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 Ed is legendary for his kindness. One mentioned in the obituaries was that on hearing a young child was seriously ill in hospital he wrote an inspirational note to the two-year-old.

As a CEO, never forget the small details. It is those small acts of kindness and consideration that will build your legend.

Lesson 5 Humility and drive are good bed fellows. Sir Ed's obituaries without fail are mentioning how little he sought for himself. He achieved at everything he participated in, yet never sort the limelight.

Bill Gates is another great leader who is humble. While the press follows his every move he seldom seeks the limelight. During one trip to New Zealand he was asked by a Kiwi who did not recognise him "what do

you do” and replied “I am in computers” – the understatement of the year.

As a CEO remind yourself every day that humility is a strength not a weakness.

Lesson 6 Dreaming of your eventual goal. Sir Ed was an avid comic book reader in his youth and would imagine himself as a hero. He read about and worshipped Shackleton, and dreamed of being the first to climb Everest.

Why you may ask was the first summit 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 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 Ed to “knock the bugger off”. As a CEO you need to dream of your eventual goal. To smell, see, feel, taste and hear what it would be like to succeed.

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.

Sir Ed suffered a similar fate on his Antarctic expedition. I recall reading that twice, with his Ferguson tractors, he attempted to cross over 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 “let’s 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 Ed Hillary sought the help of Admiral George Dufek on a number of occasions during his expedition to the South Pole and the Admiral also helped Sir Ed choose the site of Scott Base. What is remembered today is that that expedition was successful and the gratitude Sir Ed had for Dufek is clearly stated in *View from the Summit*.

In business, many costly failures could have been averted if advice had been sought from a trusted and wise mentor. The key is the selection (and use) of your mentor 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 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 provision for them. It is not uncommon to be halfway through a project and realise that more significant goals could have been achieved if some planning and provisioning had been done in the first place.

Sir Ed, 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 never being 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 Ed kept strictly to his ‘project brief’ the Kiwi involvement would be forgotten. 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 Ed 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, and a ‘she’ll be right’ attitude and will be committed until the next 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 stuck in limbo. These projects are of no value until someone re-focuses 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 the South Island before the Antarctic expedition worked for Sir Ed 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. **M**



David Parmenter is managing director of Waymark Solutions. www.waymark.co.nz