

LEADERSHIP Excellence

Warren Bennis



THE MAGAZINE OF LEADERSHIP, DEVELOPMENT, MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

FEBRUARY 2011



Barbara Kellerman
Consultant

**Best LD
Practices**

**Lead
with Agility**

**Leadership
Literacy**

Seven Key Themes



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Summit Leadership

Learn from Sir Edmund Hillary.



by David Parmenter

SIR EDMUND HILLARY has been credited with many things, yet few people realize what a great leader he was. After climbing Mount Everest as a team member, he achieved everything else as a CEO. Having read the book *View from the Summit and Hellbent for the Pole* by Geoffrey Lee Martin, I extract 11 lessons that we can apply:

Lesson 1: Properly set up your base camp. Many projects fail because of lack of planning and failure to get the infrastructure, resources, and training in place at the outset. Aspiring leaders tend to be more interested in measuring the speed of early progress than ensuring that the campaign will be completed on time and on budget. If meticulous planning and testing of gear on the glaciers in South Island before the Antarctic Expedition worked for Hillary, you should invest more time, energy, and money in setting up a base camp from which a successful summit attempt is possible.

Lesson 2: If you hope to be picked for the summit team, don't rely on reputation alone. How often are you surprised when you're not chosen to lead a special project or passed over for a management or leadership position? Hillary knew there were at least three pairs of climbers capable of making the summit in Sir John Hunt's expedition. He wanted to ensure that Sir John would not overlook his team (Hillary and Tenzing), so he devised a test of stamina to show they were the fittest team. Hillary and Tenzing ascended from base camp to advanced base and back in one day—a task previously done in two days. In business, you have endless opportunities to highlight your strengths and show that you are the best candidate.

Lesson 3: Having the best team does not mean you'll be selected and succeed if you ignore the politics. Hillary had climbed endless peaks with George Lowe in 1952-53. They were clearly the best Himalayan climbing team based on experience. Having joined the Hunt expedition, and halfway to Everest, Hillary realized that Lowe and himself, two New Zealanders, would not be allowed

to the summit first. A takeover by two Kiwis would never be allowed on a British-sponsored expedition. Hillary changed his climbing partner, teaming with Sherpa *Tenzing Norgay*, and they became the first to ascend to the summit of Everest. You may have the best team, but if you don't have the support of the top team, you may need to make alternative selections to satisfy certain stakeholders. *You need to be flexible and aware of stakeholders' needs and perceptions, and the politics they answer to.*

Lesson 4: When selecting a team, ensure they are multi-skilled and have a sense of humor. Hillary was careful in his selection of staff. He recognized that in times of difficulty you want to have someone who can laugh at adversity. The last thing Hillary wanted was a team member going into a panic, or worse, a person who would rather look



for a scapegoat. In addition Hillary looked for the right mix of skills. He recognized that having more staff does not necessarily make the team stronger. The expedition's reporter also doubled as a tractor driver; the doctor took a dentistry training course; and the cook learned extra skills, and the geologist was a mountaineer. Why would a CEO appoint people who are one-dimensional? They may be excellent when the going is easy, but the first to give up when stormy weather arrives.

Lesson 5: Do small deeds of kindness. Hillary is legendary for his small acts of kindness. For example, on hearing that a two-year-old child was seriously ill in a hospital, he immediately wrote an inspirational note to him. Naturally it was inspirational both to the parents and to their now-teenage son. *Aspiring leaders should seek to perform small acts of kindness and consideration daily—those small acts will build a leadership legacy.*

Lesson 6: Humility and drive are good

bedfellows. Sir Edmund Hillary's obituaries mention how little he sought for himself. He achieved at everything he did, yet he never sought the limelight. His legacy is one of contribution to Mother Earth. Many Sherpa pilots, doctors, nurses, and lawyers were taught to read and write through his schools. My daughter, with a tear in her eye, once 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 a recent trip to New Zealand he was asked by a Kiwi who did not recognize him, "What do you do?" He replied, "I am in computers." The understatement of the year!

• Warren Buffett, the greatest investor alive today, always looks for a CEO who is a quiet achiever rather than a flash-in-the-pan "show pony."

As a leader, remind yourself that *humility is a strength*, not a weakness. Mount a picture of Hillary on your wall as a reminder. Strive to make the world a better place. The meaning of life can be summed up in one word: *legacy*. Some of us leave a legacy through our children, some through inspiration of others, and some through deeds.

Lesson 7: Dream of (visualize) your eventual goal. Hillary was an avid comic-book reader in his youth, and on long walks would imagine himself as a hero. He read about and idolized Shackleton and later dreamed of being the first to climb Everest. Why was the first British team unsuccessful in 1953? Was equipment failure the excuse? Yet, could they have invented a new way of climbing with oxygen bottles when they came up against the Hillary step? Hillary improvised a shuffle, using the oxygen bottles on the back pack and his feet as a pair of wedges, and inch by inch, in the thin air, using all of his legendary strength made it up the tight shaft. This route, now roped, is followed by thousands. The drive to succeed pushed Hillary to "knock the bugger off." As a leader, 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 *neuro-linguistic programming* to make your dreams your reality.

Lesson 8: Giving it a go when your instincts say no is not great idea. Do you continue on a path when everything around you is sending signals to stop or change course? Are you compelled to complete the task rather than listen and change tactics? Hillary suffered a similar fate on his Antarctic Expedition. Twice he tried to cross over,

with his Fergusson tractors, ice bridges that he felt uneasy about. These failed attempts could have proved deadly. In each case, he later found a safer route (a better option). Before you say "Let's give it a go," look for an alternative route; you may well find the *safe bridge*.

Lesson 9: Seek help when you need it. For some aspiring leaders, seeking help is a sign of failure or weakness. In reality, seeking help can provide you with a leap up the ladder of success. Hillary sought the help of Admiral George Dufek often during his expedition to the South Pole. That help proved vital to Hillary—and rewarding for Admiral Dufek. He helped Hillary choose the site of Scott Base, which has been used ever since. And he helped Hillary at other critical stages of the expedition. What's remembered is that that expedition was successful and the gratitude Hillary had for Admiral George Dufek is clearly stated. You'll avert many costly failures if you seek advice from a trusted and wise mentor/advisor.

Lesson 10: In all projects, you can achieve other goals if you provision for them. Halfway through a project, you may realize that *higher goals could have been achieved if you'd done some planning and provisioning for them in the first place*. When asked by Vivian Fuchs to provide a Kiwi support expedition to his grand traverse of the Antarctic, Hillary had in mind the possibility of Kiwis also getting to the South Pole, and so he planned and provisioned for this possibility, even though it was never on the official agenda. His successful expedition was a triumph of Kiwi ingenuity (getting three converted tractors to the South Pole), and of his great vision. Look for *other possibilities* when planning your next expedition; you may achieve *more important goals*.

Lesson 11: Don't start a project if you can't see it through to the end. Whether ascending Mount Everest, driving tractors through the South Pole, jet boating up the Ganges, or building schools in Nepal, Hillary had a unique cluster of skills: he was a great planner, a person who is focused, and one who completes tasks. Often aspiring leaders start projects with little planning and commit only until the next interesting project comes up or when tying up the loose ends gets too boring. Hence, organizations are littered with projects *in limbo*. These projects are of *no value* until you refocus on completing them. LE

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ACTION: Summit your Everest this year.

Great Leaders

They possess three traits.



by Patty Azzarello

WHAT MAKE THE BEST leaders stand out is *not* their skills, or their experience. Once you compete for the top jobs, everyone has impressive skills and relevant experience. It's also *not* just about execution. Execution is critical—you need to set a compelling agenda and deliver on it—but again, that's entry stakes—it doesn't make you great. So how do you differentiate?

The higher up you go, your value as a leader is associated more with *who you are as a person*, than with your skills. The best leaders have three traits:

1. Great leaders are who they are. They are people whose words and actions match what they genuinely think and feel on the inside. This is, sadly, rather rare. Egos, agendas, fear, and politics all pull on us to say and do things that we don't believe, but serve to please others, smooth things out, or defend ourselves. Most people cave in to this pressure. The best leaders stick to their values: They say and do what they really feel and think. They bring the core of who they are to their work, and they talk about what matters

most to them. When you see a leader behaving this way, it obvious that they are being *authentic*. It's not hard to spot. You can't fake it. You can fake opinions or positions, but you can't fake *authenticity*! Your authenticity builds trust, and makes people eager to follow you.

2. They communicate well. The best leaders communicate well, consistently, often, and to everyone. They invite people in. They *let people know what's going on and tell people what they really think*.

• **One-to-one communication:** Great leaders listen. They don't just go through the *act of listening*—they listen with *active curiosity* because *they are genuinely interested in learning the other person's point of view*. Leaders who don't respect the people they listen to, or care to understand their opinions, may get some points for the show, but they're not connecting or learning—nor are they *being influenced or having much influence*.

• **Group communications:** A steady heart-

beat of communications from the top lets people know that *you are there*, and *you are engaged*. What you say is almost less important than the fact that *you say it regularly*. Communicate weekly without fail. You'll score huge leadership points with steady, quality communications. When people feel in the loop, they're much more motivated, less worried, and more productive—and they consider you to be a better leader than someone they seldom hear from.

• **Persuasiveness:** Great leaders are persuasive. You don't need to be a world-class speaker to be a *good communicator*. You need to understand people and how to persuade them. That is why listening and learning helps. Persuasive communications lights the path you are asking people to travel, and sells the reasons *why they should go with you*.

3. They pick the right people and make them great. Effective leaders build a team underneath them that is so capable that they are free to solve higher-order problems. Don't cover for a weak team: If you're personally stepping in to do the work because you have *weak spots* (team members who are *not capable* or *motivated enough* to step up to do more),

you are hold yourself back and fail to deliver high value. Hire stars, give them big work, support them, and let them excel. Help them be *amazing*. Create a culture where the team works well, and individuals can *grow to solve bigger and bigger problems over time*.

Why This Works

I used to wonder why I was so *lucky* to always have such remarkable, talented, experienced people want to work for me. I finally realized two things:

First, I pick the right people for the right jobs so they can work where they have natural strengths and thrive.

Second, I give them the room and support to stretch beyond their current capabilities. The *magic of why they want to work for me* is that *they feel respected and can be proud of their work*. They achieve more, and get recognized for it. People like to be *amazing* and be respected, supported, and recognized.

If you do these two things, you get the best people, and they move mountains for you. All you need to do is *show them trust and respect and get things out of their way*. LE

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ACTION: Cultivate these three traits.