

Climb Every Mountain

By Kim Dannies

We are all leaders in every aspect of our daily lives. The job of a leader is to identify and ignite the potential talents of those around us who share a common goal or mission. Be it executing a complex team project, getting the soccer carpool to practice, or simply exhibiting healthy discipline- we must model our best qualities and set an example of excellence in the process.

I recently had the privilege of meeting and dining with an exceptional leader, former Goldman Sachs investment banker and mountaineer, Alison Levine. Alison was the captain of the first American Women's Expedition to climb Mt. Everest in 2002. Talk about dynamite! Alison was the keynote speaker at Key Bank's annual Key4Women Forum and I was lucky enough to be on the panel. Alison's words took our breath away as she led us up the mountain via a slide show that linked lessons learned on the climb with wisdom for overcoming obstacles in business and in life. Alison covered leadership development, team dynamics, overcoming odds, tackling fear, taking responsible risks and dealing with changing environments. Here are the key points of her presentation:

1. Get To "YES." Find ways of asking the questions so that you can achieve your objective- or get to YES. Keep asking the questions, reformatting them, and brainstorming possibilities until you can remove whatever force is in your way and begin to problem solve the issue in a collaborative way. Alison found this useful in the daunting job of fund raising for the entire budget of the Mt. Everest trip. (Ford Motor Company eventually stepped up to the plate and funded the whole expedition.) She also shared a story about her desire to climb a mountain that happened to be in a war zone- permits were not being issued for that area. She persisted with friendly inquiries until she finally discovered that there was one possible way to secure a permit: she could go if the army escorted her to the trailhead. (Yup, she climbed it.)

2. Break It Down. A goal like a mountaintop can seem overwhelming until it is broken down into smaller steps. (As I love to tell my clients "You can only eat an elephant one bite at a time.") Alison told us about the pace of a climb above 20,000 feet, it goes like this: take a step; take 5-10 slow, laborious breaths. Take another step; take 5-10 slow, laborious breaths. Take a step- and so on. You get the gruesome picture. The process is so mind-numbing that she must break it down to find a goal more immediate than her overall objective (or go crazy.) Alison picks a rock, or another hard place, 5 feet away, marks it, and chips away at reaching it slowly and methodically. To get to the top she must repeat this pattern thousands of times.

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3. Build A Great Team There is no substitute for surrounding yourself with good people. The magic happens when you invest in a relationship with them. Empower your people by identifying and respecting abilities. Take the time to train skill sets and set goals that are measurable. Then delegate, and get the hell out of the way. Results will invariably be superior to any that you could have micro-managed. Challenges (or tragedy) can blow your team up, or bond you in powerful ways; a leader knows when to step in and redirect the action.

4. Network Community Partnerships. Alison is well-known in the mountaineering world as a social butterfly. But she will tell you that this investment of energy is critical to her and her team's survival. She explained that when she arrives at a new base camp she makes sure that she meets and talks with everyone. Now, some of us might be more inclined to cocoon in our down sleeping bags recovering from unfathomable physical and mental exertion, but as team captain, Alison has learned that if she can make a connection with other teams, they will have an unspoken obligation to help her team on the mountain. If there is no relationship, there is no such obligation – any team will happily march right by another team of strangers dangling off of a crevasse. Get to know your colleagues and your competitors.

5. Progress & Direction Do Not Run Together. There are times when our momentum does not seem to be going forward. This is not necessarily a disaster. Alison showed us a map of the Everest route and the three base camps that climbers must visit several times in order to acclimatize for the high altitude performance that Everest demands (29,035 feet). What's fascinating is that the climbers must trek to camp #1 and then return to base camp, spending three separate nights, before they can advance on to camp #2. When they get to camp #2, they go all the way back down to base camp. There are three more round trips spending the night each time in each camp. By the time they reach the summit, they have successfully conquered seven sections of the mountain, methodically and painstakingly climbing up and then acclimatizing down, only to scale the same route and forge forward. It's like a CandyLand nightmare and would qualify as insane behavior, except that the team is hyper-focused on their ultimate goals: the summit and their safety. This is an extreme version of the proverbial and inconvenient 'two steps back before going 5 forward' (which doesn't seem like such a pain in the neck to me anymore.)

6. Fear is OK. Fear can offer a solid bit of leverage. It is complacency that will kill you. In the death zone, you must always keep moving forward, especially during times when you feel unfocused or less than motivated. In the safety of your cubicle, complacency is rearranging

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your sharpie collection eight times before lunch. Fear is picking up the phone and pitching that scary client. With the fear factor, at least you've broken the seal and you are moving in a direction that is productive (and hopefully income producing!) Voltaire said "Perfection is the enemy of the good." If you go for it steadily- an 85% pace consistently- that is far better than waiting until things are 110% perfect. "Ready-Fire-Aim!" reminds us to resist over-thinking scenarios and over-performing. Use your sound professional judgment, pick a direction, and keep climbing!

7. Lead by Example. After seven weeks of bad food, ice toilets, and constant altitude sickness life can get a little shaky. Alison told us "Put a smile on your face and do your job. Attitude is contagious." You will be far more influential when you lead by example. No amount of authority is going to improve the morale of your team. Along with a great smile and energetic attitude, you must come prepared. Know your stuff, or where the resource is, in order to earn the respect and trust of your colleagues.

8. Judgment. The best decision makers rely on a rock solid values-based system that never fails them. These are the happiest people. Anyone can develop this system by discovering what their personal non-negotiable value system looks like and filtering every learning situation and decision through it. Responsible risk takers know exactly how they feel and why because they make sure their choices honor their core beliefs. Good judgment is self-knowledge and experience in full bloom. Alison and her team spent two months climbing Everest. On the summit day severe storms were imminent. Her team was less than a football field from the summit (about a 3 hour trek) and Alison turned them back. It was a simple but heart wrenching decision. Alison knew what she had to do and has never regretted her judgment call. Sometimes the best deals are the ones you leave on the table.

9. Ask the big question: WHY? Why are we doing things this way? Why has it always been this way? Alison asked that question over and over in Uganda where she traveled to climb Mt. Stanley. She tried to hire women porters to accompany her up the mountain. What she found was a culture so steeped in a taboo tradition that no woman, in any previous generation, had ever been up the mountain because "women don't go there." What Alison found ironic was that the women were tending to all domestic chores and performing all of the manual labor in the community while the men played cards and drank. From observing their daily arduous routines, Alison knew these women were fit enough for employment. So, on the way to bagging Mt. Stanley, Alison revitalized the economic structure of this community.

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By explaining to the village elders that women with an income would funnel the money directly back to the family via food and educational opportunities (as opposed to squandering it on alcohol or prostitution) everyone would benefit. She offered to hire any and all women who wanted to make the trek. Seven women showed up and kicked butt, completing the whole trip. During the video of this saga the audience witnessed the value of asking Why? and it was so damn powerful it gave us all the shivers.

To learn more about the amazing Alison Levine go to www.daredevilstrategies.com. Alison lectures nine months out of the year traveling like crazy all over the country. Then, for three months, she is an adventurer and a philanthropist- blazing new trails, creating new possibilities, and living her joy. This month she will be skiing 500 plus miles to Antarctica! Read 85 More Broads by Janet Hanson for Alison's complete story (and the stories of other inspiring leaders).

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