



Leadership Lessons from Survivors: 'Climbing on the Mountain's Schedule, Not Ours'

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At Wharton's 10th annual leadership conference on June 13, the theme of "Leading with Resilience: Coming Back from Challenge and Adversity" brought together speakers who had faced hardships in a number of different areas. Perhaps none of the speakers, however, had experienced as much physical danger as David Breashears, filmmaker and mountaineer, who recounted how he and his team survived one of the deadliest accidents in the history of Mt. Everest.



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"So where does a mountaineer and filmmaker fit into this conference?" Breashears asked. "Resilience, excellence, determination, conviction, resolve" -- words that are often used to describe a successful team anywhere, whether on Wall Street or on a cliff. "The mountain has been my workplace," said Breashears, adding that his high-altitude pursuits have taught him a few things about planning and leadership. Another speaker at the conference -- organized by Wharton's Center for Human Resources and The Center for Leadership and Change Management -- was Sylvia M. Montero, who recounted her own journey from a farm in Puerto Rico to a position as senior vice present, human resources, at Pfizer.

The Best-laid Plans

Climbing the world's highest mountain under normal circumstances requires months, sometimes years, of preparation. In May 1996, Breashears and his team faced a special challenge: making an IMAX film about their journey. Carrying and maintaining hundreds of pounds of filming equipment meant that planning was even more meticulous than usual. "We went to that mountain with a great plan, an elegant plan," said Breashears. For one, it was flexible. "A good plan makes you nimble, not stuck. Ours gave us options ... wiggle room."

By rehearsing extensive "what if" scenarios long before they got to the mountain, the team was ready for the unexpected. So when a freak storm hit the day they were to approach the summit, Breashears' team turned back while other teams kept climbing. With the summit just within reach, the temptation to go on was enormous, Breashears recalled, especially since the team had already spent weeks on the mountain, passing through all four base camps and acclimatizing their lungs to the thin air. Yet, as Breashears noted, "We had to climb on the mountain's schedule, not ours," an acknowledgment that probably saved his life.

As Breashears' team went back down, they passed several other teams on their way up. By nightfall, eight people had perished, including Rob Hall, a world-renowned climber and friend of Breashears. Hall was leading a group of individuals who had paid him a substantial fee to lead them to the top. Jon Krakauer, a writer and outdoorsman who was on Hall's team, would eventually write the best-selling book *Into Thin Air*, chronicling in heartbreaking detail what had gone wrong.

Among the tragedies of that day was one event that many later described as a miracle. The storm that had hit as Hall's ill-fated team made its ascent caused many of the climbers to become separated. One small group was in desperate trouble: They had lost their way in the blinding snow and had run out of oxygen.

In an attempt to save their own lives, they made the difficult decision to leave behind one of their team members, Beck Weathers, a doctor from Texas. By all accounts, Weathers was already close to death. He had no pulse and appeared to be frozen in the ground.

The next morning, however, as Breashears and his team helped with the rescue efforts for those teams still on the mountain, word came on the walkie-talkie that "the dead guy is alive." Weathers had spent the night in sub-zero temperatures fully exposed to the elements. The next morning, as the sun hit the mountain, he awoke from a hypothermic coma and, despite snow blindness and severe frostbite on his hands and feet, managed to stumble into camp. He was eventually flown off the mountain in a helicopter rescue that had its own share of danger and drama.

Having reached the summit of Mt. Everest five times, Breashears knows what he wants in a team. Surprisingly, he's not necessarily looking for the *best* climbers. "I look for talented people who believe in their craft, not those who are looking for praise," he said. "The most important quality is selflessness. I knew that no matter what, no one would leave me behind," he joked.

Sharing a common goal and vision is critical, and no one's ego can take precedence. "People who say 'me first' can be dangerous on Everest." Indeed, in Breashears' experience, the teams that operate best have a higher objective than themselves. Humility makes a great leader. "The kind of leader I want wakes up and asks, 'What did I do wrong yesterday, and how can I fix it today?' Your team doesn't need to like you, but they have to trust and respect you," he said. "A leader who puts his interests first is a highly demoralizing force."

Seeking Guidance from Others

Far from Tibet, speaker Sylvia M. Montero, senior vice president, human resources, at Pfizer Inc., has had her own mountains to climb. She spent the first eight years of her life on a farm in Puerto Rico where her father struggled as a sugar cane farmer. "We were poor," she said. "We just didn't know it." After moving to New York City with her family, it became obvious to Montero that she was both poor and a member of a minority. The knowledge of this, and what it can do to your sense of self worth and self-esteem, she said, had an impact on her childhood. "Children internalize subtle messages. I had a sense that I couldn't compete with people who were more prosperous."

Although she did well in high school, Montero never imagined going to college until a high school counselor advised her to apply to Barnard. She did, and received a full scholarship. But college life for her was different than it was for most others. She lived at home and took the subway to and from school; she married in her first year and became a mother in her second year. "I lived between two worlds," she said, "a co-ed by day and a married mother who lived in a drug-infested tenement by night." Straddling these two worlds, Montero made a decision: "I chose to actively participate in what happened to me."

She returned to Puerto Rico after the breakup of her marriage and taught literature for many years. When an opportunity to join a small pharmaceutical firm emerged, she took it. In her first 15 years with the company, which was eventually bought out by Pfizer, Montero was given "numerous opportunities for growth. I traveled around the world and had the chance to live abroad, including China, where I set up the company's first HR function." As she moved up the corporate ladder, she was often the first female or first Hispanic in the job, a fact that often weighed heavily on her. "I was deeply aware of" of being a minority, "and that concern often held me back." Each time she found herself in this defensive position, she had to recharge herself. "I purposely decided that I was not going to allow it to be an obstacle."

In the past few years, as Pfizer weathered the challenges and opportunities that come with mergers (two in the space of three years), Montero has been able to access the lessons that adversity taught her. From her first mentoring experience with her high school counselor, Montero continues to seek guidance from others. She has worked with the same business coach for years. In him, she found a "thinking partner, someone who challenges me and helps me work through strategies," she said. She also does a lot of

listening, perhaps a vestige of her early years in business when self-doubt but strong will emboldened her to learn as much as she could by asking questions.

The approach has served her well. Today she is responsible for the overall strategy and development of company-wide HR policies and also oversees leadership development, compensation and benefits for the company's 120,000 worldwide employees. Asked whether her current financial situation -- from a poor farmhouse in Puerto Rico to the executive suite -- has changed her, Montero did not hesitate. "Yes," she responded, "but not in the way you might think." Montero says she probably takes more risks because she is not preoccupied with wealth. "If I lost it," she reflected, "it wouldn't be scary because I have done without."

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