



Teaching Business Leadership Using Non-Business Case Studies: The Mount Everest Example

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Abstract. Non-business case studies, and incidents of catastrophic failure in particular, represent a powerful pedagogical tool for management educators who are designing and delivering leadership courses. This paper explains the lessons that students of business administration can learn from one such case study about the 1996 Mount Everest tragedy. Moreover, it provides management educators with ideas and suggestions for how to use the case to teach important concepts about business leadership, and to draw parallels between the reasons for failure on the slopes of Everest and the causes of failure in various business endeavors.

Keywords: leadership, decision-making, teams, cognitive bias, pedagogy, learning.

1. Introduction

In May 1996 Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, two of the world's most accomplished mountaineers, each led an expedition attempting to reach the top of Mount Everest. Five individuals, including the two leaders, died during the descent from the summit on May 11. It proved to be the deadliest day in the mountain's history. Since then, many survivors and other observers have tried to explain why this tragedy occurred.

This incident offers many important leadership lessons for students of business administration. After all, most business leaders must organize and lead teams to perform complex tasks in a highly competitive environment. They must bring together highly capable individual performers and encourage them to work together for a common goal. They need to encourage risk-taking in the pursuit of ambitious innovation objectives, yet they must not to put the organization in a precarious position through imprudent assessments of risk-reward relationships. Moreover, they must make high-stakes decisions with incomplete information, in the face of ambiguous signals and threats.

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1. I would like to thank Ralph Biggadike, Morten Hansen, and Gina Carioggia for their contributions to the development of the teaching materials described in this paper. In addition, I am grateful to the Harvard Business School Division of Research for the financial support for this project.

Undoubtedly, the heads of the 1996 Everest expeditions faced similar leadership challenges, albeit in a completely different context.

To teach these leadership lessons, I set out several years ago to develop a detailed case study of the tragedy (Roberto and Cariogga, 2002). Drawing from various first-hand accounts of the tragedy, the case provides a detailed account of the key events that took place in the days leading up to and including the final summit bid. The case describes how Fischer and Hall organized and led these two teams, and it documents the critical decisions that the leaders and their clients made during the climb. Through many of the quotes in the text, readers gain an understanding of the impressions and perceptions of the climbers, including how they felt about many of the critical decisions that the leaders made before and during the climb. The case concludes by offering a few alternative perspectives on why the tragedy occurred.

This paper begins by providing a brief synopsis of the Mount Everest case study. Then, it describes the purpose of the case and its learning objectives. The third section examines the pedagogical benefits of employing non-business case studies, particularly those about catastrophic organizational failures, to teach leadership concepts. Next, the paper discusses some of the key lessons pertaining to leadership in business enterprises that students can learn through a discussion of the events involved in the 1996 Everest tragedy. The paper concludes with some thoughts about the need for more innovation and creativity in case and course development in business education.

2. The Everest Story

In 1996 Rob Hall and Scott Fischer each led a commercial expedition team attempting to climb the world's tallest mountain. Each group consisted of the leader, several guides, and eight paying clients. While many team members reached the summit on May 10, they encountered grave dangers during their descent. Five individuals, including the two highly talented leaders, perished as they tried to climb down the mountain during a stormy night.

Many survivors and mountaineering experts have pointed out that the two leaders made a number of poor decisions during this tragedy. Perhaps most importantly, the groups ignored a critical decision rule created to protect against the dangers of descending after nightfall. Climbers typically begin their final push to the summit from a camp located at an altitude of 7,900 meters. They climb through the night, hoping to reach the summit by midday. Then, they scramble back down to camp, striving to reach the safety of their tents before sunset. This tight eighteen-hour schedule leaves little room for error. If climbers fall behind during the ascent, they face an extremely perilous nighttime descent. Hall and Fischer recognized these dangers.

Moreover, they understood that individuals would find it difficult to abandon their summit attempt after coming so tantalizingly close to achieving their goal. They knew that climbers, as they near the summit, are particularly susceptible to the “sunk cost bias” (Arkes and Blumer, 1985; Brockner, 1992; Staw and Ross, 1989). Thus, they advocated strict adherence to a predetermined decision rule. Fischer described it as the “two o’clock rule”, i.e., when it became clear that a climber could not reach the top by two o’clock in the afternoon, that individual should abandon his summit bid and head back to the safety of the camp. If he failed to do so, the leaders and/or the guides should order the climbers to turn around. One team member recalled that, “Rob had lectured us repeatedly about the importance of having a predetermined turnaround time on summit day... and abiding by it no matter how close we were to the top” (Krakauer, 1997: 190).

Unfortunately, the leaders, guides, and most clients ignored the turnaround rule during the ascent. Nearly all the team members, including the two leaders, arrived at the summit after two o’clock. As a result, many climbers found themselves descending in darkness, well past midnight, as a ferocious blizzard enveloped the mountain. Not only did five people die, many others barely escaped with their lives.

Why did the climbers ignore the two o’clock rule? Many team members recognized quite explicitly the perils associated with violating the turnaround rule, but they chose not to question the leaders’ judgment. The groups never engaged in an open and candid dialogue regarding the choice to push ahead. Neil Beidleman, a guide on Fischer’s team, had serious reservations about climbing well past midday. However, he did not feel comfortable telling Fischer that the group should turn around. Perceptions of his relative status within the group affected Beidleman’s behavior. He was “quite conscious of his place in the expedition pecking order,” and consequently, he chose not to voice his concerns (Krakauer, 1997: 260). He reflected back, “I was definitely considered the third guide... so I tried not to be too pushy. As a consequence, I didn’t always speak up when maybe I should have, and now I kick myself for it” (Krakauer, 1997: 260). Similarly, Jon Krakauer, a journalist climbing as a member of Hall’s team, began to sense the emergence of a “guide-client protocol” that shaped the climbers’ behavior. He remarked, “On this expedition, he (Andy Harris – one of Rob Hall’s guides) had been cast in the role of invincible guide, there to look after me and the other clients; we had been specifically indoctrinated not to question our guides’ judgment” (Krakauer, 1997: 245).

The climbers on these expedition teams also did not know one another very well. Many of them had not met their colleagues prior to arriving in Nepal. They found it difficult to develop mutual respect and trust during their short time together. Climber Jon Krakauer commented that, “we never really had this feeling that we were all in it together... we never coalesced as a team”

(Bryant, 1997). At one point during the climb, he admitted to himself that they were “a team in name only” (Krakauer, 1997: 213). Not knowing how others might react to their questions or comments, many climbers remained hesitant when doubts surfaced in their minds. Russian guide Anatoli Boukreev, who did not have a strong command of the English language, found it especially difficult to build relationships with his teammates. Consequently, he did not express his concerns about key aspects of the leaders’ plans, for fear of how others might react to his opinions. Regretfully, he later wrote, “I tried not to be too argumentative, choosing instead to downplay my intuitions” (Boukreev and Dewalt, 1998: 121).

Hall also made it quite clear to his team during the early days of the expedition that he would not welcome disagreement and debate during the ascent. He believed that others should defer to him because of his vast mountain-climbing expertise and remarkable track record of guiding clients to the summit of Everest. After all, Hall had guided a total of thirty-nine clients to the top during four prior expeditions. He offered a stern pronouncement during the early days of the climb: “I will tolerate no dissension up there. My word will be absolute law, beyond appeal” (Krakauer, 1997: 216). Hall made the statement because he wanted to pre-empt pushback from clients who might resist turning around if he instructed them to do so. Ironically, Hall fell behind schedule on summit day and should have turned back, but the clients did not challenge his decision to push ahead. Because of Hall’s early declaration of authority, Krakauer concluded that, “Passivity on the part of the clients had thus been encouraged throughout our expedition” (Krakauer, 1997: 219).

Before long, deference to the leaders – to the “experts” – became a routine behavior for the team members. When the experts (Hall and Fischer) began to violate their own procedures or make other crucial mistakes, that pattern of deference persisted. Less experienced team members remained hesitant to raise questions or concerns. Fischer’s situation proved especially tragic. His physical condition deteriorated badly during the final summit push, and his difficulties became apparent to everyone including the relative novices. He struggled to put one foot in front of the other, yet “nobody discussed Fischer’s exhausted appearance” or suggested that he should retreat down the slopes (Krakauer, 1997: 275).

Since 1996, many people have analyzed the decisions that Hall and Fischer made during their ascent, and they have cited a number of possible causes of the tragedy. Competing theories abound, and much disagreement remains among survivors and other expert climbers. Some individuals, such as Krakauer, recognized that mistakes may have been made, but they emphasized that climbing Everest will always be a risky and dangerous endeavor. After all, storms, avalanches, and collapses of large chunks of ice have caused many deaths over the years. This school of thought emphasized the inevitability of failure and tragedy on the slopes of Everest.

Others have argued that this tragedy represents a failure in leadership, and therefore, these deaths could have been prevented. They point to a series of crucial mistakes that Hall and Fischer made during the expedition. One accomplished guide put it rather bluntly: "The events of May 10 were not an accident, nor an act of God. They were the end result of people whom were making decisions about how and whether to proceed" (Coburn, 1997: 192).

3. Purpose of the Case

This case has three primary purposes. First, it allows students to examine how teams make high-stakes decisions in stressful situations. Students explore why individuals and teams make flawed choices. They learn about how managers shape the context and the process through which teams make decisions. For instance, managers can create a climate in which people do not feel comfortable expressing dissent. Students also learn about cognitive biases, and they examine why individuals make these systematic errors in judgment. The case demonstrates that leaders need to be aware of the traps that individuals and teams encounter when they make decisions in crisis situations, and it enables students to discuss the strategies that leaders can employ to avoid these traps.

Second, the case provides an opportunity to examine a catastrophic failure in detail. Students discover that it can be nearly impossible to identify a single factor that caused the failure. Instead, they learn how to apply multiple theoretical perspectives to examine a serious organizational breakdown. They become familiar with important concepts from behavioral decision theory, the team effectiveness literature, and complex systems theory. Moreover, they learn how to integrate these conceptual perspectives and apply them to a real situation.

Third, the case enables students to examine two leaders in action during a crisis situation. Students can evaluate the leadership and decision-making styles of Hall and Fischer, and they can examine how those styles impacted team process and outcomes. The case provides an opportunity to identify the ways – often rather subtle in nature – in which leaders shape team member perceptions and beliefs, and ultimately, individual choices and behavior. Finally, students can compare their own decision-making styles to the expedition leaders in the case, and each person can identify the strengths and weaknesses of his or her approach.

4. Pedagogical Power

Some management educators might be concerned that this type of non-traditional case study might not fit appropriately within a typical leadership course in a business school. However, innovative educators have shown that students can learn a great deal about leadership from distinctive case studies not pertaining directly to business enterprise. For instance, faculty at the Institute for Management Development use a case study about comedian Sid Caesar and his remarkable group of writers to teach about leading teams (Fischer and Boynton, 2002). Similarly, teachers at Harvard Business School ask students to view the movie *Twelve O'Clock High*, which examines Brigadier General Frank Savage's leadership of the 918th Bomber Group in World War II, to examine the topic of leading change (Miles, 1995).

In my courses, students examine many case studies about catastrophic failures in a variety of settings. My experiences suggest that students of business administration can learn a great deal from analyzing the actions of leaders in other fields – particularly when the individuals in those situations are trying to make high-stakes decisions in a dynamic environment. For years, management educators in schools around the world have taught about organizational failures such as the Challenger space disaster (Vaughan, 1996), the Mann Gulch wildland firefighting disaster (Weick, 1994), and the Bay of Pigs fiasco (Janis, 1982; Garvin and Roberto, 2001). Students often find these non-business cases to be some of the most memorable and thought-provoking topics that they have studied. In each of these cases, students learn critical new concepts such as sensemaking (Weick, 1994), groupthink (Janis, 1982), or normalization of deviance (Vaughan, 1996) that inform their understanding of how leaders can improve performance and reduce risk in their teams and organizations. Naturally, students learn that each case does not represent solely a failure of leadership, but they do begin to appreciate how the behavior of the leaders of each organization contributed to the catastrophe.

What explains the pedagogical power and the impact on students that these non-business cases can have? In many courses on business administration, students read dozens of case studies about corporate leaders trying to make key decisions regarding how to improve their performance. The case method, of course, offers many advantages over traditional lectures. It employs an inductive and experiential model of learning, and as such, it can be a very effective mechanism for teaching about leadership in business as well as other professions (Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen, 1994; Christensen, 1991; Garvin, 2003). As renowned case method instructor C. Roland Christensen and his colleagues once wrote,

Lectures about judgment typically have limited impact. Reading about problems or memorizing principles does little to prepare the practitioner –

architect, doctor, or manager – to apply concepts and knowledge to the complexity of real-life problems. Discussion teaching helps achieve that objective. It puts the students in an active learning mode, challenges them to accept substantial responsibility for their own education, and gives them first-hand appreciation of, and experience with, the application of knowledge to practice (Barnes, Christensen, and Hayes, 1994: 3-4).

Unfortunately, routinized behavior often sets in during a semester-long course in business administration, or during a two-year MBA program that is largely taught by the case method. Student preparation, comments, and interactions with their peers in the classroom may begin to fall into predictable patterns during the case discussions. For instance, students often fall into the habit of applying a few conceptual frameworks in a relatively mechanistic manner. Moreover, they can settle into the relatively “safe” routine of applying ideas and theoretical models from past discussions to the upcoming case, rather than exploring opportunities for new learning and discovery. Finally, students often become preoccupied with discerning the type of comments that will enhance their class participation grades, particularly in environments which place a substantial emphasis upon instructor evaluation of in-class comments. The habitual routines that emerge in discussion-based learning environments do not always prove conducive to the development and transmittal of knowledge; they can become impediments to the instructors’ efforts to stimulate new lines of collective inquiry.

Research shows that novelty and variety often helps to disrupt such habitual – and potentially dysfunctional – routines that develop in work groups (Gersick and Hackman, 1990). Novelty and variety may prove to be effective tools for business educators as well. The use of non-traditional cases about catastrophic failures in the military, mountain-climbing, firefighting, and other disparate settings can offer students an opportunity to examine leadership behavior in unfamiliar situations. Consequently, these cases may spur novel patterns of inquiry, discussion, and analysis in the classroom. My classroom experiences teaching the Everest case study support this line of reasoning.

5. Teaching the Everest Case Study

Instructors should plan on addressing four topics during a class discussion of the Everest case study, beginning with a brief discussion of why people aspire to climb the world’s tallest mountain and ending with an examination of the lessons from this case for business leaders. Many instructors find it helpful to allocate a few minutes at the end of class to summarize the key themes from the case discussion, and to draw parallels to business case studies that have been examined earlier in their courses.

Instructors should begin class by asking students, “Why do people climb Everest?” Students offer a variety of reasons. Some individuals can identify with the climbers and their motivations; others believe that the entire endeavor borders on insanity. Instructors may find it useful to share an interesting anecdote about Everest at this point. Journalists once asked George Leigh Mallory, the legendary British climber who died trying to ascend Everest in 1924, why he wanted to climb Everest. Mallory responded, “Because it is there!” David Breashears, the highly accomplished mountaineer and adventure film-maker, notes that Mallory actually said this with some disdain, because he had grown tired of explaining his motivation to others (Breashears, 2003).

After sharing this story, instructors can ask: “What type of individuals aspires to reach the summit of the world’s tallest mountain? What personal qualities does it take to succeed?” At this point, students describe a number of personal attributes such as courage, ambition, persistence, and self-confidence. Instructors then can ask: “Do you see any similarities between a high-altitude mountain climber and an MBA student aspiring to become a business leader?” The question typically surprises the class for a moment, but individuals recognize very quickly that they have offered a list of personal characteristics not dissimilar to the attributes of a typical high-achiever, goal-oriented MBA student. To push further, the instructor might challenge the class to consider the dangers associated with these personal attributes and qualities, particularly as the individuals set out to achieve their own lofty career goals. This discussion provides a solid foundation for the examination of the tragedy, as students now have made a direct connection between themselves and the climbers. Moreover, they have begun to consider how this case might provide lessons for business leaders.

Moving on to the next major block of discussion, instructors should ask students to identify the underlying causes of this tragedy. Students typically have a great deal of enthusiasm about this material; one can squelch that interest by providing too much structure to the discussion. Therefore, instructors should guide the class with a light touch, organizing the comments on the board but not explicitly introducing a conceptual framework for examining the tragedy. In my classes, I group the student comments according to three levels of analysis – individual, team, and organizational system – based upon the conceptual framework that I have developed for examining catastrophic organizational failures (Roberto, 2002). For the last category, students may not be familiar with the theory of system complexity, and therefore, they are not likely to invoke those concepts explicitly. However, some individuals will remark about the “rigidity of the team’s procedures” or “the build-up of many small mistakes.” Instructors should label the three categories of comments – individual, team, and organizational system – only after students have provided a fairly thorough analysis of the tragedy.

Several probes may help to advance the discussion. Useful questions include: “What types of mistaken judgments and choices did the climbers make?” Similarly, one can pose the question: “Did these teams function effectively? Why or why not?” As students remark about various causes, the instructor can introduce concepts such as the sunk cost effect and overconfidence bias – theories that I draw upon in my conceptual analysis of this case study (Roberto, 2002).

During the discussion of the turnaround time, instructors may wish to challenge students to consider their own experiences with broken rules and sunk costs. One can pose the following question: “In your own work experiences, why do people ignore or break rules in organizations?” Similarly, the instructor may ask: “Have you been a victim of the sunk cost bias? Why do individuals find it so hard to ignore sunk costs?” This brief diversion from the main discussion provides a useful mechanism for students to apply the lessons from this case to their own business and life experiences.

As the discussion progresses, students typically become very critical of Hall and Fischer. At this point, the instructor may pose the following question: “Are we being a bit hard on Hall and Fischer? Might tragedies such as this one simply be inevitable on the slopes of Everest?” One can point to data which show that, while 1996 was the deadliest year in the mountain’s history in absolute terms, many other years proved more hazardous on a percentage basis (Coburn, 1997; Roberto and Cariogga, 2002). Debate typically emerges between two camps: those who fault Hall and Fischer as leaders and those who tend to believe that such catastrophes are very difficult to prevent.

Finally, to conclude this block of discussion, instructors can ask: “What is the root cause of this tragedy?” Some students will try to select a single factor, from among the many issues raised during the class, as the dominant reason for the catastrophe. Others will resist the effort to pinpoint a root cause. They will point out that many issues played a role in the tragedy. This discussion leads nicely to a discussion of the concept of high-risk complex systems (Perrow, 1999; Snook, 2000). Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to introduce and explain other theories that an instructor may wish to apply to the case study. After describing those theories, one also may inquire as to the conditions under which “root cause analysis” seems appropriate. Students will point out that the search for a single root cause may make sense for structured problems in relatively simple situations, while multiple lenses and perspectives become more essential as situations become more complex and unstructured (Snook, 2000; Roberto, 2002).

During the broad discussion pasture examining the causes of the tragedy, an opportunity typically arises to discuss the issue of constructive dissent in more detail. To begin this line of inquiry, instructors can ask: “What factors created a climate in which climbers felt uncomfortable expressing dissent?” Students typically point to issues such as the “pecking order” within the teams,

or the style of the expedition leaders. The instructor also may broaden this discussion beyond the case to explore the barriers to candid dialogue in teams of all kinds, particularly those operating in business enterprises (Edmondson, 1999; Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and L. Bourgeois, 1997; Garvin and Roberto, 2001; Janis, 1982). Through this discussion, students begin to identify the factors that undermine team psychological safety – i.e., the extent to which group members feel safe taking interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999). Instructors can introduce the concept during this pasture, or they may wait until the conclusion of the class session.

After students provide a thorough analysis of the factors that curb candid dialogue in organizations, instructors should challenge students to consider whether leaders should always strive to encourage open discussion and dissent. One can ask: “Is dissent always appropriate? Should expedition leaders really encourage dissent high on the slopes of Everest?” This question typically triggers a thoughtful debate. Military analogies often surface during this discussion; students point out that military officers do not want subordinates questioning their commands during the “heat of battle.”

To push further, one can inquire: “Under what conditions might leaders not want to encourage dissent?” Students begin to recognize that open dialogue certainly should occur during the mission planning or strategy formulation stage of a project, and it ought to take place during a debriefing or postmortem phase. The trickier question arises during the “heat of battle.” Typically, some students distinguish between asking questions and offering ideas versus openly challenging a leader’s decision. For instance, clients could have inquired about Fischer’s health without undermining his authority. Others point out that leaders need to be aware of when they would like to hear others’ views and then explicitly invite team members to express their opinions. For example, Hall could have asked people how they felt about proceeding beyond the turnaround time. Naturally, in some situations, leaders need to make it clear that a decision has been made, and team members need to rally in support of the chosen course of action.

To close this discussion, the instructor should remind students that leaders cannot adopt a simple formula for managing dissent during high-stakes decision processes. They must take great care to evaluate the needs of the situation as well as their team, and then to judge and balance the desire for constructive conflict and the desire for commitment during the process. To wrap up the discussion, one can cite the famous quote from Cyrus the Great, who argued that leaders should strive for “diversity in counsel, unity in command.”

A class discussion of this case study typically concludes with an open-ended conversation of the implications for business leaders. As students begin to draw lessons from the tragedy, instructors can use a series of probes to deepen the analysis. For instance, useful questions include: “Drawing on your

own work experience, can you identify a situation in which some of these factors contributed to an organizational failure? How might you take corrective action to prevent that situation from occurring again?"

At some point, students need to recognize that the case offers an interesting lesson regarding the role of a leader in a business organization. To open this avenue of discussion, instructors can ask: "What qualities make Hall and Fischer great mountaineers? Are these the same attributes required to lead an effective team?" Students realize rather quickly that Hall and Fischer may have been highly capable climbers, but team leadership required other qualities not directly associated with mountaineering expertise. Parallels to business leadership become apparent quite readily. Individuals often advance in organizations due to technical or functional expertise. However, managing a group or enterprise often requires a different set of skills. The distinction between the individual performer and the leader becomes a critical one as students advance in their own careers. To bring this discussion to a close, the instructor can ask: "Can we train people to become better team leaders and more effective high-stakes decision-makers? If so, how?" Through this line of questioning, students begin to garner an appreciation for the skills that are required make the transition from technical or functional expert to general management.

6. Leadership Lessons

This case study provides students with many lessons about leadership, and instructors have an opportunity to use the Everest story to teach many different theories and concepts. However, my experience suggests that educators may find it most useful to employ the case as a vehicle for challenging students to examine and challenge many implicit and flawed presumptions that underlie leader behavior in firms. The case study offers particular insight on four such flawed presumptions. Interestingly, when confronted with these four premises, executives often respond that they are aware that each of these presumptions is clearly false, yet they also recognize that their organizations generally behave as if these statements are true.

6.1. A Collection of Stars Equals a Team

First, many organizations assemble a collection of very capable individual performers, and then they assume that these people will function automatically as an effective "real" team. Katzenbach and Smith comment about the difference between a collection of individuals and a true team:

Groups do not become teams simply because that is what someone calls them... A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable” (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993: 112).

Putting together a “real team” requires a great deal of forethought. A group performs effectively when it produces results such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, i.e., the interaction of the group members creates outcomes that could not be achieved by the individual members on their own. To achieve this type of “synergy” within a group, effective leaders spend time thinking about team design before they embark upon a complex task with a set of individuals who they have gathered together (Hackman, 1987; 2002).

Hall and Fischer did not demonstrate a capacity to design an effective team. Doing so requires skills in terms of selecting the right members, establishing norms and ground rules, structuring the group’s task, insuring that the proper incentives are in place, and clarifying roles and responsibilities (Hackman, 1987; 2002). Effective leaders also create a climate of psychological safety, and they focus members on their common team objectives more so than their individual goals (Edmondson, 1999; 2003).

The expedition teams in this case came together in Nepal for the first time. People embarked on this remarkable challenge with little trust for one another, weak interpersonal relationships, and limited knowledge about one another’s strengths and weaknesses. The roles and responsibilities of the guides who worked for Hall and Fischer had not been well defined. The confusion limited the guides’ ability to react appropriately when problems arose. The two expedition leaders chose many of the members based upon personal relationships, or the climbers’ willingness and ability to pay the fees required to join the expedition, rather than thinking about how people would fit into the team. After bringing everyone together in Nepal, Hall and Fischer spent little time trying to build cohesion and shared commitment among the climbers. The team members did not have a strong shared understanding of the common objectives, and the importance of those goals relative to individual aims and desires. As Krakauer remarked:

In this godforsaken place, I felt disconnected from the climbers around me. . . We were a team in name only, I’d sadly come to realize. Although in a few hours we would leave camp as a group, we would ascend as individuals, linked to one another by neither rope nor any deep sense of loyalty. Each client was in it for himself or herself, pretty much (Krakauer, 1997: 213)

6.2. Star Individual Performers Make Great Leaders

Organizations often behave as though the most successful individual performers will make the most effective leaders and general managers. In many organizations, deep technical and/or functional expertise enables individuals to earn promotions and become managers. At that point, they become responsible for leading a team of people, or leading an entire organization. Leading a team requires a distinctive set of skills often not mastered during people's tenure as individual performers in the organization. These skills include shaping and directing team decision-making processes, providing performance feedback, building coalitions, designing teams, and motivating and aligning people throughout an organization. Effective managers recognize the need to develop these capabilities as they make the transition from individual performer to team leader (Ciampa and Watkins, 1999; Gabarro, 1987; Hill, 1992).

In the Everest case study, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer may have been two of the world's most accomplished mountaineers. They had deep technical expertise. However, their climbing records as individuals did not necessarily qualify them to be expedition leaders. The latter role requires a set of organizational and team-building skills that they did not have. Perhaps most strikingly, Hall and Fischer relied heavily on their technical capabilities when they became expedition leaders, and they did not demonstrate the ability to encourage dissenting views and lead a vigilant group decision-making process (Janis, 1989). They assumed that they always would have the right answers, given that they had the most past experience and mountaineering expertise. However, effective leaders recognize the need for divergent thinking within their groups and organizations, to protect against overconfidence and other cognitive biases that often trip up the most accomplished of technical experts.

The leadership styles of Hall and Fischer undoubtedly diminished the level of psychological safety within the expedition teams. Through their words and actions, the two leaders signaled an unwillingness to entertain challenging questions, listen to dissenting views, and hear others express valid concerns. For instance, Hall addressed a team meeting at Base Camp, and he made a strong and very memorable statement regarding his authority on the slopes. He stated, "I will tolerate no dissension up there. My word will be absolute law, beyond appeal. If you don't like a particular decision I make, I'd be happy to discuss it with you afterward, not while we're up on the hill." While Hall hoped to prevent distracting arguments and reckless behavior during the final summit bid, his words may have suppressed people's willingness to question his judgment later, when he chose to ignore his own turnaround rule. As Krakauer pointed out, "Passivity on the part of clients had thus been encouraged throughout the expedition." Moreover, the two leaders failed to downplay the status differences among the group members and perhaps even

exacerbated these distinctions. Perceptions about status had a profound dampening effect on the level of candor and dissent. Thus, Fischer and Hall did not take advantage of the diverse talents and experiences gathered together in their groups. Because of their dominating and autocratic leadership styles, as well as their inability to minimize the deleterious effects of status differences, they did not capture the synergies that real teams attain. Instead, they squelched candor and open dialogue, and they allowed their own mistakes to remain unchallenged.

Unfortunately, the experience of these teams on the slopes of Everest mirrors the group dynamic within many executive suites and corporate boardrooms in businesses around the world. Students recognize this fact very quickly during the class discussion. The factors suppressing debate and dissent within these expedition teams also affect managers as they make business decisions. People often find themselves standing in Neil Beidleman's shoes – lower in status than other decision-makers and unsure of the consequences of challenging those positioned on a higher rung in the organizational pecking order. Many leaders boast of remarkable track records, like Rob Hall, and employ an autocratic leadership style. Inexperienced individuals find themselves demonstrating excessive deference to those with apparent expertise in the subject at hand. Plenty of teams lack the atmosphere of mutual trust and respect that facilitates and encourages candid dialogue. Fortunately, most business decisions are not a matter of life or death.

6.3. Catastrophic Failures Have a Root Cause

In many firms, senior leaders seek to find a single “root cause” when a catastrophic failure occurs. In fact, people sometimes find themselves pitting competing theories against one another. Often, this search for a single root cause is futile; many factors work together to create catastrophic failures in complex organizations. The search for a single root cause may even be counterproductive, as leaders focus single-mindedly on correcting one problem while ignoring other issues of importance. Retired Air Force General Duane Deal, a member of the board that investigated the Columbia Space Shuttle accident, explains this line of reasoning:

Rarely is there a mishap caused by a single event or a broken widget. Therefore, after major mishaps – such as aviation and naval accidents – senior leaders must use that opportunity to look at the “whole” organization. Even if the apparent cause of a flight accident is a broken part or an obvious pilot error, there are usually several other contributing factors. Those factors range from design and manufacturing processes to crew training deficiencies and operational employment. For Columbia, the CAIB (the investigation board) did not simply conclude that “the foam did it.” The CAIB examined

NASA's entire organizational and safety structure and found that to be as much at fault as the foam-shedding event. By going beyond the widget, the CAIB in effect said, "The foam did it... The institution allowed it." (Deal, 2004: 42).

In my class discussion, the examination of the 1996 Everest tragedy does not try to pinpoint a single cause of the catastrophe. Instead, the discussion examines the incident at three levels of analysis – individual, group, and organizational system. At each level, one can explain the tragedy by drawing upon a different conceptual framework – behavioral decision theory (individual), the team effectiveness literature (group), and complex systems theory (organization).

The seminal work by Graham Allison (1971) on the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrates the power of applying multiple conceptual lenses to understand organizational behavior. Scott Snook's (2000) examination of the 1994 friendly fire incident in northern Iraq, as well as my own conceptual analysis of the Everest tragedy (Roberto, 2002) and the Columbia space shuttle accident (Edmondson, Roberto, Bohmer, Ferlins, and Feldman, 2005), illustrates the power of a multi-level analysis of an organizational failure.

One should not view the three levels of analysis as simply alternative lenses for interpreting the tragic events of May 10, 1996. Instead, factors at each level – individual, group, and organizational system – reinforce and interrelate with one another. As such, these factors serve as complementary and mutually reinforcing explanations of the tragedy.

Consider the three conceptual lenses that I have chosen to employ. Behavioral decision theory argues that individuals exhibit systematic cognitive biases when they make choices (Bazerman, 1998). The evidence in this case suggests that several cognitive biases may have impaired the climbers' judgment. These biases include overconfidence, a failure to disregard sunk costs, and a tendency to misjudge probabilities due to an excessive focus on recent events. From a group dynamics perspective, one can argue that the expedition teams exhibited low levels of psychological safety, a key precondition for effective group decision-making, learning, and performance (Edmondson, 1999). Several factors undermined psychological safety within the Everest expeditions, including leadership style, status differences, and prior history of interaction among team members. Finally, the complex systems perspective suggests that two attributes of the expeditions – complex interactions and tight coupling – enhanced the likelihood of a serious accident (Perrow, 1999).

In this case, instructors may choose to employ other conceptual lenses not described here. For instance, my colleague Robert Kaplan has suggested that one might use certain economic theories to explain the reason for bottlenecks that arose on the path to the summit in May 1996 (Kaplan, 2002). Regardless

of which theories one chooses to draw upon in the analysis of this incident, the power of the case is that it enables students to recognize the benefits of identifying the multiple factors that have contributed to a complex organizational failure. In short, as General Deal calls leaders to do, students learn to “go beyond the widget” when examining large-scale failures (Deal, 2004).

6.4. We Must Hold Someone Accountable

When critical organizational failures occur, leaders feel compelled to hold someone accountable for the mistakes that were made, often before they take any other action. Undoubtedly, high performing organizations maintain a strong sense of individual responsibility and accountability, and they measure people against challenging standards. However, striving for accountability often becomes a “blame game” that can crowd out the learning that should take place when a failure occurs. As a doctor once told me, medical professionals often used to behave in accordance with the “ABCs” of medicine when a medical accident occurred – that is, they accused, blamed, and criticized. However, the medical community has now learned that many medical errors represent complex system failures, not instances of individual negligence or malpractice. It simply may be inappropriate and unfair to punish individuals, when, in fact, they did not cause the accident to occur.

Medical professionals also have learned that the effort to find someone to blame often prevented them from discerning the appropriate lessons from a tragedy, and then implementing programs to prevent such problems from occurring in the future (Edmondson, Roberto, and Tucker, 2002). The U.S. Army has learned this lesson as well. When they conduct After-Action Reviews – exercises designed to learn from past experiences – they focus on how they can learn from the problems and the successes involved in a particular mission, and they employ a different process to insure that the appropriate accountability and discipline is put in place if soldiers did not perform their duties properly. The Army’s experience demonstrates that keeping these accountability issues separate from the After-Action Review process insures a climate of candor and openness – a critical precondition for effective group learning to occur (Garvin, 2000).

Leaders should try to learn from others’ mistakes and failures as well, rather than only reflecting on their own organization’s experiences and problems. However, they need to be mindful of the “blame game” here as well. They should be aware of the typical attributions that individuals make when success and failure occurs. In short, research shows that individuals often attribute their own failures to external factors, while they argue that personal characteristics and mistakes cause others’ failures (Jones and Nisbett, 1971).

Attributing a catastrophe to the flawed decisions of others can become a convenient argument for those who want to attempt a similar course of action. By concluding that human error caused others to fail, ambitious and self-confident leaders can convince themselves that they will learn from those mistakes and succeed where others did not. Krakauer pointed out this potential trap when he reflected back on the Everest tragedy. He wrote, "If you can convince yourself that Rob Hall died because he made a string of stupid errors and that you are too clever to repeat those same errors, it makes it easier for you to attempt Everest in the face of some rather compelling evidence that doing so is injudicious" (Krakauer, 1997: 356-57).

7. Conclusions and Future Directions

The paper has explained how and why the 1996 Mount Everest tragedy offers a useful vehicle for teaching business students and executives about leadership. Perhaps more importantly, it has argued that non-business case studies, and incidents of catastrophic failure in particular, represent a powerful pedagogical device that educators can employ to teach about leadership. Students benefit from variety and novelty both in terms of the settings in which they examine leader behavior, as well as the types of challenges that they see leaders trying to overcome. These cases often provide an opportunity to introduce many different conceptual frameworks and theories, and then to encourage students to apply these back to business enterprises. In the Everest case, educators also have the opportunity to encourage students to consider and to challenge many of the flawed, implicit presumptions that underlie organizational behavior.

In the future, management scholars and educators should continue to strive to develop innovative mechanisms for teaching leadership to business students and executives. Recently, much attention has been given to the debate about the merits of MBA programs, prompted in part by the study conducted by Pfeffer and Fong, who argue based on their empirical research that, "Neither possessing an MBA degree nor grades earned in courses correlate with career success" (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002: 78). Many practitioners and some scholars also have chimed in with their criticisms of how business schools teach management and leadership (Mintzberg, 2004). As this debate rages, many educators have begun to reexamine how they teach various topics including leadership. It would behoove them to question the marginal benefits of teaching the 499th traditional business case over the course of a two-year MBA program. New cases set in a wide range of contexts and new pedagogical approaches to teaching important concepts have the potential to generate far more impact on students than another standard case study. In that spirit, my hope is that the ideas presented here encourage other educators to innovate in

their case-writing and course development efforts, and to share those creative techniques freely with their colleagues and peers elsewhere.

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