

Aim for Emotionally Sticky Goals to Get Your Team to the Top

Career Development



The riskiest thing you will ever encounter on the mountain is your own team.

In January, I had the pleasure of meeting Cathy O’Dowd at a company event in Madrid, Spain. O’Dowd is a South African rock climber, mountaineer, and motivational speaker. She is famous for being the first woman to summit Everest from both the south and north sides. Her first Everest ascent was in 1996 — the year that eight climbers died after being caught in a storm high on the mountain. This is the tragedy that became the subject of Jon Krakauer’s best-selling book *Into Thin Air* and the 2015 Hollywood movie *Everest*.

O’Dowd was a perfect fit as a speaker for our European sales kick-off meeting because the business unit had elected to use the mountain climbing metaphor as its underlying theme. The cover slide for every presentation was of a mountain profile with climbers making their way up the slope. Our regional director even took the stage at one point wearing traditional German alpine climbing gear that included lederhosen, boots, a climbing ax, and a coil of rope slung across his chest.

O’Dowd's remarks on the first day of our conference centered on the gripping tale of her 1996 South African Everest expedition. She began her talk by observing that if you ever find yourself at the base of Everest, with the ambition to reach the top, you should take stock of two important numbers. The first is the failure rate: three out of every four climbers fail in the attempt. The second is the death rate — one percent.

O’Dowd told us that if you ask climbers why they failed to summit, you can expect their explanations to include a catalogue of such obvious perils as avalanches, lack of oxygen, freezing conditions, and storms. After acknowledging that these risks are very real, she asserted that “the riskiest thing you will ever encounter on the mountain is your own team.” She then drove this point home by regaling us with the painful saga of the South African team’s travails in 1996. Egotistical elite climbers setting themselves apart from the group, weeks of bickering, vicious, unsubstantiated rumors, disrespectful expedition leaders, and unfettered, angry outbursts all threatened to tear the team apart before they ever made their first ascent through the Khumbu icefall to Camp 1.

Despite these significant challenges, while huddled in their tent at Camp 4 in the early morning hours of May 10, 1996, the South African ascent team eventually coalesced and exhibited the discipline to make a difficult, but correct decision. They elected not to make a summit attempt with several other teams because they knew bad weather was on the way. By descending from the high camp when they did, they avoided the perils that cost the lives of so many in the hours that followed. But, when they arrived back in base camp days later, O’Dowd explained that they were utterly exhausted from weeks of climbing and dispirited by the loss of so many of their climbing colleagues.

It was at this low point that they received a call from a famous South African: Nelson Mandela. She recalled that Mandela told them that he was proud of them and stated simply, “I think you can do this.”

O’Dowd and her teammates recognized that Mandela knew nothing about mountain climbing, their physical and mental state, and what would be involved in yet another summit attempt, but in his words they found the strength to try again. And so on May 25, 1996, she and the three other South Africans stood on top of the world.

In reflecting on this experience, O’Dowd observed that just “reaching the top” in mountaineering or in business is not a particularly meaningful objective. Instead, she asserted that to optimize team performance, leaders should do what Mandela did for her team — establish an “emotionally sticky” goal. In the face of enormous challenges, the South African team found the motivation to endure the hazards and physical pain of another summit attempt, because Mandela had inspired them to climb — not for themselves — but for a nation.

O’Dowd’s advice is consistent with that of many other successful corporate leaders who recognize the importance of connecting their team to a purpose beyond profits and growth. Unilever CEO Paul Polman once observed:

> Having a deeper purpose to what we do as people makes our lives more complete, which is a tremendous force and motivator. What people want in life is to be recognized, to grow, and to have made a difference. That difference can come in many forms; by touching someone, by helping others, by creating something that was not there before. To work for an organization where you can leverage this and be seen to be making a difference, that is rewarding.

You don’t have to be a CEO to be a purpose-driven leader that looks beyond the bottom line to inspire the best in others. Every company leader — including those of us in the legal profession — can do this by making the effort to expressly identify the good that will come to others by a job well done. Moreover, according to O’Dowd, in order to be most effective, we should not wait until a particular goal is accomplished to do so. Instead, like Mandela, O’Dowd asserts that we should make a point of providing encouragement to our teams “at that crucial moment when nobody’s quite sure whether

your efforts are going to be a success or an embarrassing catastrophe."

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O'Dowd's points may appear to many as little more than a recitation of the obvious, leadership 101 lessons wrapped in an interesting story. However, in my experience, most corporate leaders fail to follow her basic advice. Instead, they succumb to what I call the "seduction of the spreadsheet" and focus all their attention on numbers instead of more meaningful, overarching goals. When it's your turn to lead, be sure not to make the same mistake lest your team end up stuck in "base camp" instead of suiting up to head off to the "summit."

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