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Leading on Top of the World: Lessons from *Into Thin Air*

In May 1996, a rogue blizzard blindsided several teams of mountain climbers attempting to scale Mount Everest. Nine climbers died in the frigid conditions after enduring wind chill temperatures in excess of 100 degrees below zero (Fahrenheit). In 1997, author John Krakauer chronicled his own first-hand account of the Everest disaster in his best-selling book ***Into Thin Air****. Using Krakauer's account as a backdrop, this article examines several of the leadership theories and concepts demonstrated in the failed climb. Specifically, this article explores the skills approach, situational leadership theory, and team leadership concepts, as well as the influence of power bases and trust on decision making. Finally, teaching strategies are discussed that the reader may find useful when using this work to develop leadership competencies in others.*

Keywords: Situational leadership theory, team leadership, non-fiction, leadership skills

"Wisdom comes easily after the fact" (Krakauer, 1997, p. 285).

In May 1996, a rogue blizzard blindsided several teams of mountain climbers attempting to scale Mount Everest. Enduring wind chill temperatures in excess of 100 degrees below zero (Fahrenheit), nine climbers died in the frigid conditions.

Jon Krakauer was one of the survivors that day. As a journalist for *Outside* magazine, Krakauer had been sent to join an Everest ascent team under the guidance of renowned New Zealand guide Rob Hall. An experienced climber, Krakauer arrived in Nepal with the intent of writing an article about the mushrooming commercialization of the once-feared mountain. However, in the aftermath of the well-publicized tragedy, Krakauer met his commitment to *Outside* with a very different—and personally painful—article which gave readers first-hand insight into the Everest disaster.

While Krakauer's physical recovery came quickly, his emotional and psychological recovery proved to be nearly impossible. The events during his months in Nepal were simply overwhelming. Feeling his *Outside* article was inadequate to truly convey the full scope of the tragedy, Krakauer wrote a highly-acclaimed and cathartic book about his experiences entitled

Into Thin Air. In this brilliant and chilling work, Krakauer describes the terror of the storm, the bravery of his colleagues, and the tragic decisions made by many—including himself.

Into Thin Air provides great insight into the leadership decisions and actions which contributed to the loss of life. This chapter utilizes *Into Thin Air* as a backdrop for examining several leadership theories and concepts demonstrated in the failed climb. The *skills approach*, *situational leadership theory*, and *team leadership* concepts will be explored, as well as the influence of *power bases* and *trust* on decision making. Finally, several teaching strategies will be discussed that the reader may find useful when using this work to develop the leadership competencies of others.

In order to devote the greatest time to the analysis of Krakauer's book, it is assumed that the reader has already read *Into Thin Air*, or is at least familiar with the basic events on Mount Everest in May 1996. Analyses will include some minimal set-up from the story, but will not include all details.

Background

To fully investigate the events on Everest in May 1996, it is essential to understand the backgrounds of the two lead guides, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, because it is their leadership decisions that will be primarily examined in this paper.

Hall was a 36-year old New Zealander who was extremely experienced and revered as one of the top guides on the mountain. By all accounts, he was a steady, serious leader who made decisions methodically and rationally. He was the principle owner of a guided expedition company called "Adventure Consultants."

Scott Fischer was one of Rob Hall's chief competitors in the guided expedition business, leading an organization called "Mountain Madness." The 40-year old Seattle native was known

to be an excellent mountaineer, although he did not possess Hall's organizational skills. Krakauer describes Fischer as a skilled guide with "frat-boyish" tendencies (1997, p. 11). Fischer had a famously strong will and a very high threshold for pain. These qualities, coupled with his charismatic personality, made Fischer very well respected on the mountain.

Most of the climbers on Everest in 1996 had paid around $65,000 for the opportunity to scale the world's highest mountain. Rob Hall had allowed Jon Krakauer to join the team at a greatly reduced rate because of the publicity and free advertising Krakauer's *Outside* article would undoubtedly bring. Likewise, Scott Fischer's clients had paid similar fees. Like Hall, Fischer's team included a media journalist who would likely bring tremendous marketing opportunities in exchange for a trip to the summit.

Both guides led teams of approximately eight climbers ("clients") and approximately 15 additional guides and equipment aides (usually the indigenous Sherpa population) through the actual ascent and during the several months of acclimation prior to the climb. All of their clients were experienced climbers, but none would be considered to be experts. Instead, they had paid handsomely for guides like Hall and Fischer to take them to the top of the world's highest peak.

Both Hall and Fischer were killed on Mount Everest during the blizzard as they attempted to lead clients off the mountain.

Skills Approach

Northouse (2004) details the 1955 work of Robert Katz, who identified leadership as a set of skills that could be intentionally developed over time. Specifically, Katz suggested that leadership (he used the term "administration") was primarily a function of three basic personal skills: technical, human, and conceptual (Northouse, 2004, p.36).

Technical skills

Technical skill is "having knowledge about and being proficient in a specific type of work or activity" (Northouse, 2004, p.36). As might be reasoned, technical skills are highly specialized to a particular discipline or set of competencies. Katz's research indicated that leaders should have technical proficiency, especially at lower and middle levels of management. Both Rob Hall and Scott Fischer relied on their considerable technical skills to safely lead their teams of clients to the top of the mountain.

By any objective standard, both Hall and Fischer were exceptionally skilled climbers and guides. Both were respected by their peers and possessed tremendous technical skill. Hall had led 39 clients to the summit during his previous four ascents. He was known for his meticulous attention to detail and organizational skills. He studied weather patterns and historical data and could predict the precise date that was most likely to yield a successful trip to the summit. Krakauer describes Hall as being one of the most revered men on the mountain:

> Hall's...compound served as the seat of government for the entire Base Camp, because nobody on the mountain commanded more respect than Hall. Whenever there was a problem—a labor dispute with the Sherpas, a medical emergency, a critical decision about climbing strategy—people trudged over to our mess tent to seek Hall's advice. (Krakauer, 1997, p.65)

Like Hall, Scott Fischer also enjoyed great trust and credibility on the mountain. While he did not possess Hall's reputation for meticulous planning, Fischer was an experienced veteran of many high-altitude ascents.

Clearly, both guides were well-qualified in their technical skill. Katz hypothesized that technical skill was less important the more a leader moved up the managerial ladder. However,

in this case, the technical skill of these men was the single most distinguishing factor as they led their groups. They had knowledge and experience the others simply did not have.

Human skills

Human skill is "having knowledge about and being able to work with people" (Northouse, 2004, p.37). In common language, "human skill" might sometimes be referred to as "people skills." Both Hall and Fischer had exceptional "people skills." Krakauer (1997) describes Hall as a "gregarious (and) skillful raconteur with a caustic Kiwi wit…I liked him immediately" (p.33). Fischer was even more charismatic, according to Krakauer (1997), "He had the kind of gregarious, magnetic personality that instantly won him friends for life. Hundreds of individuals—including some he'd only met once or twice—considered him a bosom buddy" (p. 68).

Northouse explains how Katz's concept of "human skills" goes farther than a friendly personality. It also includes creating "an atmosphere of trust" (Northouse, 2004, p.37) and becoming sensitive to the needs of others. In the cases of Hall and Fischer, their personalities combined with their technical expertise to give them tremendous influence on the mountain. Influence, according to Northouse, is the core of leadership (p.3).

Conceptual skills

Conceptual skills are "abilities to work with ideas and concepts" (Northouse, 2004, p.38). Leaders with conceptual skills are able to take information—often incomplete pieces of data—and use that information to make informed decisions. In the case of Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, each of these men had proven their ability to think clearly and use current data to predict future conditions and, therefore, make informed decisions.

However, it is difficult to criticize a leader's ability to use conceptual skills while on the frozen slope of Mount Everest at 29,000 feet above sea level (the altitude of a modern passenger jet aircraft). Altitude creates oxygen deprivation, which produces slow thinking and poses considerable health risks after prolonged exposure. It should be remembered that Hall and Fischer made their decisions during that raging storm in 1996 with exhausted bodies and oxygen-deprived minds. Their conceptual skills might have been very solid under normal conditions, but were severely lacking on that fateful afternoon.

Analysis of the Skills Approach

Research regarding the skills approach has been expanded in recent years. In 2000, Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, and Fleishman, describe how leaders develop their skills over time, and how career experience "helps leaders to improve their skills and knowledge" (as cited in Northouse, 2004, p.48). These researchers also expanded the theory to include "environmental influences", which "represent factors in a leader's situation that lie outside the leader's competencies, characteristics, and experiences" (as cited in Northouse, 2004, p.48). This expansion of the skills approach concept would help describe how—even with Hall and Fischer's considerable expertise honed over many years—the environmental factors present on the mountain that day were simply overwhelming.

One of the major criticisms of the skills approach to leadership is that it "is weak in predictive value. It does not explain specifically how variations in social judgment and problem solving skills affect performance" (Northouse, 2004, p.51). In other words, the skills approach gives a picture of the requisite competencies needed for leadership, but does not ensure that those qualities will produce leadership in a given situation. The possession of technical, human, and

conceptual skills simply allows for one to have the *potential* to lead in a given situation (emphasis added). They do not, however, guarantee leadership.

Both Hall and Fischer possessed technical, human, and conceptual skills and were supremely confident in their abilities. In fact, one could argue that Hall and Fischer had a certain level of *overconfidence* in their skills, and that overconfidence was one of the key factors to their poor judgment on the mountain that day. Perhaps both guides had gotten lax in their appreciation for this dangerous mammoth of nature called Everest. From 1921 to 1996, for every four people who reached the summit, one person had died in the attempt. Krakauer describes corpses lying along the trail, visible to all that Everest was still a mighty force. "Hall had become so adept at running climbers of all abilities up and down Everest that he got cocky perhaps," writes Krakauer after the ordeal. "He may well have thought there was little he couldn't handle" (Krakauer, 1997, p.284). Likewise, Fischer may have also become too complacent. "We've got the big E figured out," he commented to Krakauer before their journey, "...these days, I'm telling you, we've built a yellow brick road to the summit" (Krakauer, 1997, p. 70).

In addition to the natural environment that impacted their decisions, Hall and Fischer were also under a great deal of pressure from the business environment present during the climb. For example, in mountain climbing (especially with a peak as unpredictable as Everest), it is essential to have a pre-determined turn-around time in order to get all of the climbers back safely to the shelters before the historically-poor afternoon weather arrives. However, on the day of the Everest disaster, high paying clients were tantalizingly close to the summit. As the stakes rose, Hall and Fischer felt more and more pressure to succeed.

This makes sense from a psychological perspective. The $65,000 entry fees for these excursions are not insignificant, in either amount or their impact on the decision-making of the

guides. Guides feel pressure to perform when entrusted with that kind of money. Moreover, the clients often feel they are owed a trip to the top—it becomes an entitlement. In fact, some previous clients had actually sued their guides for a failure to reach the summit. Krakauer's quote from a veteran guide sums up the relationship quite succinctly: "We think that people pay us to make good decisions, but what people really pay for is to get to the top" (p. 237).

When one takes these situational factors into account, it is easy to see how Hall and Fischer might have felt undue pressure to keep going. Their considerable technical, human, and conceptual skills might have actually clouded their judgment on this day. They were too close to quit. This type of behavior is a result of "escalation of commitment," which refers to the "tendency to stick with an ineffective course of action when it is unlikely that the bad situation can be reversed" (Kinicki and Kreitner, 2003, p. 186). The turn-around time of 2:00 p.m. passed and they remained on the mountain for more than two additional hours, trying to shuttle clients to the top.

Applying the skills approach to this leadership situation, both Hall and Fischer possessed all of the skills necessary to make sound choices that afternoon and evening. However, having the right skills did not ensure that they would exhibit sound leadership decisions in that setting. Sadly, the events on Everest highlight the failures of these men to make sound decisions that day.

Team Leadership

In 1989, Larson and LaFasto found eight characteristics that were regularly associated with team excellence: (1) Clear, elevating goal, (2) Results-driven structure, (3) Competent team members, (4) Unified commitment, (5) Collaborative climate, (6) Standards of excellence, (7) External support, and (8) Principled leadership (as cited in Northouse, 2004, p.211). This section

will briefly explore each of these characteristics and, where appropriate, connect them to the team dynamics present on Everest in 1996.

Clear, elevating goal

Obviously, the goal of standing atop the highest peak on the planet would be a motivating goal for any serious climber. As a result, one might assume that the team of climbers had a clear goal of achieving the summit together. Deeper analysis indicates that reaching the top was more a collection of individual goals, rather than a team goal. While no one was actively rooting against another person to reach the summit, it is clear that this was not a unified team goal, as much as it was an individual goal for each climber. Consider Jon Krakauer's words on the morning of the final ascent, "Each client was in it for himself or herself, pretty much. And I was no different: I sincerely hoped Doug (Hansen) got to the top, for instance, yet I would do everything in my power to keep pushing on if he turned around." (Krakauer, 1997, p. 171).

Results-driven structure

The structure of the team is important and should be consistent with the team abilities and desired end goals. Is it possible that both Hall and Fischer were using a structure/system that had worked with previous teams, but was not appropriate for their 1996 group of clients?

Competent team members

The competence of the climbers on Everest that May is questionable. While they certainly were not novices, "no client on Hall's team…had ever reached the summit of any 8,000-meter peak," says Krakauer (1997, p. 96). Their abilities were so disparate that they did not practice together. "My fellow clients and I were like a ragtag collection of pretty decent small-town softball players who'd bribed their way into the World Series…It was clear to me (that) none of us…had

a prayer of climbing Everest without considerable assistance from Hall, his guides, and his Sherpas" (1997, p. 96-97).

Unified commitment

"Excellent teams have developed a sense of unity or identification" (Northouse, 2004, p.213). Krakauer's words demonstrate the lack of team cohesiveness and identity, "In this godforsaken place, I felt disconnected from the climbers around me—emotionally, spiritually, physically—to a degree I hadn't experienced on any previous expedition. 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" (Krakauer, 1997, p. 171). One can only wonder whether the missing "loyalty" was a contributing factor in the decision some clients (including Krakauer) made later that night to remain in the safety of their tents instead of venturing into the frigid tempest to try to save their trapped teammates.

Collaborative climate

This concept deals with team members working through their collective abilities in concert to achieve group goals. The lack of team unity and identity previously discussed created a very poor collaborative environment.

Standards of excellence

This team characteristic is evident when team members feel encouraged and compelled to perform at high levels. Clients on Everest were especially aware of how others would perceive their abilities. No climber wanted to cause others to fail and, thus, genuinely tried to perform at a high level. Still, there were moments when strong climbers were forced to wait on weak ones. "Those of us at the front of the pack were thus compelled to repeatedly stop and wait in the

bone-cracking cold for our slowest members to catch up" (Krakauer, 1997, p.174). Krakauer's tone seems to convey an unspoken reality that disparate performance levels were a source of division for the team.

External support

Northouse (2004) points out that "the best goals, team members, and commitment will not mean much if you have no money, equipment, or supplies" (p.214). At first glance, it certainly appears that the 1996 Everest teams had excellent external support in terms of communication, equipment, and supplies. However, Krakauer (1997) highlights that, during the climb, some climbers lost the use of their communication radios due to dead batteries (p. 228), some of the secondary guides did not even have communication radios (p. 209), and supplemental oxygen tanks were in short supply (p. 209).

Principled leadership

Northouse indicates that studies consistently show "leadership is the central driver of team effectiveness" (2004, p.214). Thus, it is the leader's task to ensure that the previous seven characteristics are developed and integrated to produce a high-performance team of unified members. The lack of most of these characteristics has been shown in the preceding paragraphs and ultimately must fall under the responsibilities of guides Rob Hall and Scott Fischer.

Northouse (2004, p. 9) identifies three essential leadership qualities:

(1) Establishing direction (creating a vision, clarifying vision)

(2) Aligning people (communicating goals, seeking commitment, building teams)

(3) Motivating and inspiring (energizing, empowering subordinates)

Clearly, both Hall and Fischer were skilled at item three above, but both failed to truly align their teams into a cohesive unit, as prescribed in item two. Krakauer goes into very few details

about this vital aspect of the trip, apart from his quote about being "a team in name only." One can deduce, however, that they performed on the upper mountain the way they had been allowed to perform on the lower parts—as individuals.

With regard to item one, Hall and Fischer established vision to a moderate degree, but there were times when even their lesser guides were not always aware of what was happening. The vision that Rob Hall cast was primarily a solitary one of seeing themselves on the summit…not necessarily seeing themselves with their teammates on the summit.

Situational Leadership Model (SLM)

A monumental contribution to the study of leadership occurred in 1969 when Hersey and Blanchard developed a model for determining a particular leader approach toward a given follower, depending on the situational factors present at the time. While this theory lacks substantial and sustained confirmation in leadership literature, it remains one of the most cited and popular models in organizations today (Northouse, 2004, p.92-93).

The theory contends that leadership contains supportive and directive dimensions, and each should be used only when appropriate to a given situation. Four basic leadership styles emerge: (1) directing, (2) coaching, (3) supporting, and (4) delegating.

A *directing* approach would be appropriate for a follower that needs a great deal of direction, without a need for much supporting encouragement. Many new workers fall into this category. In contrast, a *coaching* leadership style would involve both high direction from the leader and high supportive encouragement. As the name implies, *supporting* leadership involves much supportive encouragement and little specific direction. Finally, *delegating* leadership is appropriate for followers who require little specific direction from the leader and little supportive encouragement.

As one might imagine, the rigors associated with climbing a mountain place a high degree of physical, mental, and emotional strain on climbers. Part of the function of the guide is to inspire and encourage their team members as they encounter these strains. A client might require all four leadership styles in the course of a single day. According to the SLM, a skilled leader is able to determine the needs of his or her team and adjust the approach accordingly.

The aforementioned differences in technical ability among team members were determined to be a factor in the lack of team cohesion. Using SLM as a reference, however, Hall's and Fischer's approaches to this situation may be partially justified. Some climbers had proven their ability and psychological maturity and could essentially be delegated the task of climbing Everest with minimal oversight from their guides. Others, however, were not as skilled or confident and needed more coaxing through their mental doubts. In such cases, according to the Situational Leadership Model, a more supportive or coaching role would have indeed been most appropriate.

This is precisely what the lead guides did. Krakauer and others were essentially allowed to climb at their own pace. It might be difficult to fault Hall and Fischer for using this approach, except that it did very little to enhance the cohesiveness of the team itself. Rather, it served to further detach the members from one another.

Power and Trust

In 1959, social researchers John French and Bertram Raven identified five different bases of power: legitimate power, expert power, referent power, coercive power, and reward power (Kinicki and Kreitner, 2003, p. 267-268). In their respective roles as guides, both Rob Hall and Scott Fischer possessed every one of these power bases simultaneously. They both had the formal position as the leader of their respective teams (legitimate power). They were both

extremely knowledgeable and brilliant mountain climbers, with high-altitude experience (expert power). Both men were respected and revered by their peers and clients alike (referent power). Ultimately, they each had the power to enable their clients to achieve the ultimate reward of reaching the summit (reward power). They could also have—if they had chosen to—used coercive power because they had the ability to send people down off the mountain for not complying with rules.

According to research, the combination of referent and expert power tends to create the highest combination of influence over others (Kinicki and Kreitner, 2003, p. 269). Both Hall and Fischer were oozing with expertise and charisma. This combination is the primary contributing factor to the confidence the clients had in them—overconfidence, as it turned out—on that fateful May day in 1996.

Like power, trust is an important concept in leadership. "The leader's impact is compromised (when) others no longer trust and believe in the leader" (Northouse, 2004, p.315). Indeed, trust was essential, as Krakauer highlights in the book, "Trust in one's partners is a luxury denied those who sign on as clients on a guided ascent," he wrote, "One must put one's faith in the guide instead" (Krakauer, 1997, p. 40).

The trust the clients gave Hall and Fischer was not without merit. In addition to their well-documented credentials, they had demonstrated solid judgment during earlier portions of the ascent. Hall had already forced the group to turn around during one of their practice ascents because of deteriorating conditions and the arrival of their pre-determined turn-around time. This sound decision added to the trust his clients had in him. They undoubtedly believed he would make sound decisions on their behalf in the future.

Even something as seemingly trivial as the selection of the summit day (May 10) added to Hall's credibility. As previously stated, he had carefully chosen that date after a meticulous study of the historical weather patterns. He had summitted Everest four times already, and his expert power only grew due to these credentials. Early in the morning of their planned summit day, Krakauer commented from the inside of his tent that "Hall's instincts were uncanny: it appeared as if he had timed our attempt perfectly" (Krakauer, 1997, p. 172). The low winds and highly favorable conditions present at the time made Hall seem more like a soothsayer than a mountain guide.

Ultimately and sadly, though, these revered experts presiding over totally-dependent and trusting clients proved to be a horrific combination. Indeed, clients were forbidden to question decisions on "summit day." In fact, Rob Hall had issued a stern warning to his clients prior to the final ascent, "I will tolerate no dissention 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, but not while we're on the hill" (Krakauer, 1997, p. 174).

Krakauer understood this rationale, but points out one of the inherent dangers with such a policy: "For safety's sake, a responsible guide will always insist on calling the shots—he or she simply can't afford to let each client make important decisions independently. Passivity on the part of the clients had thus been encouraged throughout the expedition" (p. 176). This passivity meant that a poor decision made by a guide would likely not be challenged by a client—even if that decision was a seriously flawed one. As Hall and Fischer were attempting to coax clients to the summit—well after their pre-determined turn-around time—it is likely their decisions were not questioned by clients or aides.

Teaching Opportunities

Educators can use lessons from *Into Thin Air* to develop leadership competencies in others. Obviously, one way would be to simply read Krakauer's book (or listen to the audio version), pausing at the end of each chapter for class discussion and individual reflection. Also, there are video versions of the book, as well as some well-publicized mountain climbing movies/ documentaries that might be useful in stimulating a discussion. Table 1 summarizes sample discussion questions to link leadership theory to leadership in practice as found in the book.

Table 1: Sample questions for classroom discussion

Skills Approach	
Technical Skills Katz (1955)	Using examples from Krakauer (1997, p.65), describe Rob Hall's technical skills.
	Using examples from Krakauer (1997, p.68), describe Scott Fischer's technical skills.
	In what ways did Hall and Fischer's technical skills give them influence on the mountain?
Human Skills Katz (1955)	Using examples from Krakauer (1997, p.33), describe Rob Hall's human skills.
	Using examples from Krakauer (1997, p.68), describe Scott Fischer's human skills.
	In what ways did Hall and Fischer's human skills give them influence on the mountain?
Conceptual Skills Katz (1955)	How did high-altitude oxygen deprivation affect Hall and/or Fischer's ability to make informed decisions?
Team Leadership	
Team Excellence Characteristics Larson and LaFasto (1989)	How did the disparate abilities of individual team members affect the effectiveness of the group?
	On page 171, Krakauer (1997) states "In this godforsaken place, I felt disconnected from the climbers around me—emotionally, spiritually, physically—to a degree I hadn't experienced on any previous expedition. We were a team in name only." What does this comment say about the "unified commitment" of the team members?
	How did Hall and/or Fischer fail to align their teams into cohesive units?
Situational Leadership	
Situational Leadership Model (SLM) Hersey and Blanchard (1969)	Cite specific examples of Hall or Fischer using each of the following styles: (a) Directing, (b) Coaching, (c) Supporting, (d) Delegating.
	How did differences in technical ability among clients affect the styles chosen by the leaders?
Power and Trust	

Bases of Power (French and Raven, 1959)	In what ways (if any) do Rob Hall and Scott Fischer possess the following types of power: (a) legitimate, (b) expert, (c) coercive, (d) reward, and (e) referent? Cite specific examples.
	Did the power possessed by the guides contribute to the Everest tragedy in any way? If so, how?
	Before departing Base Camp, Rob Hall tells his clients "I will tolerate no dissention up there. My word will be absolute law, beyond appeal" (Krakauer, 1997, p.174). How does this statement demonstrate the kind of power he possessed? Did this form of absolute power play a role in the Everest tragedy? If so, in what way(s)?
Trust	In what ways did Hall and Fischer gain the trust of their clients?
	How are trust and influence related?

One of the key leadership aspects of the Everest tragedy is the impact that external and internal pressure play in the decision-making process. As stated in the above essay, both guides felt tremendous pressure to get their clients to the summit. Thus, experiential activities that involve some degree of artificial stress (for example, a timed activity or a situation where participants fail to get a reward if unsuccessful) could be used as springboard exercises to discuss the effect of stress on performance and decision making. In the right setting, an activity that produced physical exhaustion prior to leadership decisions would also be in keeping with the lessons of the book.

One of the most important lessons of *Into Thin Air* is how the lack of team development may have contributed to the disaster. Numerous team-building exercises/activities/games can be easily found and may be useful when teaching this concept. In addition, role playing and skits can demonstrate team dynamics in powerful and memorable ways. Team tasks that involve artificial stress can combine several lessons from *Into Thin Air* in one lesson.

Since team dynamics were such important factors in the failed Everest attempt, a discussion regarding team selection and development might be very beneficial, particularly as students process the implications of *Into Thin Air* in their own team settings. For example, because

climbers had paid large fees for a spot on "the team", it appears that financial opportunity played a strong role in team development—perhaps at the expense of competence in some instances. A discussion with students that focuses on team selection could be particularly engaging. For example, teachers could engage students with the following questions:

- Besides payment of fees, what are some other factors and criteria Hall and Fischer could have used to select their team members?
- What might have happened if Hall and Fischer had communicated the clear message that it is not likely everyone will make it to the top—but the team's role was to get as many of the most qualified climbers to the top as possible?
- If Hall and Fischer had charged reduced fees (or offered modest refunds) for those who were unable to climb to the summit, do you think that might have reduced the stress and pressure the guides felt to get everyone to the top?
- What are the implications of team formation on leadership style?
- What issues should be addressed when team members have vastly different skill-levels?

Another method of teaching the lessons from this non-fiction book is to ask students to consider successful teams from their own experiences or observations (sport teams, work teams, etc). Students can then be asked to identify the differences in highly-successful teams and unsuccessful ones. These differences might be discussed in a reflective writing assignment, class discussion, or some other type of activity. Discussion, role play, and reflective writing are all examples of teaching techniques that help the theories of leadership come alive in *Into Thin Air.* A summary of various activities and their objectives can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample activities

Type of Activity	Description of Activity	Leadership Concept	*Into Thin Air* reference(s) (if applicable)	Objective of Activity
Chapter-by-chapter discussion and reflection	Students read *Into Thin Air* (or listen to the audio version), pausing at the end of each chapter for class discussion and individual reflection.	- Skills approach - Team leadership - Situational leadership - Power bases/trust	Multiple	Students will… …understand, comprehend, and analyze the leadership implications of the book
Role play	Assign students to specific characters from the book. Provide specific guidance regarding skill levels, power bases, etc., for each character. Then, ask students to act out a particular scene from the book. After the activity is complete, ask students to discuss their characters feelings, attitudes, fears, and other important emotions during the scene.	- Skills approach - Situational leadership - Power bases/trust	*Possible scenes:* - Hall, Hansen, and Harris trapped at the summit (p.209-210, 237-238, 241-245) - Beidleman & Lopsang struggling to care for Pittman (p.209, 212-213) - Beidleman & others trapped and lost (p. 214-217)	Students will… …be able to analyze the thought processes of central characters …begin to understand the synthesis of trust, team leadership, power, and other concepts simultaneously present in the case
Physiological manipulation	Divide students into teams. Each team selects a representative to compete in a knowledge competition (for example, boys versus girls, etc). The winning leader's performance translates to a reward for all team members, while losing teams receive some negative consequence. Then, have students perform an activity that will make them dizzy (i.e., a "bat spin" exercise, spin in a rotating chair, etc). While students are dizzy, ask them simple questions (for example, multiplication facts, state capitals, etc). Students will likely have difficulty answering the questions in their abnormal physiological state (Note: this activity has inherent physiological and/or psychological risks. It should only be done after very carefully considering all risks, and with appropriate medical and legal approval.)	- Skills approach (conceptual skills) - Team leadership	"Lucid thought is all but impossible at 29,000 feet" (p. 285).	Students will… …gain knowledge and appreciation for the challenges of making decisions while enduring non-optimal physiological conditions …comprehend the challenges when making decisions in stressful situations
Blindfold Buddy Walk	Students find a partner. One student is blindfolded, and the other student must guide them safely through a series of obstacles using verbal commands only.	- Trust	N/A	Students will… …gain an appreciation of trust in a team setting

Conclusion

This essay examined key figures from the failed 1996 Everest expedition, and provided critical analysis of leadership decisions using various theoretical leadership perspectives. Indeed, mistakes were made and poor judgment seemed to be the rule rather than the exception on that fateful day in 1996. However, as Jon Krakauer eloquently asserts in the quotation which begins this paper, wisdom does come easily after the fact. As such, this true-life story has no evil villains. The errors that occurred on that fateful day—and the weeks leading up to that day—were made by intelligent, well-meaning people under the most extreme conditions this planet can offer. In nearly all cases, these life-and-death decisions were influenced by the dizzying effects of oxygen depletion, altitude sickness, and extreme physical exhaustion. The intent of this essay is not to vilify anyone for their actions, thoughts processes, or choices.

That said, the leadership lessons offered by this tragedy give insight into the human decision-making process in extreme conditions, and might prove useful in teaching leadership principles, or possibly helping to avoid future calamities. Some techniques for teaching those leadership principles were offered in this article.

Scott Fischer once spoke about how human error was almost always the reason for a mountain tragedy. In retrospect, his assessment appears to be correct. The deaths of the five climbers that day certainly seem to be avoidable and—it can safely be reasoned—almost entirely caused by human error and poor judgment. It is certainly true that both Hall and Fischer were heroic in their attempts to help others and get to shelter during the fury of the storm. Ultimately, however, both Hall and Fischer died that day (along with seven others) due in large part to flawed leadership practices. In addition, several other clients were nearly killed and suffered either life-threatening or life-altering injuries.

While wisdom does comes easily after the fact, it is hoped that the lessons learned from the failed May 1996 Everest climb can be used to develop stronger leaders and prevent similar disasters.

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