

K2, at 28,253 feet the world's second-tallest and arguably most dangerous peak



2007 Shared Summits K2 Expedition, Chris Warner

Danger #1

FEAR OF DEATH

Remember not to have a fatal accident, because the community will think climbing is a dangerous thing, your friends will be bummed . . . and you'll be dead.

—Kitty Calhoun, *America's top female mountaineer*
in the 1990s, closing remarks at an
American Alpine Club lecture

Time: July 20, 2007, Summit Day

Location: K2, Pakistan

4:45 A.M.: Vapor from my breath immediately freezes on my beard. At twenty-five degrees below zero and 26,500 feet above sea level, I'm lucky to be breathing at all. The three members of our team are not using bottled oxygen, and at this altitude, there is barely one-third the oxygen at sea level. With so little oxygen reaching our brains and fingertips, we struggle to stay warm, think straight, and climb higher. The list of reasons to turn back keeps growing. We can see the final summit climb hanging above us: 2,000 feet of twisting snow gullies, a nearly vertical traverse below a hanging glacier, and a knife-edged ridgeline. As we prepare for hours of physical and emotional endurance, we know that everything will be demanded of us—if we make it to the top at all. This is not just any mountain. It's K2: the world's second-highest and most feared peak. For our team, this day will be the ultimate test.

The Korean team struggles through the deep snow, barely 100 feet above us. Sucking bottled oxygen and teamed with three experienced Sherpas, they should be farther ahead. But at this altitude, simple problems become monumental challenges. They've reached a notoriously treacherous spot known as the Bottleneck. More than a dozen climbers have died there over the years, and the Koreans are rigging the first set of ropes, ensuring all our safety.

As I adjust my gear, I look up. Suddenly the Korean team's professional leader, Nima Nurbu Sherpa, a highly experienced climber who had summited Mount Everest six times, slips and falls. He rockets to the bottom of the Bottleneck, but slows as he toboggans across the only flat patch on the nearly vertical South Face. I hold my breath, expecting him to plant his ice ax and stop himself on this relatively modest slope.

But he doesn't.

To our horror, Nima slides off the edge and tumbles into the darkness. At our altitude, he will fall for several minutes before hitting the glacier 10,000 feet below us.

Nima is dead.

His body will never be recovered.

Leadership is a sweet delusion: so fragile, so easily sabotaged.

Whether on a mountain or at work, leading others can quickly become difficult and dangerous. You want so badly to influence positive change in your organization. You accept the title of leadership and purposefully trek upward, propelled by hope. In this exciting journey, you seek to be a great leader leading a great company to great altitudes. With best-selling books, inspirational trainings, and smartly dressed consultants, you expect to finally reach the summit and become—well, great.

Then you slip off the cliff into reality. Instead of things going your way, leadership becomes a burden as the world fails to cooperate with your dreams. In an instant, the threat of failure

awakens you from the delusion. Luckily most of us don't tumble to our deaths if we stumble. But how you respond in the face of real dangers defines you as a leader.

Leadership destroys climbers on windswept slopes at 26,000 feet, and executives in comfortable conference rooms. It occurs during the death of great ideas and plans. When the hoped-for promotions or projects die, when commitments or sales aspirations breathe their last breath, the danger emerges: great fear.

Only now will your true greatness arise. Or not.

Will you freeze in the face of your fears? Or will you fight?

Great Fear: The Nemesis of Great Leadership

In a moment of great fear, action stops. We see it all the time. One client, a second-generation office product company, reached such a critical point. The CEO knew that future sales growth and expansion required a new channel or path to focus the company's attention and resources. After a series of on-site assessments and an off-site program, it was clear that the necessary plans for repositioning the company were being thwarted by two old-guard salesmen. These salesmen were great day-to-day performers, but they had no capacity for the strategic thinking needed to support the plan.

Obviously these salesmen were out of place on the executive team, and many on the executive team agreed. But when they faced the prospect of reassigning these salesmen, or even firing them, the CEO froze. And the high costs of inaction befell him. The company's founder (the CEO's dad) had hired these old-timers, and the CEO was too afraid to confront them. Although the executive team found the new strategy a much-needed breakthrough for getting to a new level of performance, this summit push failed because of the CEO's fear to take action. In a sense, he sabotaged his own company. Unable to accept his own weak leadership, he blamed the process instead. The CEO and his team were frozen in place, the summit not yet attainable.

Whether in an office or on a mountain, choosing to stay stuck in the safe world ensures losses of great opportunities to the ultimate strategy killer: fear. It stops staff from making great decisions, stops change agents from disrupting the status quo, and stops leaders from leading.

The desire for safety stands against every great and noble enterprise.

Tacitus, Roman philosopher

Is this so surprising? After all, traditional business education occurs safely in a safe classroom with safe books and a safely tenured professor. So when great decisions have to be made, who has the courage to step forward? In the face of impending danger and high risk, many leaders are deterred from their mission or stopped altogether, no matter how well they're educated or think they're ready for the challenge.

You will wrestle with the fear of death no matter what altitude you're at. But if you want to reach the summit, you must fight onward.

How Do You Tame Your Fear?

Let's consider Nima's death that fateful day on K2, a mountain that is known to be deadly. It certainly wasn't surprising that someone would die on that summit push, although I wouldn't have guessed it would be Nima, who was level-headed and highly experienced.

Nima's was the first mountaineering death many in our group of elite mountaineers had ever watched, and it was a particularly gruesome way to die. When Nima fell, with him went the group's strategy for fixing the three thousand feet of rope we needed to secure the summit climb. His team was supposed to fix the first thousand feet, our team would fix the middle thousand, and the Russians would fix the last thousand feet. Fixing these ropes creates risk and exhaustion, and sharing that risk and labor was the only logical and practical approach. Now our

strategy was in disarray. Who even knew who had what section of ropes and the anchors we needed? Was Nima's pack loaded with critical pieces of the group's gear? The group froze.

When faced with fear, most people freeze up. Among humans, fear becomes the dominant biological response, and an estimated 90 percent of us freeze up when stressed.² In the moment, this causes all sorts of problems (we get hit by the oncoming train instead of stepping

off the tracks), and in the long term, it can destroy us (it suppresses our sex drive, leads us to withdraw from friends and family, drives substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviors, and causes weight gain). When we freeze, our relationships and health suffer direct consequences.

We see the same effects of freezing up in teams. As fear races through a team, whether the fear of confronting coworkers or the fear of a failed project, team members withdraw, morale sinks, and whispered conversations and accusatory e-mails cause distrust. The rats start jumping off the ship, and the team self-destructs.

As leaders, we have to combat the freeze response and prevent it from taking root in our professional lives and the teams we lead. But how do you do this? When many high altitude leaders identify the moment they overcame the great fear that could have frozen them, they tell you they focused not on whether they succeeded or failed, but on the very fact that they acted in the face of great fear.

When the summit seems lost, when the risk of death is greatest, seize the opportunity to become a high altitude leader! At this moment 90 percent of your peers will fail, but the few possessing the fighter's instinct will leap the crevasse and continue the journey to the summit.

Anything I've ever done that ultimately was worthwhile . . . initially scared me to death.¹

Betty Bender,
American professor

High altitude leaders tame fear in themselves, their teams, and their organizational cultures by taking decisive action.

Bruce Normand, climbing K2



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How can you teach taking action? How do high altitude leaders consistently act in the face of real fear?

The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.

Walt Disney

SURVIVAL TIP: Embrace Death

*For the samurai to learn
There's only one thing,
One last thing—
To face death unflinchingly.*

Tsukahara Bokuden, noted swordsman

K2, Summit Day, continued

Stunned by Nima's death, we stop—not just our team of three but everyone else pushing to the summit: two dozen climbers from ten countries. All of us have come together at this point on this mountain because we need each other's help to succeed. And we are here on this particular day because it is one of very few this decade that has been forecast to be good enough to summit this peak.

Now, struck by the fear of death, our confidence slid off the edge with Nima. Each of us is facing a painful dilemma: if we don't continue climbing, we will miss the window in the weather—a certain failed climb for this coalition.

Listen! I tell myself. If you didn't think this would happen, you're delusional. Are you going to let this stop you?

In a moment of bitter realization, I choose to accept Nima's death and all the risks that lay ahead. K2 had already claimed the lives of sixty-four climbers. Nima was the sixty-fifth. On K2, the odds of survival are low; the odds of summiting are lower. Even if we do summit, the odds of survival get worse: one in seven of all who summit K2 die descending. If I want to summit, now is not the time to grieve, but to act. Someone has to take over the job of leading. It might as well be me. I pay my silent respects to Nima and climb on. When I reach his Nepali and Korean teammates, I pay my respects to them. Some of them are already descending, and some are immobilized, literally trapped by their fear on the steep slope. I untangle the ropes that were dropped when Nima fell. Then I tie on a new 200-foot section and begin climbing toward the summit. Below me, the other climbers are weighing their options.

We each had to accept the possibility of our death if we were to continue. If we didn't accept what we always knew was a possibility, we would fail. Soon most of us are heading upward.

Acting at that moment allowed eighteen climbers to stand on top of the world some thirteen hours later. After a brutally hard struggle, physically and emotionally, it became the most successful summit day in the history of K2, the most dangerous mountain in the world.

Chris knew, without needing to think it through, how to act. The freedom to act instead of freeze by accepting death was not new to Chris. Here's how he tells it:

In 2002 when I was first attempting K2, two climbers were killed. One was wiped out in a massive avalanche. The second slipped off an exposed ledge and bounced for five thousand vertical feet. I watched him fall. Every time his body slammed into the mountain, a splash of blood marked the spot. He was dead long before his body rolled to a stop, still five hundred feet above us. Five of us watched this horror unfold, but only two of us climbed to the body. It took us nearly twenty minutes to reach him. We knew he was dead, but still we had to place our fingers on his neck to check for a pulse. His eyes were open, but with his skull smashed, the eyes and nose and mouth were all slightly misplaced on his now graying face. Certain he had no pulse, we radioed his friends in base camp, telling them he was dead.

We all lost a friend, and it didn't seem appropriate that his teammates had to see him like this. He was so bloodied and twisted that it took a garbage bag and the covering of several tents to contain the blood and cover his body. Lifting his body to wrap him up, we were covered in his blood, and I steeled my stomach to keep from vomiting. That night I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, his fall and our handling of his body replayed in an endless loop.

This was not my first experience with death. The first time someone died in my hands, I felt the person's soul leave his body

and pass through my hands. It was surreal, to say the least. In that moment, I learned how to handle death as it occurs. We have one job, whether the person is a total stranger or an old friend. We need to push as much love into the person as we can. A departing soul deserves to be honored by the greatest human emotion, love, and it is our job to supply plenty of it.

Add those two deaths to the dozen or so I saw while guiding Everest and the random handful from other mountains, and I quickly learned how to deal with these tragedies. If I didn't fail to save that man's life (he died in my hands even though I was trying to save his life), I wouldn't have learned how to act when people I knew were dying. First, honor the dead. Then honor the survivors in a way that inspires others to be their best.

That morning on K2, we all stopped as Nima slid to his death. We were struck with fear. I imagine that most of us were too consumed with our own questions of survival to think too much about Nima or his teammates. Nima's teammates, already shattered by his death, still had to survive a dangerous descent and break the news to Nima's family. When I saw him tumble off the edge, I felt the fear but still knew what I had to do. First, I honored his soul. While we were waiting for his team to sort themselves out and start to descend, I questioned my desire and our strategy for climbing this deadly mountain. It took me only a second to know I was still heading up, but I knew I couldn't make it alone. I had to convince a handful of the truly exceptional mountaineers who were attempting K2 that day to overcome their fear. Pleading for their assistance wouldn't have inspired confidence in them. I knew that I needed to lead by example. These were brave men. If they saw the summit as a possibility, it should be enough for them to push aside the probability of dying on K2.

Although Chris stumbled into this situation without warning, he was prepared for it. When Nima fell to his death, he knew he had to honor his soul and honor his friends before he could do

anything else. To simply climb past them, ignoring their pain and suffering, would have turned the climb into a personal failure. When he accepted Nima's death, he broke through to a higher level of leadership and helped produce a historic event.

This ancient secret of embracing death unleashes the courage of your convictions as a high altitude leader, giving you power not available through any other path to take decisive action. The acceptance of failure, even death, as an option sets in motion a series of actions that counteracts the fear that paralyzes a group's collective goal.

**Accepting death is choosing life.
It grants us the power and freedom to act.**

History shows that leaders and companies that embrace death also achieve superior results. Suspend your disbelief in death as a management concept and you begin to see shadows of it everywhere:

- Near-death experiences can profoundly transform a person's life to take needed action. Why does a heart attack victim suddenly stop caring about the office politics that consumed his life before his near-death crisis and take new actions?
- Why did the famous Buckminster Fuller take the action to produce historic breakthroughs in mathematics, physics, and architecture only after he stepped back from the brink of suicide on the shore of Lake Michigan?
- The power of accepting death showed itself on 9/11 on Flight 93, en route from Newark to San Francisco. Initially the passengers probably behaved like those on the other fated flights that day, until somebody made a cell phone call. Then everything changed. When the hostages discovered the secret for power that al-Qaeda used, death, the passengers' power equaled that of the terrorists, and the passengers took action.

Although it has proven to work for centuries in taking leadership to higher altitudes in performance, embracing death remains a radical and unorthodox concept for many. Not everyone on your team or organization may be strong enough or brave enough to engage this process. Highly egocentric individuals will try to hide out, wait for it all to blow over, dismiss the process as worthless, or hope they won't be found out. These people ultimately will be exposed, just as weak climbers quit early in an expedition. But those in your organization who do embrace death successfully will never look back: embracing death allows decisive action in careers and organizations.

When we spoke with leaders about their most fearful experiences, the subject of death kept coming up. From a management point of view, this thing called death takes several forms; it doesn't have to be physical. Although our mountaineering teams face death in the most absolute sense, metaphorical death can also occur, from the boardroom to the production floor, and it can be just as transformative an experience. Leaders told us how embracing, versus avoiding or denying, the death of a goal, a project, a sale, or a career freed and inspired them to create new possibilities and actions.

Bankruptcy, the ultimate death of a company, enables companies to make great decisions they should have made much earlier, and perhaps avoided bankruptcy altogether. But until death was breathing down his or her neck, many managers were powerless to act in the face of their fears.

High altitude leaders find that these moments of imminent failure free them to take decisive action. The call to action from accepting such business deaths drives problem solving, decision making, and execution with greater clarity of vision. Suddenly a host of new possibilities exists, including ones they would have earlier dismissed. Acting in the face of death, not freezing up at the very thought of it, stops fear and allows you to continue climbing, pushing on past those paralyzed instead of giving up and descending. It isn't hard to find an entrepreneur who

reminisces about gaining an entirely new level of ability after going flat broke or a professional who risked giving up her career to make a dream come true.

No better example of this paradox of fear and death is with former Vice Admiral Charles “Willy” Moore Jr. When Willy was deputy chief of naval operations for fleet readiness and logistics, he hired Don to help facilitate the strategy for transforming naval fleet readiness. Willy is a legend, although he’ll never admit it. When he left the navy a few years ago after serving for over forty years, he was the most combat-experienced naval officer and the longest-serving naval pilot on active duty, an honored status in the navy known as a Grey Eagle. He had commanded naval squadrons and air wings twice, as well as a carrier strike group. Now he is vice president of global sustainment for Lockheed-Martin Aeronautics, a \$12 billion business with thirty thousand employees. Willy is probably the best at understanding freeing yourself from fear by accepting death:

My last combat operation was Operation Enduring Freedom. I slept like a baby. I never worried about anything. I flew into the combat zone, I walked the battlefield, and I was very, very comfortable the entire time. And it’s a phenomenon that you know, Don, very well. In a military combat situation, you have already made a commitment to give up your life. You’ve made it consciously or unconsciously, but you made it. There’s something very liberating about that. If this is it and it’s my day to lose my life, then so be it.

Not so in corporate work. Death in the business world is not necessarily physical death, but death of the ego. When we are too invested in our ego, we can’t collaborate, change, adapt, and cooperate as a team. It’s vital to be a team when there is a relentless pressure on revenue and having to change with market demands. If you can’t accept death here, you’re at a disadvantage. And it will kill you just as surely as in combat because your blood pressure rises, you put on weight, you stop sleeping, and the stress takes its toll. Then it’s only a matter of time when you become another casualty.

Embracing the death of projects, goals, careers, teams, or companies frees leaders to create alternatives to becoming paralyzed and sliding off the cliff. In contrast, the normal response of seeking to deny death by clinging to cherished plans, opinions, or personal agendas can kill you metaphorically. Embracing death frees you to continue climbing.

If the genuine experience of having nothing left to lose opens up hitherto unimagined capacities, then what are you afraid of?

How to Die and Take Action

Strength is built through exercise. Here are a few exercises we learned as we stumbled and fell so many times through the valley of the shadow of death. These exercises inspire action in career development, team improvement, and executive leadership, even at altitudes below 26,000 feet.

Seek Fear

Seeking fear is critical. High altitude leaders purposely push themselves up against their limits on a regular basis. When Don first studied rock climbing, he remembers it like this:

Sewing machine leg. That's what they called it. The fear of being a thousand feet up on a sheer rock face hanging on by your fingernails causes such fear that one of your legs starts shaking up and down, like you're running one of those old-time manual sewing machines. It's embarrassing, but you don't care; you're just trying to stay alive. Then, after you push through, you begin to trust your gear, your guides, and your capabilities. After a few days, you're leaning over the edge enjoying the view as if you're relaxing on your front porch.

You have to put yourself in fearful situations regularly in order to consistently overcome ever-larger fears. You don't have to take up rock climbing, but you do have to push your

own limits. Maybe you are terrified of public speaking, or being criticized for your artistic talents, or swimming in deep water, or snakes. To practice doing scary stuff, start by addressing some of the issues within your life that you've been avoiding.

We like telling executives that no one wants to be led by a has-been. That really hits a lot of them in the gut. Here they are, business leaders who live in the comfortable world they built for themselves and surrounded by the trappings of success, and someone who has climbed an icy peak is insinuating that they've stopped being the leader they imagine themselves to be. We ask them, "How often do you take real risks in your career?" "Are you pushing your team to the limits of your industry?" "Are you exercising your strengths, so that when a crisis occurs you can act decisively?"

If you and your team aren't regularly pushing limits, you won't be able to overcome the life-or-death challenges that every person, every team, and every organization eventually faces. If you don't train, you won't reach the summit.

Kill Your Cherished Plans

High altitude leaders don't freeze when they fear the death of projects, ideas, and teams. Acting despite those real fears frees them to create alternatives.

In 1980 Don gained his first clue on this phenomenon at a business conference. A speaker revealed that in the 1950s, Lockheed's domination of the commercial aircraft market forced Boeing into a financially desperate situation. At a time when the entire industry was designed around propeller technology, Boeing had nothing left to lose. Accepting the inevitable gave it the freedom to kill its "propeller" dreams and risk putting a jet engine on a commercial airframe. It paid off. Lockheed, the number one player, withdrew from the market, and Boeing, en route to the summit, eventually ended up owning the second-place competitor, Douglas.

It doesn't take long to see the same pattern in hundreds of companies. Japan's threatening domination of the motorcycle market, for example, gave Harley-Davidson something to die for. There was no other choice. Harley-Davidson killed the processes it had invested so much in—fired consultants, let go of entrenched turf battles, and banded together in a desperate last stand to take back the market—and succeeded.

The Maryland Jockey Club, the oldest sports franchise in North America, is another example. The club was founded in 1743 and counts George Washington among its past customers. You probably know of its premier race: the Preakness Stakes of the Triple Crown, the world's most famous thoroughbred racing series. You might think that after surviving the American Revolution, the Civil War, Prohibition, World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, this club would never die. The club had spawned such a large horse racing industry that in the 1980s, it accounted for more than seventy-five percent of the state of Maryland's total sports income (the combined gross revenues of professional football, professional baseball, professional basketball, professional hockey, and every other amateur and professional sport operating in the state).

But as the Maryland Jockey Club neared its 250th birthday, it almost ceased living. Frank DeFrancis, its inspirational CEO, had suffered a serious heart attack from which he would not recover. After he died, Frank's estate and his partners were faced with two enormous problems, both with the potential to be fatal. First, trying to replace Frank, who had almost single-handedly revived the company and led the Maryland horse industry into an era of unparalleled prosperity, was an enormous challenge. Second, the fundamental economics of the business were undergoing a paradigm shift of seismic proportions as a result of advancements in technology and major changes in the legal and regulatory structure that governed horse racing in the United States. Simulcast racing had arrived. Now people could bet on any horse race in America without even showing up at the

track. Up to this point, bettors had to come to the track to bet, and the only races they could wager on were the ones run before their very eyes. The cash wagered was spent locally. But now the Maryland Jockey Club would be competing with Churchill Downs, Santa Anita, Belmont, Saratoga, and every other horse track in the country. Money wagered in Maryland would go to tracks and breeders thousands of miles away. How could the club possibly make a profit with this new business model?

Thousands of people were at risk of losing their jobs, and billions of dollars were at stake because of this twin set of corporate catastrophes: the untimely death of a charismatic leader and a radical shift in the industry. A new leader had to be found to fill Frank's gigantic shoes. But who would shoulder the burden of an organization that is about to die?

Three thousand miles away, Frank's son, Joe, was at the pinnacle of an incredibly successful career. He and his team had been hired by Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. to serve as counsel to handle the antitrust aspects of the merger of RJR and Nabisco. At \$25 billion, this was the largest leveraged buyout of all time. (This was the deal that made Michael Milken famous and was written about in the book and movie *Barbarians at the Gate*.)³ Joe, thirty-four years old at the time, was perfectly positioned to be a key player in the growing, and insanely profitable, business of mergers and acquisitions.

Now, with his father dead, Joe was asked to give up his successful career to come back to Maryland to salvage the Maryland Jockey Club. If he saved the club, he would save his mother's and sister's long-term financial future and revitalize the important economic role that horse racing plays in Maryland; hundreds of small stables and farms employing thousands of trainers, breeders, stable hands, and jockeys would survive. If he failed, everyone would lose. Moreover, if he moved to the Jockey Club, he would lose his role at the peak of his legal career:

I didn't waste too much time agonizing over the decision. I'd just been through the most grueling legal battle imaginable. I'd built a team and we won. That experience reinforced all I learned

about identifying risks and balancing them against the potential rewards. Yes, I had to take some great personal risks.

Stepping away from my legal career after that victory was a very risky proposition. The legal landscape was changing so quickly that my intellectual capital would soon be outdated. My contacts would dry up.

My path to partnership would be cut off. If I left now, I'd have to start from scratch if I needed to return to practicing law again. But my potential losses weren't nearly as great as the losses that threatened so many of the stakeholders. What options would a fifty-five-year-old horse trainer have if this industry failed?

It was pretty easy for me to weigh the risks and rewards and decide to return to Maryland. And once I made that decision, I didn't dare look back. It was full steam ahead.

Joe killed his legal career and returned to Maryland knowing that cherished traditions were about to be sacrificed. With so much at stake for the Maryland Jockey Club and Maryland's horse racing industry, Joe was just one of thousands of people who feared losing all they had in the fight ahead. But still he acted instead of freezing. It took a few years to rally thousands of stakeholders around a new customer-focused vision. But it allowed the 250-year-old Maryland Jockey Club to keep the best parts of its tradition, discard the limiting factors, and enter into the most prosperous years in its history.

Could you have sacrificed as much as Joe did to reach the summit?

Always Push Forward, but Do It Fast

In mountaineering, the beauty of pushing forward means that the higher your altitude, the farther you will see. At sea level, the horizon is just twelve miles away. On the summit of Everest, the horizon is twelve hundred miles away. When you can see that far, obstacles that once seemed impossible to overcome are put into perspective. The same happens when

you push higher. So to achieve your full potential be sure to act when things get scary, and always be pushing forward. You certainly have met leaders who have this drive. No matter how deadly the climb may be, these leaders shoulder their load and continue climbing. They fight the immobilizing power of fear by acting. Joe DeFrancis didn't waste time agonizing over his decision to come to the aid of the Maryland Jockey Club. Chris didn't agonize over his decision to continue the K2 climb even after watching Nima Sherpa fall to his death.

In what areas of your life now have you just stopped? Why? What's it going to take to start pushing forward again? And why wait?

All the leaders we spoke with learned through brutal experiences how to act in spite of their fears, but they all impressed on us their wish that they had acted earlier in the process. In retrospect, they could see their organizations, or teams, or even themselves individually freezing. But by staying stopped for so long, they risked future success. Their teams slowly became less risk tolerant, emotions frayed, people withdrew, trust eroded, and they gradually lost strength. When everyone's best was needed, everyone had less to give. When teams or companies freeze, time relentlessly robs them of their potential to push forward again.

How long have you been stopped?

Just Remember Death

One who is an executive must before all things keep constantly in mind, by day and by night, the fact that they have to die. That is his chief business.⁴

We've all dealt with the finality of death at some point. Maybe your business went bankrupt, your career fizzled out, you fired some employees, a great team drifted apart, your heart was broken, or your climbing partner fell for thousands of feet.

But have you noticed that very few cultures see death as the end? Most religions teach us that death is the beginning of something even better. Whether a better existence awaits, or one reincarnates to work through current failings, death is a door for what's next. And in business it's no different, as the many stories of people bouncing back from catastrophe to reach even bigger summits show. The proof exists: not every failure ends in disgrace. A lot of times, the consequence of failure is a previously unimaginable success.

So why do we fear failure and death so much? So many people are paralyzed by it. As leaders we avoid making difficult decisions because of this fear. Our teams suffer as a result and the very dream of reaching the summit ends in disappointment.

At Earth Treks, we had two charismatic and strong-willed employees running parts of the business that actually did not make much money, so keeping these employees around had a direct impact on our profits. The first guy left in disgrace: he stole our mailing lists and tried to cover it all up with a series of lies. In the end, he severed a relationship that was nearly a decade old. A year after he left, his department, properly managed, doubled in revenues and tripled in profits. The second guy left with dignity. He helped us sell his division to a competitor and went on to become the general manager of this new and larger company. Earth Treks was suddenly freed from the financial losses of that division. Every penny saved went directly to our bottom line.

It wasn't easy to admit that both of these situations were killing us. And even once we admitted it, it wasn't easy to act. Both times we delayed the inevitable course of action because we were afraid. But looking back, it's obvious that once we knew these things could kill us, we were freed to act. When we examine high altitude leaders, we learn that the very possibility of death frees them up to explore new possibilities.

Remembering the inevitability of death loosens the ego's grip.

Then honor, bravery, and integrity emerge in its place.

This is the secret to high altitude leadership.

Remembering death is easier if you're in a company that is dying. If not, congratulations. But an exercise you can do is to have a brutally honest discussion on what decisions and actions are being avoided because you don't have the necessary freedom and power to confront them. For example, if you're on a team, try the following at your next meeting:

1. Ask participants to ponder what they would do if the team, project, or company was dying.
2. Have everyone individually write down what they would do differently now that there's nothing left to lose—for example, what actions would be taken that previously had been avoided, what decisions would be made differently, which policies or processes would be changed, what resources would be managed differently.
3. Combine the common themes on a flip chart.
4. Challenge the group: "Why are we waiting?" Remember that not all ideas are good ones or make sense to act on because your team or project isn't dying, but can you really ignore everything on the list?
5. Develop actions to address the appropriate issues everyone has been avoiding.
6. Assign champions and time lines to the actions, and schedule a follow-up accountability session to check on progress.

Repeat this exercise at least a couple times per year.

*Surviving a failure gives you more self-confidence.
Failures are great learning tools—but they must be
kept to a minimum.*

Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric

Fail often in order to succeed sooner.

IDEO, a well-known, much-admired design firm

Fear Conquered?

You will never conquer all your fears, and you shouldn't want to. As we tell our mountaineering clients, fear focuses the mind. Every once in a while, we need to feel our hairs stand on end, our heart rate quicken, and our palms sweat. Without a little adrenaline, our lives would become boring and our team would stop focusing on its true goal.

Key Learnings

- Fear of death is natural, but freezing in the face of it paralyzes organizations and leaders.
- Acting decisively in the face of great fear triggers the actions needed for success.
- Embracing death provides freedom and power for innovation, decisiveness, and action.
- High altitude leaders don't cling to cherished projects, personal agendas, or career positions. They focus on strategic results.
- Act early. Waiting diminishes the chances for success.