

Each of us Has our own Everest

by David Fojtik

*"It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves."
Sir Edmund Hillary (1919 –2008)*

In May 2006 I succeeded in climbing the north-western ridge of Mt. Everest without the aid of high-altitude Sherpas and oxygen bottles. In the beginning it didn't occur to me to look for parallels between the climb and management experience. However, the positive response to the climb from colleagues and the number presentations for corporate clients compelled me to reflect on it and formulate a few ideas.

You have to believe that you can do it

If you want to achieve something, you first have to have it in your head; your body will always get there somehow. In other words, "If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right" (Henry Ford) – an old, but true saying.

Many people have given up on Everest the moment they first saw its north wall (see photo). It's an astounding view and you then realise what you've sacrificed so that you could stand here open-mouthed in admiration. If at this moment you're not sure why you're standing here, you've half lost the battle. In spring this year I stood like that under the north wall of another 8000m mountain, Dhaulagiri. This wall is huge, like if you stand two "smaller" 8000m mountains one on top of the other. On the backpack on my back were the skis on which I wanted to ski down this mountain. At these moments you have to be 100% sure that it can be done. Even in these mountains the biggest battles take place first inside of us, and then on the battle field.



*The north wall of Everest from Rongbuk Monastery
(approx. 5,000 m.a.s.l.).*

Motivation stems from setting tough goals

I've seen the visualisation of company goals as the peak of some mountain a few times with our clients. I guess it's not by chance that the distance from the peak gives you immediate feedback as to how you're doing and in my opinion that's the best motivation. Likewise, my motivation arises from my goals; thinking about them and their planning is something that is fun and pushes me forward.

However, what is a challenging goal? Or, in other words, how big a goal is still realistic and not an unreal utopia? Frankly speaking, I don't know an answer to this question. I only know that if I had stayed on the classic mountain climbing line of the Tatra-Alps-Caucasus-Himalayas, I would have got to my first 8000m mountain somewhere around 40. I'm young and patience isn't my strong point. The advantage of challenging goals is that they force me to think in a completely different way and get the best out of myself. Messner called these goals "real utopias" and denoted them as something that kept him above water in periods between expeditions. In 1978, when he climbed Everest with Peter Habeler without oxygen, he was one of the few who believed that it was possible without lasting effects on health. Even if you are not able to achieve a challenging goal, you don't leave empty-handed. Someone said: "As long as you try to reach the stars, you won't return with a fistful of mud".

Go with the right people



Think big – SKI 8167 Project - Dhaulagiri – skiing line

Gather up people who share the same values and together you'll enjoy the journey. Together you'll have fun and laugh, overcome hurdles, celebrate small victories and push back the borders of possibility. Support each other and be reminded of the meaning of the whole act. The journey will not be easy but as long as you have the right people, you'll get to the goal. If in work I had to choose between a group of extremely talented individuals and a team of average people sharing the same values, I would always choose the second.

Before my first expedition to the Himalayas I was wracking my brains over who I would go with. One option was to go with experienced Himalaya veterans who had plenty of experience. Mountains were their life passion and if they could, they would do nothing else. Their lifestyle was filled from expedition to expedition by searching for sponsors and occasional work. I really like mountains and they inspire me, but the same goes for my work. Just once every two or three years I need to reset my brain and head somewhere high to search for answers to questions which occur to me in Prague, but for which I can't find answers here. In the end Miloš Palacký went with me to Everest,



With Miloš at advanced base camp (ABC-6,400 m.a.s.l.)

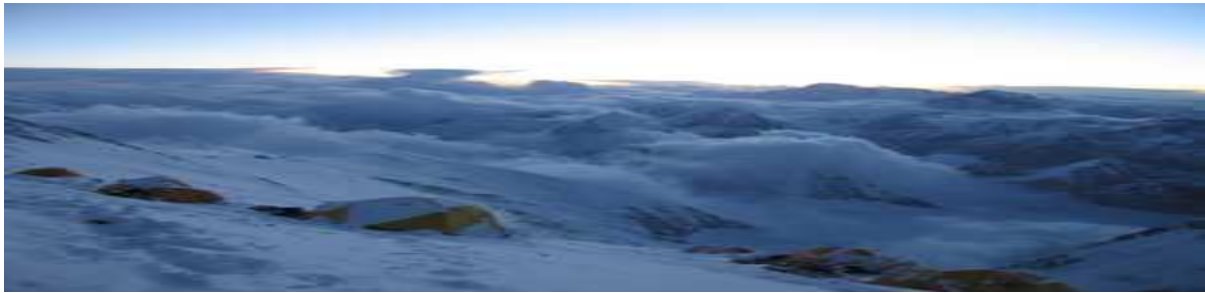
a colleague from my mountain climbing club with who I shared above all the approach and values. We understood each other in and out of the mountains and that proved to be decisive.

Be yourself

Start with who you are and what values you have. In my opinion self-reflection is one of the key factors to the success of every manager. Through this our values are formed, personal development takes place and our behaviour is amended. Knowing who you are and what you stand for simplifies your way and you will also simply have a better feeling from it.

Staying at high altitudes, tiredness and ongoing risk in their own way test your character and values. After returning from the peak to stay at the third, and highest located camp, I wrote this: "Nobody pretended anything here. I saw someone come out of their tent and ask for oxygen. I saw some people going into their tent who obviously weren't themselves. I saw clients on a commercial expedition tethered tightly to a rope behind Sherpas. At this altitude your character is revealed to the bone. Nothing matters to anyone, they just want the peak and to survive. In the worst case just the latter." That day, on 15 May 2006, on their way to the peak somewhere at an altitude of around 8,600m 40 people stepped over a delirious David Sharp. Most of them had the possibility to choose – an attempt at the peak or start organising his rescue. Two days later on my way to the peak I only passed his dead body.

On the way regularly look back and evaluate your advancement



Camp 3 at dusk (C3-8,350m)

Permanent feedback is the motor of performance. In the mountains you always have at your disposal immediate feedback in the form of the distance from the peak. It's like the score in a collective game: you always know where you are. I believe that an environment with intensive feedback creates a first-rate performance.

It's possible to liken the climb up Everest to a bank account: from the moment you come to base camp you have finished with saving and you start withdrawing. At altitudes over 5000m above sea level the human body no longer has the ability to regenerate – essentially it slowly dies. The most common injuries at base camp are ribs broken from coughing fits. Every illness or injury at this altitude means a perceptible withdrawal from the bank account. Your aim is to get to the peak with enough in your bank balance for a safe return. There is no overdraft.



View of the peak from ABC

Don't give up - Never give up

As Lance Armstrong says: "Pain is temporary. If I quit, however, it lasts forever."

On Everest you see unbelievable stories of will and stamina. I saw one on the way to camp 2. The friends of New Zealander Mark Inglis were lowering him down because during the ascent he suffered from considerable frostbite. There would be nothing unusual in that if Mark hadn't had both legs amputated below the knees and he had got to the peak on carbon fibre prostheses. In the end it finished with further amputations of legs and hands, but in his own words he never regretted it. Tears of joy ran down his cheeks when he embraced his friend, Blair, who congratulated him on his ascent. He wasn't alone on Everest with a handicap: people who were attempting this mountain after several failures were many and more than a few had sacrificed the same things as Inglis. My friend Miloš attempted Everest this year for the fourth time, again unsuccessfully. Failure is not a person, it's only, and only an event from which you have to learn and which can help you move forward.

Responsibility for your decisions



Rescue of Mark Inglis (C2-7,800m)

These days I meet a lot of “mortgaged managers”, who are not able to decide or postpone their decisions because they are simply afraid about their jobs and related to that their ability to repay their debt. Staying in high mountains builds character and responsibility. All of a sudden you have a lot of responsibility and your given word simply has to hold true.

If I tell my partner that I’m fine but at the same time I’m on the edge, I thereby put at risk not only myself but also the others around me.

If I say that I’ll leave my sleeping bag at the last camp, it has to be so, otherwise someone will leave with frostbite. Somewhere around 7,300m my fellow climber Miloš “dropped out”. Miloš simply couldn’t keep treading on. He could have rested and tried to climb higher with the last of his strength. He could have asked me for help. But he didn’t do any of those things. He well knew that if he tried to go on, he endangered not only himself but mainly me and potentially also all the others who would have to assist in his rescue. Based on our previous agreement we split up and I went on.



Miloš can't go on (7,300m)

The last 5% is the most important

The last 5% on Everest is the climb from the last camp at an altitude of 8,400m to the peak and back down. The whole two months of the expedition is therefore decided on that single day. You start at midnight, higher than the peaks of most 8000m mountains, and in the dark and frost you climb to the peak. On the way you pass the bodies of those who didn’t make it. It’s a little different than if you see someone with frostbite – it’s possible to “shake that off”, but when you see your first deceased, you realise that this is “mortally” serious. Furthermore, you know that no one will help you: physically and technically it simply isn’t possible. A senseless trip or a twisted ankle here can change your life in a second.

Somewhere at the altitude of 8,500m is a place called “green boots”. They simply protrude from the snow, they never completely disappear below it and they are still planted to the feet of a dead Indian mountain climber. They have lain there since 1996 when six clients and two guides on a commercial expedition perished on the way down. Ten years later, the body of David Sharp lies next to the boots. If you succeed in getting to the peak in the early hours, you’ve half won. 80% of all tragedies happen on the descent. I felt no euphoria at the peak. All my thoughts were fixed on a safe return. I was afraid, but it was only the type of fear that stimulates you to a higher performance. I had the same fear last spring just below the peak of Dhaulagiri when I clicked into the bindings of my skis and prepared for the downhill run.

It doesn't work without risk



The peak ridge of Everest

Before the peak attempt you have to be sure of what you're prepared to sacrifice. You have to be absolutely honest with yourself.

Any bad estimate of the situation or your state at these altitudes is almost always fatal.

During the ascent to camp 2 I got frostbite in the fingers of my right hand.

I went to three doctors. An American told me that I should pack up and go home. A Spaniard told me that up to altitudes of about 8,000m it should be okay – higher and I would risk losing the fingers. A Russian told me that it's okay. Good advice is better than gold but still the final decision and related responsibility is up to you. The rules you try to maintain up there may be good insurance for a safe return. I had three – I'll immediately turn round if: (i) I don't get to the peak by noon, (ii) I feel that I'm starting to get more frostbite and (iii) if I start to "lose my mind". Unfortunately, only once at the top I found out that the third condition is hard to uphold when you're alone. Somewhere at around 8,700m, to my amazement, I stared at my own footsteps and thought who's coming behind me. These and other states caused the transgression of the boundaries of reasonable risk, which I would never want to repeat in the future. In short, Messner set the bar very high in 1978 (the first ascent of Everest without oxygen) and to "do it" without oxygen will always be a big challenge with a fair measure of risk, which it is basically necessary to accept.



The cemetery below Everest. You'll also have a headstone here if you don't return. Bodies are not brought down, it's too dangerous.

Count on the fact that you'll be alone at the top

As you climb you leave more and more people below you and the further you go the lonelier you are. It's similar to a career. The higher you climb the less people you have around you who you can confide in and who can support you. Only you carry the responsibility for important decisions. Self-motivation and independence play a key role in the day-to-day routine.

Once above 8000m it basically runs by itself. It's like if you are on board an aeroplane with a child: during the instruction at the start of the flight when they tell you that you should first put the oxygen mask on yourself and then on the child – tough, but the only right solution. It's the same at altitudes over 8000m – first take care of yourself so that you can then take care of others. Even then any kind of rescue of one person at this altitude needs 20 others, with oxygen naturally. You won't find this many even on a larger commercial expedition.



The peak – there is no higher (8848m)

Why do you do it?

It's the question I often come across at presentations for clients. There isn't an easy answer to that and it's probably different with every mountain climber. In the 1940s Mallory answered the question of why he wants to climb Everest with the words "Because it's there". On Everest I met people with basically two kinds of motivation. Some had motivation from outside, or external. These people wanted to have their own peak photo hanging above their desk and the ascent for them was a measure of social prestige or standing. Then there were people with internal motivation. With them it was difficult to say exactly why they were doing it and the most common answer was because they enjoy it. It was interesting that the people with internal motivation were significantly more successful than the people with external motivation. Most of the number of successfully reached peaks equalled the number of happy returns. With the other group there were not so many peaks, but mainly, the number of returns differed from the number of peaks. In the spring of 2006 you could have counted 13 dead bodies on the northern side of Everest, all in 500 metres altitude on the way from the last camp to the peak.

Personally, Hillary's motto in the introduction to this article seems the most apt to me. We don't conquer a mountain, but ourselves. Every campaign to a mountain peak is simultaneously a fascinating probe into your own soul. I really realise who I am and what I want in particularly restrictive situations. I won't find the answer to my questions, however banal they sound, in Prague.