

*Strategic Leadership and Change  
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**LESSONS IN TEAM LEADERSHIP  
FROM  
MT. RAINIER**

## LESSONS IN TEAM LEADERSHIP FROM MT. RAINIER

A few years ago I turned 40. Decade-marking birthdays seem to have a certain effect on me. I was determined not to repeat the life-altering experience of my 30th, after which I chucked my career, sold everything I owned, and moved my family to London for a two-year excursion into poverty while I went to business school. This time I reasoned I would plan extra-career activities to stimulate my sense of adventure and convince myself I wasn't yet dead. So during my 40th year I ran the first of two marathons, went up in a hot air balloon, avidly resumed downhill skiing (after a twenty year hiatus) and made a summit attempt on Mt. Rainier.

Lest the reader think this flurry of athletic activity indicates some sort of super-jock frame, I should add that I'm usually the typical "weekend warrior" of sport, struggling to keep my weight down and my knees intact simultaneously (a feat that gets harder with every year).

I learned about Rainier from a man with whom I occasionally ran and hiked at the time I turned 30. Pete turned 40 around that same time and brought back pictures of his mid-life encounter with Rainier. Pete's stories and photographs convinced me that "someday" I'd contact Rainier Mountaineering. What I didn't know was that I'd end up doing it at the same time he did, the fateful 40th year.

Rainier Mountaineering is a company of "born-to-the-mountain" guys (also some women, I'm told) who cater to us "adventure seeking" folk by offering a one-day mountaineering school and two-day group summit attempt.

The folks at Rainier Mountaineering were very helpful. When I registered by phone they told me what clothes to bring and how to get in shape for the climb. (They recommend bicycling over running.) One thing everyone repeatedly told me, from telephone reservationists to the guides at the school: "This is not an easy hike."

### **The Mountain**

Mount Rainier, a 14,410-foot extinct volcano just south of Seattle, is the highest and most extensively glaciated mountain in the continental United States. The Rainier Mountaineering brochure says the mountain "... is demanding and at times relentless; the combination of altitude and cold challenges the climber..." What the brochure curiously omits is the astounding beauty of the mountain.

My first visual encounter was from Sea-Tac Airport. There it was, an enormous snow cone seemingly suspended in mid-air above a cloudbank. The next day was much clearer. From downtown Seattle the snow-topped peak glistened in the distance and projected extraordinary vistas for the entire three hour drive. Upon seeing Rainier it is easy to understand the Native American name *Tacoma*, "the mountain that was God."

Entering Rainier National Park I drove through an evergreen tunnel formed by the six-foot thick, sixty-foot tall firs on either side of the road. As I arrived, first the sunset and then the moon painted the surprise views of the peak in a progressive rainbow, from burning orange to chilling blue light. Finally I arrived at the Paradise Lodge, an enormous structure of Alaskan Cedar built in 1917. Though it was dark, I was aware that I was at 6000 feet, above the treeline, and resolved to get up to see the first

reflected sunlight strike the surrounding peaks with the eerie golden light the Swiss call “alpenglow.” There is a story in the camaraderie of Paradise Lodge, camaraderie bathed in wine and firelight savored by mountain-hearts following a dream. But this story is about the team leadership found on the mountain itself.

## **The School**

Learning to be a mountaineer in a day is a daunting task.

The guides of Rainier Mountaineering use the school not only to teach climbing and survival techniques we will need on the mountain but also to weed out those who are not fit. (This “testing” made some nervous and others of us unreasonably “gung-ho”).

At 7:00 a.m. the group convenes. The guides have us begin by talking individually about our reasons for making this assault and the conditioning that brought us here.

Soon we are outfitted with boots, crampons, ice axes, and steadying ski poles, and we walk up to the edge of a small snowfield. It is 70° Fahrenheit; the sky is September blue; the climb is 1500 feet or so, half of it on paved trail.

We are taught the rest-step (for use above 10,000 feet), one step breathe in and out, next step breathe in and out. At this altitude it seems unnecessarily cautious. We later will find the rest step a very useful means of conserving energy at altitude.

We are taught to walk with crampons not just on ice (which is easy) but on rock (which is not easy).

We are taught to walk roped together, holding the ropes in front of us and behind, leaving slack but still “feeling” the other members of our rope-team.

Most of the day is spent practicing the skill of “self-arrest” with an ice axe. From a variety of positions each of us must “fall” on the glacier. We are instructed to yell “Falling” to alert others of our predicament. We are then left to slide down the glacier until our instructor shouts, “Stop!” (Hopefully before we drop over a 200-foot precipice.) We then “self-arrest”: rapidly turn over, dig the ice axe into the ice and dig into the “anchor position” with our crampons. This technique can save your life and the life of anyone who happens to be roped to you. We are encouraged to take it seriously.

We practice self-arrest for about five hours continuously, with rare breaks for water and whatever snacks we brought. We practice self-arrest backwards, forwards, sideways, blind folded, alone, in pairs, roped together in five-man teams (a few of us even think it’s fun). By final exam time we have practiced this technique with every person in the group from every possible position.

We aren’t told that there is a final exam (though Pete told me and now I’ve told you). The exam is a surprise. While on an “endurance hike” across the glacial snowfield an instructor simply pushes you over toward the edge. Most everyone in our group passes; a couple of people decide to wash out voluntarily and Bert, a seventy year old Australian man, who has passed every physical test, is asked to withdraw because his deafness in his right ear slows his reaction time. (I feel badly for Bert. I’d even trust him

to be on my rope team, but Rainier Mountaineering takes no chances, and I respect that.)

### **The Climb: Day One**

The next day starts early. Today we climb to Camp Muir at 10,000 feet.

It is a warm day, 75°; most of us climb in shorts. We climb individually (no ropes yet). We use crampons some and the guides vary the pace, continually checking the stamina of each member of the group. We climb through the occasional snowfield but mostly climb on loose shale and over boulders. Our group is now twenty-one, sixteen of us “one-day wonder” mountaineers and five Rainier Mountaineering guides. The head of this assault is George; the other guides call him Georgo. He is about six feet tall, blond, full of toothy smiles and an easy confidence that would be read as arrogance in a flatland bar. Up here it’s reassuring.

Each of us climbs in the lead position for a while and brings up the rear for a while (more testing we suppose). We all get used to hearing Georgo’s voice from the front: “Coming up to a stream, we’ll rest at the flat space above that outcropping of rock.” “Some tricky crevasses in this snowfield, step in the tracks of the person in front of you.” Each of us learns to pass on Georgo’s instructions to those behind us even though today his voice is clearly audible to the back of the line.

The day is beautiful, the air clear, clean, and fresh. A few high cirrus clouds have begun to lazily drift in. Though “this is not an easy hike” so far, it’s not been that difficult either. We arrive at Camp Muir at 4 p.m. We take in the exhilaration of the view of other lesser mountains and other volcanoes like Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Baker.

We cook our dehydrated food and go to bed, under protest, by 7 p.m. At 12:30 a.m. the guides will wake us so that we can climb to the summit and all the way back down in a day.

### **The Climb: Day Two**

We awake at 12:30 a.m. to a raging storm of snow and ice. I stumble to the door of the shelter, look out at the curtain of stinging whiteness and say to myself, “We ain’t going anywhere,” and begin to get back into my sleeping bag. Just then the door opens wide with a bang. “Listen up! You will need long underwear, wool and waterproof pants, parkas, gloves and masks. Get your headlamps, crampons, and rope harnesses on and be down on the glacier in fifteen minutes!”

At this point I’m thinking that selling everything I own and moving sounds like a cakewalk compared to this, but I find myself following instructions just like everyone else in this hut. Getting “down on the glacier” is no easy task. The “path” down is a steep (40°) 35-foot embankment of glacial boulders, most about 4 feet in diameter, covered with ice and snow from the continuing storm. Miraculously, no one falls.

We are milling around on a flat space at the base of a vast white slope. Mostly what I can see are bobbing head-height lights. They look like a convention of Tinkerbells. The

noise of the storm makes conversations difficult but most of us are stunned speechless by the hour and the weather, anyway.

Somehow, each guide puts together his rope team. Our guide, Paul, ropes me into the rear position, "Anchor" it's called, a dubious honor Paul bestows on me for my enthusiastic practice of self-arrest. "Born to the mountain" I hear him say. Somehow, right now, the appellation seems neither complimentary nor particularly reassuring.

Suddenly, Paul is in front of us yelling at what must surely be the top of his voice with every ounce of energy his 5'8" frame can muster. "O.K. YOU GUYS, THIS IS IT! GET PSYCHED! GET READY! YOU ARE GOING TO BE CLIMBING IN SOME OF THE MOST DIFFICULT CONDITIONS KNOWN TO MAN. PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU ARE DOING. IF YOU LOSE YOUR FOCUS YOU COULD DIE! BUT YOU CAN DO THIS. WHATEVER YOU DO TO GET YOURSELF PSYCHED UP - DO IT NOW! ARE YOU READY?!"

Though I was questioning my sanity as I listened, when I opened my mouth I was screaming, "LET'S GO!"

And so we go.

We walk at an upward diagonal across the snowfield of the first glacier. The snowstorm has blotted out my depth perception and my hearing. All I can see is a bobbing string of Christmas tree lights moving ahead of me. I see no people, not even the person in front of me, just the floating headlamps. But I can "feel" the person ahead of me, hand fixed on the rope. I can feel Bob, the anesthesiologist from Chicago, with whom I had raced down the glacier on my belly till we both heard the call to "Stop" and self-arrested. The feel of Bob on the rope is important, as is his voice echoing back what I know are Georgo's descriptions of the terrain ahead.

We reach a steep embankment, and Bob echoes back Georgo's instructions: "Climb up the boulders to the ridge. Watch the ice." When I reach the ridge, the Christmas tree lights sway wildly side to side. "Wind. Get down on your knees," the voice comes back. We then climb down onto the Ingraham Glacier. This is not a snowfield. This is ice.

I turn my headlamp up to my left. What I see is almost a sheer wall of ice. I turn my headlamp down to my right and it disappears into blackness. We walk on a "path," a track literally cut into the ice with an ice axe, a track only wide enough for me to stand with both feet together, if my ankles are touching.

"Rest step," the voice comes back.

Now I understand the importance of the rest step. Despite being in close to the best condition of my adult life, it is darned hard to breathe up here and the climb is steep. We move slowly, carefully, without mishap, but with a focused stillness, which contrasts sharply to the screaming storm.

I follow the floating headlamps, Georgo's relayed messages and the feel of Bob at the other end of the rope to 12,600 feet, where, after a brief pow-wow, our guides turn us

around. The mountain that makes its own weather will not relent. We'll have to leave the summit for another day.

Paul pulled me aside after the announcement to check that my disappointment was manageable. I was disappointed, of course, but I told him, "I pay you guys to think about my safety. I do what you tell me to do. No problem, really." Paul went on to explain quietly to me that the trip back down to Muir would require the same concentration. I noticed that he took each of the others aside as well.

It was 2:30 a.m. and still snowing. We turned around and inched back down, over three glaciers and two ridges. I don't know what time we got back to Camp Muir. I was beyond tired and slept soundly until awakened at 9:00 a.m. for the climb down.

The climb down from Muir was in 70° sunshine. (Who would have believed it possible a few short hours before?) The climb would have been easy but for the fatigue. The guides kept us in single file with plenty of needed rest stops.

At 5 p.m., when we reached Paradise Lodge, I wished I had booked in instead of planning a return to Seattle that night. I don't remember the drive except for one postcard-like picture that I pulled hastily off the road to take. The photo now hangs on my bedroom wall, a field framed with purple spike flowers with a young doe grazing in the middle, oblivious to me, the very blue sky above and the sunset bathed presence behind it of the "mountain that was God."

## **The Lessons**

I thought very little about leadership while on Rainier. But I had a long plane flight home and client work developing the leadership of senior executives immediately upon my return, so I reflected on my experience during that flight. I told this story to these leaders of a large international corporation that has fallen on hard times. These men and women have their own mountain to climb. I told them that I hoped what I had learned on Rainier would be helpful as they joined together in teams to plan the company's renewal.

Here is what I learned:

### **TEAM LEADERSHIP IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY**

Each member of my rope team was responsible for the life and success of each one of us and all of us. We learned to climb in all positions so that any one of us could lead if required.

So in business, leaders, followers, all members of the team, are responsible equally for the life and success of individual teammates, the team, and the entire organization.

### **FITNESS AND CONDITIONING ARE CRITICAL**

Just as the Rainier Mountaineering Guides weeded out those unfit for the summit attempt, so leaders in organizations must select the most fit and deselect or develop the unfit. Even so, each of us took responsibility for our own readiness, so also must team members in business.

### **THE TEAM LEADER EXCITES THE OTHER TEAM MEMBERS**

Georgo's bravado and easy confidence was infectious. Paul's "GET PSYCHED!" speech worked on Rainier. Business team leaders need more variety and subtlety of exhortation but the concept is the same. "Follow me!"

### **THE TEAM LEADER SHOWS PERSONAL INTEREST IN HIS TEAMMATES**

Paul's interest in my reactions made me much more receptive to his "we're not out of the woods yet" instruction. Business team leaders must also attend to the emotions of teammates. Emotions affect performance.

### **"EYES CONTINUALLY AHEAD, VOICE BACK"**

The leader of the team must carry the vision of the future and communicate it to all just like "Georgo's echoed voice."

### **CREATE TRUST**

Being on a forbidding mountain in the dark, blinded by blowing snow and ice, would have been intolerable but for TRUST.

- I trusted myself first - I had learned the skills I needed to know
- I trusted that the other members of my rope team had learned what they needed to know
- I trusted Rainier Mountaineering, its guides and instructors

So in business, team leaders must demonstrate that they know what they need to know. The leader must create opportunity for each team member to learn and demonstrate knowledge, skill, and judgement.

### **"FEEL THE ROPES"**

Holding the rope before and behind us helped us feel connected and supported. Often business team's connection and supports are less visible. The leader creates opportunities to "feel the ropes." These may be informal get-togethers, celebration, recognition of the team by those outside. The team members may have a nickname or wear pins that identify past successes. Or the leader may just take every opportunity to reinforce the group's mutually agreed upon goals. Successful team members are connected and supported and successful teams' leaders help them "feel the ropes."

Finally, what I learned is that the lessons of leadership are everywhere, especially within us.