

THE 1996 EVEREST TRAGEDY

Professor Khushwant Pittenger prepared this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In May 1996, two world renowned climbers, along with some of their clients and guides, perished on Mount Everest (Everest) in the mountain's deadliest tragedy to date. Were these deaths unfortunate mountaineering accidents, or did some poor decisions significantly contribute to the dangers leading to the deaths?

INTRODUCTION

According to Jon Krakauer, "attempting to climb Everest is an intrinsically irrational act — a triumph of desire over sensibility. Any person who would seriously consider it is almost by definition the sway of reasoned argument."¹ Yet, Krakauer was one of 150 climbers and their 300 Sherpa guides and porters who were in the process of climbing Mount Everest on the weekend of May 10, 1996, the deadliest in the mountain's history.² That season, a record number of 98 climbers had reached the summit, yet 15 climbers had died on the mountain, 11 during the weekend of May 10.³ The deaths might have been written off as a natural element of the sport and the increasing commercialization of the mountain, had it not involved two of the most experienced and famous climbers in the world and some of their clients of questionable abilities, who had paid approximately \$70,000 each to set foot on top of the world. Krakauer was one of the fortunate clients who lived to tell the story. Other survivors have published their accounts as well.⁴

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION AND THE MOUNTAIN WITHOUT MERCY

Rob Hall's expedition group, Adventure Consultants Guided Expedition (Adventure Consultants), had boasted in an American mountaineering journal 100 per cent success in reaching the Mount Everest

¹ Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, Anchor Books, New York, 1997, p. xvii.

² J. Adler and R. Nordland, "High Risk," *Newsweek, Society Section*, May 27, 1996, p. 50.

³ B. Coburn, *Everest: Mountain Without Mercy*, National Geographic Society, New York, 1997.

⁴ A. Boukreev, and G.W. DeWalt, *The Climb*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1997; D. Breashears, *High Exposure: An Enduring Passion for Everest and Unforgiving Places*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1999; B. Weathers, *Left for Dead: My Journey Home from Everest*, Villard Books, New York, 2000.

summit.⁵ Hall perhaps had reason to be boastful: he had climbed Mount Everest four times. In six years, he had guided 39 clients to the summit, more than the total number of people who had reached the summit in the 20 years following Sir Edmund Hillary's first climb in May 1953.⁶ On this particular weekend, the accomplished New Zealander, Rob Hall, was guiding a party of eight — his largest client team ever. He was, however, not the only famous climber with clients on the mountain. Scott Fischer of Seattle was the leader of Mountain Madness Guided Expedition (Mountain Madness). He also had eight clients, and his company was a direct competitor of Adventure Consultants Guided Expedition, Rob Hall's company. Actually, Hall had "stolen" Jon Krakauer from Fischer's expedition by offering *Outside* magazine, which sponsored Krakauer, a sweeter deal in exchange for publicity. In addition, 14 other expeditions from around the world, including a team sponsored by IMAX, were on the mountain in the spring 1996 with lofty ambition.⁷ No doubt, this was a remarkable story in the making.

Everest's summit is the highest in the world with a height of 29,028 feet. It is a place where the difference between life and death may be only one small step. One wrong step can plunge a climber to death either in Nepal or China. More than 150 climbers have died on their way up to the summit or on their way down from the summit.⁸ "Going to the summit is entirely optional but returning is mandatory."⁹ A significant number of climbers die on their return from the summit when they run out of energy, oxygen, thinking ability and daylight. It is a place where the most minor ailments turn deadly, people lose their desire to eat and the thinking level becomes that of a child. Minor wounds do not heal, a dry cough cracks ribs, exposure of limbs to the elements can instantly make them as fragile as glass and the body starts to eat into its own muscle to stay alive. It is a place where severe storms develop quickly and unpredictably and often rob climbers of their most precious resource — sight. On the average, only one in seven climbers actually reaches the summit, and yet approximately 700 people have reached the summit.¹⁰ One can only wonder why anyone would want to climb Mount Everest. The answer can be found in the British mountaineer George Mallory's classic 1928 response, "Because, it's there." George Mallory is speculated to have died on his way down from the summit.

Obviously, death on Mount Everest is neither unexpected nor unusual. Yet, the world was in shock when 11 climbers perished on the mountain during the weekend of May 10, 1996. Particularly newsworthy were the deaths of Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, two of the most experienced climbers in the world. Fischer had gained world-wide notoriety in 1994 for climbing Everest without supplemental oxygen and removing 5,000 pounds of trash from the mountain as part of the Sagarmatha Environmental Expedition.¹¹ The experience and the fame seemed to have made Fischer confident — perhaps overconfident. When asked about the risks, he was noted to tell a reporter shortly before the 1996 climb, "I believe 100 per cent I am coming back My wife believes 100 per cent I'm coming back."¹² Fischer cajoled Krakauer into joining his expedition to write an article for *Outside* magazine with statements like, "Hey, experience is overrated. It's not the altitude that is important, it's your attitude. You'll do fine These days, I'm telling you, we've built a yellow brick road to the summit."¹³ Fischer made these claims even though he had never guided a commercial expedition to the summit, he suffered from a chronic clinical illness related to gastrointestinal parasites and he had reached the summit only after three previous unsuccessful attempts. Fischer died on his return from the summit only 1,000 feet from the safety of Camp Four.

⁵J. Adler and R. Nordland, "High Risk," *Newsweek, Society Section*, May 27, 1996, p. 50.

⁶B. Coburn, *Everest: Mountain Without Mercy*, National Geographic Society, New York, 1997.

⁷Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, Anchor Books, New York, 1997.

⁸B. Coburn, *Everest: Mountain Without Mercy*, National Geographic Society, New York, 1997.

⁹B. Weathers, *Left for Dead: My Journey Home from Everest*, Villard Books, New York, 2000.

¹⁰B. Coburn, *Everest: Mountain Without Mercy*, National Geographic Society, New York, 1997.

¹¹Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, Anchor Books, New York, 1997.

¹²*Ibid*

¹³*Ibid*, p. 263.

Fischer's attitude seemed to match that of his rival commercial operator, Rob Hall, of Adventure Consultants. Hall failed to guide any of his clients to the summit in 1995, and his co-founder, Gary Ball, had died of altitude sickness in the Himalayas in 1993. Yet, Hall's company placed ads in American mountaineering magazines claiming "100 per cent Everest success."¹⁴ Rob Hall's cockiness could be attributed to his ability to successfully guide 39 climbers of various abilities to the top in the past and his ability to save all his clients' lives under the worst of circumstances in 1995. His extraordinary success in the past seemed to have led him to believe, "there was little he couldn't handle on the mountain."¹⁵ Yet, on May 10, 1996, Hall died on the mountain, along with two of his clients and one of his guides.

The Deadly Decisions

Were the deaths of Fischer, Hall and others just natural events due to unpredictable weather and bad luck, or did other human factors play a role? Ironically, it was Fischer who told a reporter before his 1996 expedition, ". . . I am going to make all the right choices. When accidents happen, I think it's always human error You come up with lots of reasons, but ultimately it's human error."¹⁶ One accomplished guide put it rather bluntly: "The events of May 10 were not an accident, nor an act of God. They were the end result of people who were making decisions about how and whether to proceed."¹⁷ Coburn concluded, "lives were lost as a result of compounding factors."¹⁸ However, even he pre-qualified his statement, "But if one or two decisions, out of many hadn't been made . . . the outcome may have been very different."¹⁹ Can we learn anything from this extreme case for climbing our own mountains in the workplace and guiding/leading others to the desired peaks of performance?

Everest is considered the toughest mountain to climb because the altitude makes even simple mountaineering exceptionally difficult. It took 101 years since its discovery before Hillary and Tenzing successfully reached the summit and returned alive to tell the story in May 1953. However, Mount Everest's popularity has been steadily increasing. With its popularity has come its commercialization. In 1996, 16 expeditions paid \$70,000 a team plus an additional \$10,000 a member if the expedition had more than seven members. Another 14 expeditions paid \$15,000 a team to China to climb the mountain from the Tibetan side. There were five Web sites posting daily dispatches from the base camp including NOVA's Web site which received as many as 10,000 visits a day following the news of disaster on the mountain. A number of reporters were part of these expeditions to write stories for their respective publishers, including Jon Krakauer who was to write about the commercialization of the mountain for *Outside* magazine. The IMAX team spent \$5.5 million dollars to film the climb of Everest. Guided climbs to the summit became a subject of controversy world-wide. There were commercial expedition leaders who themselves had never climbed Everest. Krakauer quotes Rob Hall, "With so many incompetent people on the mountain, I think it is pretty unlikely that we will get through the season without something bad happening up high."²⁰ Obviously, Hall was not thinking of anything bad happening to him or his clients.

Hall had the reputation of being a very methodical, organized and caring person. He was known to pay close attention to all the details, including the health and well-being of team members and their equipment. He paid his staff well and even had a paid doctor on staff. He was the epitome of an efficient operator, and

¹⁴J. Adler, and R. Nordland, "High Risk," *Newsweek, Society Section*, May 27, 1996, p. 50.

¹⁵Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, Anchor Books, New York 1997, p. 84.

¹⁶*Ibid*, p. 84.

¹⁷B. Coburn, *Everest: Mountain Without Mercy*, National Geographic Society, New York, 1997, p 192.

¹⁸*Ibid*, p. 193.

¹⁹*Ibid*, p. 193.

²⁰Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, Anchor Books, New York 1997, p. 182.

his clients felt they were with the best commercial guide on the mountain. No wonder he had little trouble finding clients for the last seven years, even if he charged \$65,000 a person. He was well-respected by his guides, clients, Sherpas and even other teams. He mediated labor disputes, co-ordinated equipment sharing responsibilities among expeditions and even tried to establish agreements on summit climbing dates to avoid crowding on the treacherous route at the top. He used the traditional five-week acclimatization process to get his clients accustomed to the thin air of the mountain, as the Everest summit has only one-third the oxygen of air at sea level. If climbers were dropped off on the summit from sea level, they would die within minutes from altitude-related illnesses. Like most other guides, Hall gathered his team in Nepal in March and took them to the base camp, at a height of 17,600 feet, in the beginning of April. From there, over a period of a month, the teams made grueling climbs back and forth to a series of four camps established higher up on the mountain at different heights in order to steadily acclimate their bodies to increasingly low levels of oxygen. Unlike many other commercial guides, Hall personally escorted his entire team up and down those climbs. He was always there when any of his clients suffered altitude illnesses or injuries related to mountaineering. His tactics might have been efficient, but they created and reinforced the clients' dependence on him.

Scott Fischer had a different strategy for his team. He had given his clients free rein in going up and down the mountain for acclimatization. His main guide, who was from Russia, had a different philosophy about client service. He did not share Fischer's western perspective of meeting all the needs of his clients. One of Fischer's clients said, "I doubted that I'll be able to count on him when it really mattered."²¹ The Russian guide believed in the survival of the fittest, and many of these clients were not fit for such a demanding environment. Many of Hall's and Fischer's clients were well-to-do professionals with busy careers who had little time for real mountaineering on a regular basis. They used gym equipment to get ready for the climb. This is not to say they did not have any previous mountain climbing experience. Actually, their previous mountain successes might have given them a dangerous sense of confidence. Fischer personally had to do a lot of hurried and unscheduled running back and forth between the camps to help his clients in trouble. His team doctor was inexperienced and was there only on a voluntary basis. His most experienced Sherpa, who had climbed Everest three times previously without bottled oxygen, was poorly acclimatized for the summit this year and probably would not be there to support Fischer during the acclimatization of the team. Almost the entire month of April, the Sherpa was busy with the rescue of another Sherpa on the Mountain Madness team who had to be brought down to the base camp and later evacuated to Kathmandu before he died in late April. Fischer, an energetic and charismatic person by nature, was described to be "extremely wasted" during his ascent to the summit.

Mountain Madness, Scott Fischer's company, had been a fiscally marginal enterprise since its launch in 1984. In 1995, Fischer's income was \$12,000. His family had been supported mostly by his wife's income as a pilot for Alaskan Airlines. During the past year, however, she had been involved in a sexual harassment law suit with her employer. This was Fischer's chance to enter the Everest market and emulate Rob Hall. The competition between Fischer's Mountain Madness and Hall's Adventure Consultants for the high end of the market was obvious. Hall had failed to take any clients to the summit in 1995. If he failed again this year, Fischer was likely to become a formidable threat. He already had the strategic advantage of being based in the United States as more than 80 per cent of clients came from the United States. The need for market advantage was the reason Rob Hall had significantly undercut Fischer in his negotiations with *Outside* magazine to get Jon Krakauer on his team. He bartered for magazine space, in exchange for \$55,000. Scott Fischer's cash-strapped enterprise probably was unable to match the deal. Fischer, however, did manage to have Sandy Pittman, a New York socialite and freelance reporter for multiple national papers magazines and television networks, on his team.

²¹*Ibid*, p. 193.

The Pressure to Perform

The presence of reporters among the teams was a double-edged sword. They provided visibility and notoriety world-wide through their reporting, much of which was posted on the Internet on a daily basis. Their presence also, however, created pressure for performance among the team members and leaders. One of the clients on Rob Hall's team, Beck Weathers, commented on the presence of reporters among the teams, "I was concerned that it might drive people further than they wanted to go. And it might even for the guides . . . they want to get people on top of the mountain because . . . they're going to be written about, and they're going to be judged."²² This thinking bears credence in light of Scott Fischer's comments, "If I can get Sandy to the summit, I'll bet she'll be on TV talk shows. Do you think she will include me in her fame and fanfare?"²³ The pressure to push beyond the limits was not all external. After investing a significant amount of money and an inordinate amount of time and effort in the ordeal, few would have had the courage to turn their back on the summit less than two vertical miles and a few days away. Jon Krakauer reported, "Doug was hell bent on joining the summit push even though . . . his strength seemed to be at a low ebb. 'I have put too much of myself into this mountain to quit now, without giving it everything I've got.'"²⁴ Doug Hansen was a 46-year-old postal worker from Seattle who had paid for this trip by working the night shift and doing construction work during the day. This was his second attempt to reach the summit with Rob Hall. In 1995, he had been turned around by Hall only 300 feet away from the summit because of their late arrival at the peak. Hansen died on his way down from the summit on May 10, 1996.

Hansen's sentiments were shared by others regardless of their physical condition. Beck Weathers, a pathologist from Dallas, insisted on attempting the summit on May 8 and 9, even though he was suffering from near blindness because of the impact of altitude on his vision correction eye surgery and his feet had been badly wounded by his brand new boots. He survived miraculously after he had been left for dead on the mountain and his family had been notified of his demise.

The expedition leaders were not blind to these dangers; they were very cognizant of them. Hall had expressed concerns about his clients' inability to turn around on their own by impressing upon them how important it was for them to unconditionally obey him and his guides on the mountain during their final push to the summit. On their ascent on May 6, Hall had drawn their attention to another climber whom they encountered on his way down. The climber had turned around at 2 p.m. only 300 feet and an hour away from the summit. Hall said, "To turn around *that* close to the summit . . . *that* showed incredibly good judgment . . . I am impressed — considerably more impressed, actually, than if he'd continued climbing and made the top."²⁵ In the month of April, Hall repeatedly underscored the importance of having a predetermined turnaround time, either 1 p.m. or 2 p.m., and abiding by it no matter how close people were to the top. Unfortunately, he did not establish a specific time on the day they reached the summit and did not himself abide by the generally understood principle of turning around no later than 2 p.m.

Who is the leader of the team?

The need for clear instructions and leadership was critical for these teams. In comparison to traditional mountain climbing teams, these teams were large and consisted of strangers with a wide range of abilities

²²*Ibid*, pp. 177-178.

²³*Ibid*, p. 221.

²⁴*Ibid*, p. 191.

²⁵*Ibid*, p. 190.

and experiences. This created a worrisome situation because the actions of a single member — bad knots, improper hooking-up or a fall — can jeopardize the safety of the entire team. No wonder Jon Krakauer “hoped fervently that Hall had been careful to weed out clients of dubious ability.” He was not reassured by the actions of his teammates who brought unbroken, new boots or were seen not knowing how to hook the crampons on their boots for climbing the glacier. Under such circumstances, no wonder Hall and Fischer felt the need to establish their authority over their team members, including the guides, as unquestionable. Immediately prior to the departure for the summit from the base camp, Hall was reported to say, “I will tolerate no dissension up there My word will be absolute law beyond appeal.”²⁶ The clients were obedient because dependence upon leaders, guides, Sherpas and passivity had been encouraged from the beginning.²⁷ Even the guides knew their place in the pecking order. One guide in Fischer’s team later reported, “I was definitely considered the third guide So I didn’t always speak up.”²⁸ There were pay differences. Senior guides were paid twice as much as the junior guides. In addition, they were the only ones with radios for two-way communication on the day of summit — an error that is considered to have contributed to the tragedy.

For the summit push, Hall had instructed the team to “climb in close proximity . . . within a hundred metres of each other.” The result was that on May 10, the team performed at the level of the slowest member of the team on the final summit day when they were to climb from Camp Four to the summit and return in a grueling race against time and elements. The stronger members of the team had to stop and wait periodically for the slower members to catch up for periods that added up to more than four hours just on their way up. In addition, these waits created crowding on narrow, treacherous pathways and bottlenecks, which added at least another four hours of delays for the stronger members. The result was that no one reached the summit before 1 p.m. on May 10. In the absence of a clear directive from Fischer or Hall about when to turn around, the members kept ascending. Only six members from the two teams (three guides and three clients from the two teams) reached the top by 2 p.m. Doug Hansen and Rob Hall were the last ones to arrive at 4 p.m. — fully two hours behind the generally understood turnaround time of 2 p.m. Not every member of the team, however, succumbed to the temptation. Four members of Hall’s team did turn around when they were caught in a bottleneck and realized they would not reach the top by 1 or even 2 p.m. Hall seemed disappointed in their decision, perhaps because Fischer’s clients were continuing to push forward at that time and the weather still looked good.

Communication in Times of Crisis

The weather turned deadly very quickly in the evening during the teams’ descent on May 10. The availability of only two radios on each team made communication scarce, chaotic and unreliable, right when precise communication and leadership mattered most to the members who were socialized to be passive and dependent. The 3,000-foot climb (less than one vertical mile) to the summit from Camp Four is a 16- to 18-hour race under the best of circumstances. These were not the best of circumstances. Even the strongest members had taken 14 hours on their way up because of wasted time waiting for the slower members and the bottlenecks. Most of the climbers on the two teams, as a result, were running out of canned oxygen. During their acclimatization, many were seen using oxygen at altitudes lower than where it is considered essential. Almost no one was coping well with wind chill factors near 100 degrees below zero, whiteout conditions, little canned oxygen to support their bodies or brains, and no leaders for moral support or physical guidance. Only two clients, Krakauer and Adams, barely managed to make it down to Camp Four before the conditions became utterly hopeless. Twenty-seven individuals were lost on the

²⁶*Ibid*, p. 216.

²⁷*Ibid*.

²⁸*Ibid*, p. 260.

mountain that night.²⁹ The climbers were disoriented and suffering from hallucinations and exhaustion. Some of them huddled only 200 feet away from Camp Four for hours waiting to be rescued. Through combined heroic acts of some Sherpas, guides and the clients in Camp Four, most of them eventually were brought down to the sparse safety of Camp Four. Scott Fischer and Rob Hall were not among them. They were caught in the storm too high up, and were beyond help. Scott Fischer's poor physical health and possible illness had slowed down his decent to a crawl. His image of invincibility led others to ignore his condition. They focused their energies on saving themselves or the other "weaker" climbers. Doug Hansen had used all he had to reach the summit. Rob Hall took 10 hours to negotiate a descent with Hansen that others would negotiate in a half-hour. Even when his friends at the lower levels urged him to save himself, Hall refused to abandon Hansen. Some have suggested that Hall was in an impossible situation. Leaving a live client on the mountain certain to die in order to save himself would have ruined his credibility as a guide. At the same time, staying with the client under deadly conditions was certainly going to kill him.³⁰ Also, Hansen told teammates Hall had called him a dozen times urging him to give the summit a second chance and offering him a reduced rate to come back. Neither Hansen nor Hall made it down. By the time the storm cleared, 11 climbers had died, and one died later from his injuries. Of the dead, four were from Adventure Consultants and three from Mountain Madness.

²⁹G. Rummier, "Everest Strikes Back", *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Lifestyle Section*, Sunday, June 23, 1996, p. 1.

³⁰B. Coburn, *Everest: Mountain Without Mercy*, National Geographic Society, New York, 1997.