

LEADERSHIP

Warren Bennis

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Eileen McDargh
Leadership Coach



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Lessons for Leaders

From the highest mountains.



by Eileen McDargh

WHEN I JOINED AN expedition through two remote provinces of the Indian Himalayas, I was constantly overtaken by ah-hah moments that held lessons for leaders.

Here are six principles:

1. Watch for patterns—different trees grow at different elevations. The apple trees of the Kullu Valley could not survive at Rohtang Pass. Nature allows for adaptation, to a point. As leaders, we must know where we belong, what adaptations we can make, and how to help people find the best match for their growth and abilities.

As the journey became more difficult, our wise guide Ankit Sood voiced his concern in a way that enabled us to gracefully examine our skill levels. Four of our party self-selected to not continue. That showed wisdom and courage, as they might have hurt themselves and the rest of the group. Ankit paved the way for that decision yet was prepared to take them to a lower elevation had they insisted on continuing.

A leader gives followers a chance to evaluate their own performance but is also prepared to transfer or terminate an employee who is not doing the job at hand, damaging the morale and performance of a team.

2. Expect the unexpected and deal with it. Change is one thing. The unexpected adversity or opportunity is something else. Great leaders live in the present moment and make decisions based upon what is before them. As we climbed higher into Spiti, the remote Himalayan cold semi-desert region, Ankit learned that the Dali Lama would be teaching at a monastery in the village of Nako. To venture there meant changing plans on a dime, completing bureaucratic paperwork, and going through time-consuming checkpoints. However the chance to see a world leader in a special setting was an opportunity not to be missed.

In business, had 3M ignored an engineer's idea that a less-than-sticky glue could be useful, the world would

never have known Post-It-Notes. Had Larry Page and Sergey Brin ignored the unexpected response to their simple search engine methodology, the word Google would not have become a common word in our vocabulary.

3. The more critical the effort, the more teamwork is required. The rivers of the western Himalayas cascade from melting glaciers. At night, when the glaciers freeze, water level is reduced. The timing of a crossing is critical, as water rises along with the sun. Rocks and debris swirl into tumultuous rapids. Crossing alone can be suicidal. We created a human chain, grasping each other by wrists (not hands) and alternated smaller team members with larger ones. We succeeded, cold and battered, but safe.



How often do we encounter the leaders who insist on "going it alone" in a critical situation? To ask for help is perceived as a weakness. Yet, the strength of collective brains and brawn can produce a better result. There is strength in numbers and in knowing how to optimize the strengths of team members.

4. Action is the antidote for anxiety. We made it in time to cross the dangerous river that had claimed six lives. But other members of our expedition crew were not so lucky. Their pace had been slowed by rounding up pack horses. In horror, we watched these men try three times to cross, spinning against rapids and almost drowning. They had to stay on the rocks and wait until morning.

I could see the anxiety in the eyes of our leader. While we hiked ahead to make camp, he devised a plan. With another team member, he filled a water-proof barrel with food, warmer clothes, and a small tent. He hurled a

rope to the stranded crew, and together they created a pulley system for retrieving the barrel. While everyone was still concerned, taking action provided some comfort.

Hand-wringing accomplishes nothing. Action gives a level of control over what might seem uncontrollable. A leader helps people take that action.

5. Everyone deserves to be welcomed home. When the stranded crew appeared at day break, we cheered, sang and welcomed them "home". Their faces glowed with a sense that we weren't just customers to serve, managers to follow, but individuals who cared for their well-being. They redoubled their efforts to work for us.

We all want to be welcomed and cheered. Whether in the remote regions of India or in company meeting rooms, people deserve to feel that someone has seen their effort, hard work, and long hours. The degree of engagement and retention would increase exponentially if leaders welcomed people "home".

6. Gratitude transcends latitudes. Regardless of nationality or geography, people respond to expressions of gratitude. And the more personal the expression, the deeper the connection.

While it is customary to pool money and give a bonus to the crew, our expedition wanted to extend a more intimate thank-you. After all, these men had put our well-being ahead of their own. They paid attention to our personal needs, even found a way to bake a cake at 15,000 feet when they discovered that two of us had birthdays.

Our solution was to gift them with personal items we knew they could use, including my new boots, thermal jacket, ski hat, and my husband's favorite parka. Our party left gloves, socks, medicines, thermals, and bags of trail mix and jerky. And we gave money to have everything cleaned and restored.

When gratitude comes from the heart, is personal, unexpected, and out-of-the-ordinary, amazing linkages are created. The gifts showed that we had observed their life and their needs. Spontaneous appreciation that recognizes the uniqueness of an individual beats standard reward programs.

My expedition partners and I will continue our relationships. In effect, we have created a new company through collaboration, cooperation, and consideration. That's a final lesson. LE

Eileen McDargh is ranked among LE's top 100 thought leaders. She is the author of, *Gifts from the Mountain and Talk Ain't Cheap—It's Priceless*. Visit www.eileenmcdargh.com.

ACTION: Learn lessons from your expeditions.