



→ Leadership: **SUCCEED WITH MUTUAL RELIABILITY**

Executive endeavors

The foundations of high performance – esteem and trust – are not easily earned in modern enterprises. To guide employees successfully through challenging business landscapes, managers need the traits of a mountain guide.

By Rhea Wessel

Managing people gets more and more complex. Globalization, demographic development and changing awareness of values often make peaks for executives to climb. Indeed, managers and mountain guides, despite their differences, share a variety of traits – and thus can learn much from each other.

One thrives in nature and the other in the enterprise, but both must be motivating team builders and carry responsibility for group endeavors. And both mountain guides and managers must be good judges of risk and rely on logic and intuition to make decisions that endure critical situations.

Walter Laserer, a world-class mountain guide and the first Austrian to climb the seven highest peaks in the world, and Gerth Vogel, a Swiss consultant to top companies, investigated the traits that make mountaineers and managers successful.

In their book, “Am Berg kannst du dich nicht verstecken. Was Führung ausmacht” (“You Can’t Hide on the Mountain: The Secrets of Great Leadership”), the authors illustrate what the two groups can learn from each other. They show the similarities between leading a team up Everest and running a successful business. But in the end they can only help you to find your own way. PURE magazine spoke to the two authors.

PURE: How did you get the idea that managers and mountain guides share leadership traits?

Vogel: Walter and I met in Switzerland after his return from Everest. We struck up a conversation about how to succeed in business and how to bring a group of climbers safely to the summit without taking too much risk. Walter talked about the mountains, and I talked about companies, and we were both very fascinated about how similar the two are.

We use a profiling tool at my consulting company, ProfileXT from Profiles International, that rates leadership skills on a scale, and I asked Walter to take the test. From his profile, I would have thought Walter was a CEO! Then we wanted to make sure the similarity between successful managers and top mountaineers was not just coincidental in Walter’s case. And we tested 40 international guides and compared the results with those from 100 company managers. We

defined a “successful” company manager as a person who leads an organization that is more than 40 years old and is among the top five in the business. In addition, the executive must have been in the leadership position for more than seven years.

PURE: What were the results of the comparison?

Laserer: Gerth’s tools measure things like written and oral abilities, as well as quantitative skills. We found that mountain guides and top managers learn quickly, manage their energy well and have the ability to make strong decisions based on the evidence at hand. For instance, mountaineers can find the best way from a map; managers can see the appropriate strategy from the numbers. As a result of our research, we found that seven traits were as important on the mountain as on the executive floor. Besides learning, energy and decisiveness, we found leaders showed the

valuable ability to be self-assertive, independent, empathetic and entrepreneurial.

PURE: Can you give us some examples of these leadership traits in action on the mountain?

Laserer: On Aconcagua, the highest mountain in South America, I was leading a group of eight climbers. We got to where our base camp was to be and discovered that a storm had damaged the tent, and our mules with all our supplies had not arrived. We had a totally unexpected situation. The group began a discussion that became destructive, and I sensed that I had to turn the situation around with strong leadership. We would have to spend the night on the mountain without supplies. For CEOs, the main parallel is dealing with new information from a new perspective and motivating managers who don’t want to follow their instructions. Our group members were tired. I sized up the situation and

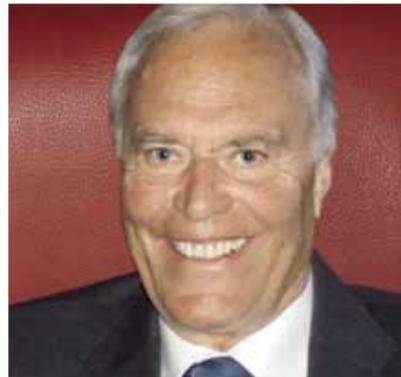
Photo: laif/Modrow



Walter Laserer

Profile

Walter Laserer is a world-class mountain guide and the first Austrian who successfully climbed the seven summits, and he is the first mountain guide ever to take visitors up there - and back again to the safety of base camp.



Gerth Vogel

Profile

For more than 25 years Gerth's passion has been business consulting. He has founded his own center of corporate development (www.zfu-vs.com). Among other commitments he is president of the board at Profiles International.

considered the appropriate language that was needed to pull them together. I explained our alternatives and the concrete steps that needed to be taken to help us get through the night as comfortably as possible. People suddenly began to keep their doubts to themselves and cooperate. Our supplies finally arrived and we made it to the top without further complications. Like in business, we orchestrated a project turnaround through clear communication, understanding and strong leadership.

PURE: Have you experienced a parallel situation at a company?

Vogel: I worked with managers at a pharmaceutical company in Munich who had to learn to look at information in a new way and gain insights about the path forward. The client was a market leader that had not implemented enough risk controls for its production processes. We went through the various scenarios about what could go wrong when producing a key product that was sourced almost entirely from a single location – Ukraine. We examined all the options, and the company decided to secure a supply of raw materials from other regions in the world. The CEO had insisted that procurement go through the exercise of examining supplies from other regions. Those in procurement thought we had finally gone crazy for sure. They had tried to talk him out of it, but the CEO, who has a strong intuition for business and risk, stayed firm. As it turns out, that move was made just in time since one year later the Chernobyl nuclear disaster happened.

Without looking at the information in a new light, the company might have been ruined by the sudden halt in supply. Although the situation seemed hardly plausible, the risk was too great for it to go unconsidered. Like the group of climbers on the mountain, the ability of the company to survive is far more important than the minor effort and cost of creating a plan B.

PURE: Any other parallels?

Vogel: Both managers and mountain guides must project a sense of control over the situation at hand so that the team knows it can rely on the leader. This goes for both the leaders of salespeople and of amateur climbers, whose lives depend on the guide.

PURE: How are the traits energy and motivation important?

Laserer: Leading mountain climbs takes the utmost, detailed planning and requires both physical and mental endurance. Climbers push themselves to their physical limits. On Kilimanjaro, I was reminded that the leader always under pressure to reach a certain goal cannot let his energy wane. Clients had paid to summit the mountain and view its craters. At the top, we were all very cold and tired, and our local guides were trying to dissuade us. It was my job to motivate the group to summon their last bit of strength to achieve our aim.

PURE: What about the differences between the boardroom and the great outdoors?

Laserer: On the mountain, your physical condition is of utmost importance.



Group success depends on leaders who can motivate people to summon all their strength.



Pennants and messages: Climbers who have made it to the summit leave their marks.

At the same time, you can be held hostage by the weather. But the main difference is probably that managers don't often face life-and-death situations when they're sitting in their air-conditioned offices. They can run into a wall, but a wrong decision won't mean a life-and-death situation.

Vogel: Our research backs this up: Mountain guides have higher levels of independence than managers. But where they really diverge is on decision-making styles. Both mountaineers and managers rely on logic and intuition, but mountain guides more often use their intuitive abilities. It makes sense. If an avalanche happens, it's too late. A mountain guide must have

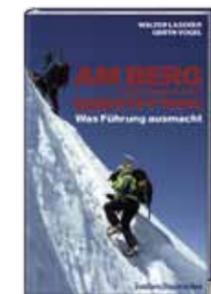
a strong feeling for risk that is based on intuition. Business leaders, too, have strong intuitive abilities, but they are usually trained to use their logic and reasoning to back up a decision. I believe that the best managers also rely heavily on their intuition.

PURE: In closing, do you have any advice or best practices to share with executives?

Vogel: A leadership best practice I believe in is quite simple: ignore best practices! True leadership is understanding the type of leader you are. If people try to lead by using best practices, we see that they continue to fail. A leadership style must always fit one's own personality. <



Responsible leaders get the group to the top successfully, and safely back to base camp.



In their book you can join Walter and Gerth in climbing the seven summits of leadership: Aligning management and mountaineering, they take you along with learning, energy, empathy, decision making, assertion, independence and entrepreneurial spirit.

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by Walter Laserer and Gerth Vogel

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