

## **Ethics and Leadership: Critical Dilemmas from Mount Everest**

An endeavour to climb Mount Everest is like any major business venture. Both require elements of enterprise, risk-taking, leadership, supply-chain management, strategies, labour management and courage. However, the issue of ethics in extreme situations on Everest not only determines success or failure, but also if people will live or die.

**In an interactive seminar**, participants are invited to discuss and share their beliefs in the many dilemmas that affect business and expedition leaders – of individual vs. team goals, group vs. self-leadership, values and processes vs. ambition and objectives.

### **Five case studies will be explored:**

The tragic 1996 Everest expeditions where eight climbers lost their lives,  
The 1<sup>st</sup> Singapore Mt Everest Expedition in 1998,  
and expeditions on the Tibet side of Everest in 1999 -2006.



The North Face of Everest - Tibet



The South Ridge/Col route - Nepal

We distinguish **specific sporting ethics** of mountaineering, such as whether the use of oxygen should be allowed; from **moral dilemmas** and general elements of humanity for this seminar.

In discussing the moral dilemma, the following scenarios are worth considering:

### **a) What is the benefit of risking life and limb for another human life?**

For those less altruistic, helping another could be motivated by the sense that such help could be reciprocated in the near or distant future. For more idealistic, it could be something within humanity that demands, compels us to assist another for no financial gain. Perhaps it is also a sense of the ‘common good’ that should prevail. In some faiths, like Buddhism, a keen sense of building good karma may prevail, with an overriding sense that good deeds are an essential part in progressing in the afterlife. To what extent is the interest and commitment to help others based on a selfish need for self-actualisation or the ‘feel good’ factor, and how much of it is done purely altruistically? We discuss this intensely personal issue.

**b) Should our propensity to help be based on our relationship to that person?**

On Everest, there have been a number of scenarios where people's propensity to help others varied depending on the degree of closeness or kinship with the party requiring help. If the imperative to help based on our innate humanity disregards the relationship factor, then our propensity to help should remain a constant. However, on mountains like Everest, this is rarely the case. On Everest, as events in Spring 2006 showed, the 'bystander effect' has a serious impact on producing helpful outcomes in a critical situation, where group paralysis and apathy showed that a lack of leadership and team cohesion led to some lethal situations developing

**c) What application to business should such imperatives have?**

In deciding on what should guide one's decisions in business, a certain compass might be needed. This could be based on religious constructs if one is of a faith; or on separate secular constructs which could be based on a number of elements. The lessons from Everest expeditions suggest that *in extremis*, the normal bonds of mutual help and cooperation and quickly evaporate. In addition, ethics become more flexible and dependent on degrees of separation between one party and another. Group apathy (the 'bystander effect') can also affect corporates in that each person refuses to accept responsibility for a situation. A pre-agreed set of team behaviours, tested in actual crises can be, though not universally, applied to produce ethically acceptable outcomes. Critically, a want of effective leadership appears to be a main contributing factor in Everest and other mountain disasters. Leadership coloured by self-interest, will cloud judgment. A lack of leadership also accounts for a lack of team cohesion (see the 2001 case study as an example of the opposite).

**Summary:** Ethical dilemmas present themselves when there is conflict of interest – from 'doing the right thing' to great personal gain, and people will respond similarly whether they are in the boardroom or on Everest. Having a clear set of personal boundaries which flex only as far as it is appropriate to do so may be a practical starting point to making clear-headed decisions. Further, effective leadership is also a critical contributing factor in preventing moral hazards from arising, as well as helping to resolve sticky issues when they do actually arise.

**About the seminar speaker/facilitator:**

**David Lim**, is best known for leading the 1st Singapore Mt Everest Expedition in 1998 which succeeded in placing two members on the summit. The climb captured the imagination of the entire country and helped reset the parameters of what could be achieved by the small, flat, tropical island nation. David is the author of "**Mountain to Climb**" and "**Against Giants**". The books describes the challenges of the 1998 expedition as well as his subsequent life-and-death struggle with Guillain-Barre

Syndrome, a serious nerve disorder which hospitalised him for six months in 1998 after the Everest climb. David spent six months inside a hospital totally paralysed. He is now partially disabled from that disorder but continues to climb and organise climbing expeditions around the world.

His years of climbing have included over 55 alpine and Himalayan routes. These include ascents of technical routes on Mt Blanc and Mt Cook; Dhaulagiri VII and Cho Oyu. Since his disability, his return to the mountains include first ascents in the Tien Shan range in Kazakhstan, Aconcagua ( Polish Traverse ) and a return to the highest peaks in the world including Everest.

David was educated in Singapore and Britain; graduating in 1987 with a law degree from Magdalene College, Cambridge University. He worked in London for a number of organisations before returning to Singapore in 1991. In the corporate world, David spent nearly a decade in the media industry with positions in marketing, journalism management and multimedia.

David is owner of Everest Motivation Team Pte Ltd ( [www.everestmotivation.com](http://www.everestmotivation.com) ), a speaking and training business; dedicated in maximising organisations' and individuals' capabilities. The company has delivered leadership, teambuilding and motivational programmes in 40 cities and 20 countries world-wide.