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The Interview The Longest Climb

By KEVIN VOIGT
August 31, 2007

Many executives climb high through hard work, determination and a passion to improve. Some also play hard -- thrill-seekers who delight in the physical and mental exertion of, say, scaling peaks and sheer cliffs.



David Lim atop Temasek Peak in Kazakhstan

For David Lim, work and play are one and the same. The 43-year-old Kuala Lumpur native climbs the highest mountains in the world, while using techniques he learns on his adventures in coaching and team-building seminars for executives and employees of companies such as Hewlett-Packard Co., Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu and Accenture. "The one feeds the other," says Mr. Lim, a former business development manager for Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. who started his own company, Everest Motivation Team, in 1999.

"I'm on the road 90 days a year doing speeches and seminars, like a team-building program I ran in Lapland (in Finland) last March for Amadeus, a software service provider." For another month each year, Mr. Lim goes on his own adventures, the most recent of which was earlier this month when he and Shani Tan, one of his frequent traveling companions, spent six days hiking 175 kilometers across the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia, the world's largest salt flats.

Mr. Lim led Singapore's first team to scale Mount Everest in 1998. But his most difficult journey happened later that year when he was diagnosed with Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a rare malady that left him completely paralyzed -- even unable to speak -- for six months. Mr. Lim's leg is still paralyzed below the right knee, but he continues to take on mountains -- in 2005 he became the third person to climb solo to the summit of Ojos del Salado, the world's highest volcano at about 6,900 meters, on the Argentina-Chile border. The author of two books, "Mountain to Climb" and "Against Giants," Mr. Lim lives in Singapore with his wife, Maureen, and their two dogs and five cats.

For a guy who grew up in the tropics, why are you so fascinated with cold and high places?

I'm always interested in things that are different from my own experience, to find and discover new limits. You have to make mistakes to test yourself and learn how to succeed. That's true in mountaineering and in business.

When and why did you decide to start climbing mountains?



David Lim crossing Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni

I got started pretty late: I was 25 years old. About a year before, I chanced upon the book "The Shining Mountain" by Peter Boardman. Written in a brutally honest style, it's about how difficult climbing was, and it just really grabbed me. So I started reading everything I could about climbing, and training in a gym. My first climbing experience was doing a course for five weeks, working one-on-one with a climber in the French Alps.

Which climb gave you the most satisfaction?

Two climbs come to mind: Aconcagua (in Argentina) in 2000, which is the highest mountain in North or South America. That was my comeback climb, the first since



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I was paralyzed, so it was very emotional when we (Mr. Lim and fellow climber Tok Beng Cheong) got to the top: just two guys, standing alone, and one of us has a leg that doesn't work.

From strictly a mountaineering standpoint, the solo climb of the world's highest volcano was satisfying. But every mountain has a story, and even failures can be successes. In 1996 a friend and I climbed Mount Dixon, which is a moderately difficult mountain in New Zealand. We decided to retreat off the mountain because we couldn't find our route and were losing light, so we climbed down a totally different section, which turned out to be a real challenge. We had to pull every trick out of the bag. We didn't get to the top, but we learned a lot on the climb.

You've climbed some of the world's highest mountains, but you recently trekked across Bolivia's salt flats. Why?

In 17 years of mountaineering, this is the first time I tackled something that was not mountain-related, so it creates new challenges and planning. The flats are incredibly remote, rimmed by mountains, with no living thing. To do the crossing by foot would be interesting: How do we carry things? How do we deal with the wide range in temperature -- 15 degrees Celsius in the day, minus 15 degrees at night. With the white surface of the salt, you're being microwaved by the sun from top to bottom.

We had all kinds of problems. We nearly had to abandon the trip from the start, because the two custom-designed carts we had made got held up in shipping...so we found a hole-in-the-wall place to build a couple of wobbly carts for us. The two-wheeled trolleys fully loaded weighed about 80 to 90 kilograms each and we carried them with a belt harness—they often got stuck, so you kind of had to push and pull them at the same time.

We had navigational problems. Our visual cues from our maps and our (global positioning system) readings weren't matching up. So we trusted the maps.

But we nearly had to abandon the trip on the next-to-last day. After four days, I strained my right knee. We were going far too slowly, and thought about calling our logistics support by satellite phone to come and get us. But that's when my motivational work started kicking in. Do we look at problems, or look at solutions? We were so close to succeeding -- only one more day: What options do we have to finish? So we lashed the two trolleys together, which (Dr. Tan) pushed, and I carried what I could, pumped up on painkillers, and finished. Couldn't have finished without her.

When you became paralyzed, did you despair you'd never climb again?

Yes. There was a chance I would never walk again, let alone climb. But as the months progressed, I started to be able to do some walking. The closer I got to walking, the more I knew I would progress toward climbing again. A lot of people see it as a hobby, but mountaineering is a lifestyle for me. You plan for it, you dream about it, you build friends around it. If you lose your lifestyle, you'd do anything to fight for that lifestyle back.

I still don't have the ability to lift my right foot, so I have a variety of braces I use. My left hand's strength is down 50%.

Who inspires you?

Jamie Andrew (a Scottish mountain climber who had his hands and feet amputated after a climbing accident that gave him frostbite in 1999). He was part of a team I put together of four disabled climbers who climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in 2004. I met him in Glasgow (in Scotland) when I was doing a motivational presentation there. He is an iron man -- a quadriplegic who still climbs. You can't get near this guy without feeling like you're with someone special.

How did you decide to go into motivational speaking?

It started out just being asked to give talks in the community about my experiences. But after my recovery from my illness, groups and businesses started asking me to speak at conventions and so forth. To be a good speaker on stage is one thing -- it's about technique and stagecraft. But in professional speaking the client is also looking for a particular outcome. You have to manage expectations, because there's only so much you can achieve in a short period. You have to have powerful illustrations...and sticky stories -- stories that stick in the minds of the listener.

Most of my professional speaking falls in one of two categories: reinforcing things that the company should already be doing, or a new shift in thinking. An example of a "reinforcing idea" would be if the client is looking for employees to be more engaged in work. In the context of mountain climbing, all team members have to be engaged in the process months before the climb -- testing equipment, suggesting routes, collectively deciding on rules to obey on the mountain. If everyone isn't on the same page before the climb, we won't be when we're on the mountain, which can be disastrous. The same applies to reaching business goals.

A speech on a new "shift in thinking" would be ambitious goal-setting. Goals have to seem slightly unachievable to make sure you're reaching as high as you can. If employees have moderate goals, you'll never know what their potential is. Like in climbing, you have to aim high.

--Kevin Voigt is a Hong Kong-based writer.

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