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## PEAK PARADIGMS: Mountain Metaphors of Leadership and Teamwork

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Dynamic, effective leaders know how to inspire others with a vision of where they are going and how to get there. They have the ability to articulate and communicate their visions through vivid metaphors with the power to bring people together to work for common goals. Great leaders even become inspiring metaphors in their own right. During World War II, Winston Churchill, with his heavy jowls and gruff voice, came to embody the bulldog determination of the British people that enabled them to hang on during the German bombing of England and come back to win the war.

Mountains and mountain climbing provide some of our most dramatic and powerful metaphors for overcoming challenges to attain both personal and corporate objectives. Expeditions to Mount Everest, for example, stand out in modern culture as inspiring models of the initiative and determination needed to achieve the highest goals. For this reason, business corporations frequently hire Everest climbers to give motivational talks to their employees. There is no clearer, more vivid metaphor for a compelling goal than the summit of a mountain peak.

But there is more to climbing a mountain or succeeding in business than getting to the top. As Ida Hiroshige, the Japanese leader of a Mount Fuji devotional society, puts it, "The most important thing in climbing is the inner strength to help each other, so that not just the strongest but all the members of the group reach the goal." Reaching a summit, or attaining any hard-won objective, helps forge team identity and establish the core values organizations need to endure and thrive where others wither and die. Even just seeing a mountain or visualizing important goal can be important. Whether or not we ever climb it, the view of a distant peak gives us a sense of where we are and where we are going; such clarity of vision also gives a sense of direction and purpose to an enterprise.

Metaphors involve seeing and experiencing one thing in terms of another. Powerful metaphors, such as the idea that "life is a journey," operate at a deep level to structure how we think and act. They shape how we envision our goals and the steps we must take to reach

them, and the choice of metaphor can lead to different outcomes. If, for example, we view business through the prism of warfare, we will be more likely to regard others as either enemies or allies and to think in terms of battlefield tactics and strategy. If we see business as a game, we will focus on finding the underlying rules and developing the skills to play by them more effectively.

Mountain metaphors have a number of advantages over the sports metaphors of baseball and football commonly used in business today. As we have noted, the summit of a peak is one of the clearest and most powerful symbols for attaining a goal or objective. The flexibility of mountain metaphors makes it easier to formulate win-win approaches to cooperative business ventures. Although climbers can compete with each other or the mountain, they don't have to; everyone can get to the top and win without one side having to lose, as is a must in football or baseball. Instead of regarding each other as implacable enemies, management and unions, for example, can work together on pension plans that benefit both sides. A mountaineering expedition emphasizes team efforts, but also allows scope for individual initiative and leadership; one or two people go out in front to establish the route for others to follow. Climbing takes place not on an artificial, neatly controlled playing field but in the natural, unpredictable setting of mountains, mirroring the uncertainties of the real world where unexpected events, such as the recent sub-prime mortgage meltdown, can sweep financial markets like storms and avalanches, catching almost everyone by surprise.

The usual mountain-climbing metaphors of leadership and teamwork, which focus on attaining a goal, can be broadened if we look at the significance of mountains around the world. As the highest and most dramatic features of the landscape, mountains tend to become associated with people's highest and most central values and aspirations, revealing what inspires and motivates them at the deepest levels—precisely what a leader needs to tap into in order to galvanize a team or organization. Mount Sinai occupies a special place in the Bible as the sacred site where Moses received the Ten Commandments, the basis of law and ethics in Western civilization. The remote Himalayan peak of Mount Kailas, rising aloof above the Tibetan Plateau, directs the minds of millions of Hindus and Buddhists toward the utmost attainments of spiritual liberation. For many in the modern world, Mount Everest symbolizes the highest levels of human achievement. In other words, there is more than one way to see a mountain.

By exploring the varied ways people around the world relate to mountains, we can improve our own leadership skills, opening ourselves up to different ways of approaching tasks and, in the process, becoming more flexible. In particular, this investigation can help us work with people of different cultural backgrounds within our own organizations and do business across cultures.

In subsequent issues of the *Wharton Leadership Digest*, we will use well-known peaks from different parts of the world as paradigms—or exemplary models—to identify and develop the key aspects of leadership and teamwork needed to succeed in today's world of rapid change and cultural diversity.

Mount Everest will highlight various ways of setting and attaining goals that stretch members of a team to do their utmost. Mount Sinai will focus our attention on the inspirational power of cultivating a sense of calling and service, while Mount Fuji will stress the need to develop and maintain strong corporate cultures. Other mountains and mountain ranges, such as Mount

Kailas in Tibet and the Sierra Nevada in California, will serve as paradigms for implementing core competencies and providing opportunities for inspiration and renewal.

*Author's Note:* Edwin Bernbaum is an author, scholar, climber, and authority on mountains as sources of inspiration and meaning around the world. He has co-designed and organized Himalayan leadership programs for Wharton Leadership Ventures and lectures widely on leadership to corporate audiences.