



# Lessons for Chief Transformation Officers from Mount Everest

An Interview with the Founder of Furtenbach Adventures

By David Kirchhoff, Jakob Richert, Katie Rice, and Michael Lutz

**How does serving as the chief transformation officer (CTO) of a large company compare to leading an expedition up Mount Everest? You'd be surprised.**

The parallels came to light recently when Boston Consulting Group's David Kirchhoff sat down with the founder of Furtenbach Adventures, Lukas Furtenbach, who organizes and runs climbing trips on some of the world's most challenging mountains. Furtenbach and his team of guides have led more than three dozen expeditions, including to the peaks of Everest and K2. Like a CTO who oversees a team of highly accomplished managers and executives leading a massive corporate change, Furtenbach's clients are driven, ambitious people signing up for a daunting challenge. And also like a CTO, the leader of an alpine climb must marshal all of his or her skills in program design, motivation, and contingency planning to tip the odds toward success.

Kirchhoff interviewed Furtenbach to see how his experience might inform the successful execution of a corporate transformation. The following are excerpts of their conversation, along with some pointers for those who carry out their own organizational journeys—under less physically challenging conditions, no doubt, but still with high stakes of their own.

**Summitting Everest is generally something for expert climbers. The people you work with are often novices, albeit highly motivated ones. What's the most important thing you do to give yourself a chance of succeeding?**

We need to plan very carefully knowing that there will

always be uncertainty, with weather and other conditions changing within seconds. Also, people can change quickly in terms of their physical condition or their mental state. We, as guides, have protocols and guidelines in place to anchor our expedition no matter what happens.

**While any of us in a demanding role can appreciate the value of readiness, it seems like something entirely different in your world. How important is preparation in an alpine expedition?**

The pre-work is crucial; a tremendous amount of planning and calculating takes place. We prepare the route, plan how much oxygen we need to store at each altitude. We count double and have spare equipment for everything: oxygen, rope, masks, etc. We have a clearly defined program for making these expeditions successful—which means reaching the summit with everyone safe. We trust the programs, processes, and protocols, which we have developed and finely tuned over many trips.

## Systematic Approach

A clearly defined program—and a locked-down set of processes—form the essential foundation of every successful organizational transformation. No big company would undertake a transformation without putting in place a transformation management office to ensure the right routines and systems.



### **How do you keep your expedition motivated and on pace during the day?**

We expect a high level of discipline from all our customers, and frankly they like being pushed. The people that sign up for these trips are intrinsically motivated, and they respond well to clear directions and high expectations. We have each day broken down into clear milestones, and we push them to make each one on time. While we climb, we are strict and metric driven. It's critical in order to make the summit on schedule.

#### **Milestones**

Specifically designated near-term milestones are critical to ensure pace and progress. Good CTOs spend a lot of time strategizing and measuring; they look for red flags signaling that a deadline is about to be missed. And when a program does fall behind schedule, good CTOs draw attention to it and ask what can be done to make up the time.

### **We understand the need to drive your clients hard during the day. People also have a soft side that needs attention, and that can be critical to keeping them motivated. How does this figure into your approach?**

We distinguish between the time we climb and the time at camp. During the climb, yes, we push our clients hard. But we are careful not to push them beyond their limits.

When we're not climbing, that's the time to focus on the soft side—people's wishes and their fears. Take the example of arriving at camp after a long day. This is the time when people need support and a confidence boost. We use simple and easy rewards to motivate our customers: a good bottle of wine, a letter from their family or friends. It makes them happy and they forget about the uncertainty ahead for a moment. These rewards can be important confidence builders to help our customers feel excited about the next day.

## Coaching

This is the psychological-motivational-coaching side of a CTO's role. Execution can be as simple as an evening email praising a team member who has overcome a difficult obstacle or is nearing a goal on one of her projects. Or it could be a celebratory meal out with all the team members.

CTOs must also recognize the efforts of nonexecutive employees who are helping the transformation to progress. The need to address two distinct constituencies has no parallel in the world of sports, whether extreme or otherwise.

### How do you find people's limits?

Before we start a climb, we spend up to three weeks in base camp and on the mountain preparing. During that time, we have our clients perform a number of physical exercises—and here we do go beyond people's limits. We take notes on each client, so we know what their capability is. We also spend time observing them during those three weeks to understand their personalities and styles. This allows us to know how to motivate and push them the right way during the journey, without stepping too far. Knowing our clients individually before they start is critical to leading and coaching them through the journey.

## Sixth Sense

An ability to read people and understand their motivations is an essential skill for a CTO. What drives one person to excel isn't necessarily what will drive another. Every CTO must know how to get the most out of his or her team.

### How do you manage the wide range of personalities over the course of an expedition?

It's the biggest challenge of every journey. Some clients are driven by ego and the need for independence. We find ways to give them room to go in front, often by pairing them with a similarly aggressive Sherpa.

Other clients are more cautious or like to be part of a team. We make it all work by knowing them and knowing how to motivate them and live to their full potential in the expedition.

## Type A

Type A personalities aren't unique to alpine climbs. It's a near certainty that there will be one or two intensely competitive executives on the transformation team that a CTO is leading. The objective shouldn't be to tamp down these people's intensity. Instead, you should play to their strengths to ensure that what they bring adds to—and doesn't detract from—the collective effort.

### People think of Mount Everest as a dangerous and thrill-seeking endeavor, but you speak so much about safety. How do you balance the thrill of danger and safety?

Climbing will always be dangerous. Every year, people die on the way up Mount Everest, and even more die on the way down. This is what gives an Everest expedition its incredibly high stakes.

Of course, we cannot put our clients in this kind of danger. Last year, 11 people died on Everest; 10 of them could have been saved if there were minimum safety standards in place. We don't accept this risk. We always sit together to examine every situation and analyze what needs to be done to prevent or mitigate danger.

## Risk Mitigation

The risks that CTOs face are less grave than those encountered on alpine climbing expeditions, but they are more numerous. Scenario planning can be used to anticipate these risks and to identify the responses that will mitigate them. Swift action instead of a hesitant reaction may well be the difference that keeps a transformation from getting knocked off course.

### In addition to running expeditions, you are also running a business. How applicable are all these strategies to the way you operate your company?

My decisions during an expedition are about life or death. In the business they are less dramatic, but I am in a high-risk business where one single mistake at the mountain can ruin our company and my reputation forever. Planning and measuring are critical to running my expeditions, but they are also important to managing my business, particularly in these challenging times.

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