Summit Fever on Mount Everest

by

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“Dudes, what are you doing? Wake up! Guys, turn around, turn around”

-- Viesturs (1996, p. 1)

On May 10, 1996 two groups, one led by Rob Hall and one by Scott Fischer, set out for the summit of Mount Everest from their high camp at roughly 26,100 feet. Several expedition members did make the summit, but before the climbers could descend and reach the safety of their high camp they were overtaken by a storm. After the storm passed, numerous climbers were missing and five climbers, including Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, perished. Mount Everest is one of the most dangerous climbs in the world, but a disaster of this magnitude, involving such talented guides, begs the question: Why?

In general, climbing experts agree that these two groups (Hall’s expedition and Fischer’s expedition) made a mistake-- they all ignored their set “turn-around time.” Expeditions set this “turn-around time” to minimize the risks of lack of oxygen, darkness, and afternoon storms on the descent. For climbers on Mount Everest, a noon turn-around is cautious and a 2:00 p.m. time is risky. Edmund Hillary, who was one of the first climbers to reach the summit of Everest, heard about the disaster and felt that the tragedy was not an “accident”-- it was caused by the slow ascent to the summit (quoted in Dowling, 2006). Ed Viesturs, an expert on high-altitude climbing, was there on May 10, 1996. He watched in disbelief as the teams climbed towards the top and exclaimed, “Guys, you left at midnight. It's two o'clock! It's going to be three or four before you get to the summit.” As he watched the climbers continue upward he wondered, “Dudes, what are you doing? Wake up! Guys, turn around, turn around” (Viesturs, 1996, p. 1). Sadly, the two expeditions did not turn around-- a terrible mistake that proved deadly.

Why did the groups push on past the turn-around time? Some claim that hypoxia (lack of oxygen), stormy weather, and too many inexperienced climbers on the mountain caused the tragedy. However, Rob Hall and Scott Fisher were very experienced lead guides and had successfully and safely climbed Mount Everest before. What, then, caused such a tragedy this time? We reviewed personal accounts, media descriptions, online interviews, and past empirical papers on risky decision-making-- in summary, we propose that a variant of the original groupthink model may have precipitated the disaster (Burnette, Pollack, & Forsyth, 2011; Dion, 2000). Specifically, in our groupthink type II model, we focus on task cohesion-- the pursuit of a common goal. We suggest the two groups suffered from groupthink-- but, a form of groupthink where cohesion is rooted in the pursuit of a common goal, not necessarily strong emotional bonds.
Janis (1972, 1982) described groupthink as a faulty style of thinking that makes group members unable to evaluate decisions rationally. The key component of his model (Janis, 1972; 1982) was the presence of high interpersonal cohesion where members were overwhelmed by pressures to go along with the preferences of the group and failed to challenge bad reasoning or correct mistakes. However, according to Janis’ model, the Everest climbers could not have experienced groupthink— all existing accounts of the groups stress their lack of interpersonal cohesion. We wondered about this paradox generated by Janis’s (1972) classic theory— some groups display the symptoms and causes of groupthink, but they cannot be “victims” of groupthink as they are not interpersonally cohesive.

These two Everest expeditions were not cohesive in a social sense. However, they were cohesive in their shared pursuit of climbing the mountain. Everyone trained for months or years, endured ailments, painful coughing spurts, freezing temperatures, and months away from family and friends. Also, each person paid up to $65,000 for guiding fees and set aside personal issues during the climb (Emerson, 1966). Kayes (2004, 2006) coined the term “goalodicy” and suggested that members of these two groups focused too much on their collective goal and may have had, what mountaineers often call, “summit fever.”

In today’s business environment, groups and project teams formed to address one specific issue are more common than ever. Two salient examples include the N.A.S.A. Challenger disaster and the 2000 (Y2K) information technology changeover—both examples illustrate the dire consequences that can result from a narrow focus on a common task (e.g., Moorhead, Ference, & Neck, 1991; Schiano & Weiss, 2006). A groupthink type II perspective may have important implications for reducing risky decisions in groups focusing on achieving a common goal— if your group is focused on one task, and you sense that mistakes are being made, turn around before it’s too late! Don’t fall prey to “summit fever!”
References


