

Climbing for leadership: A Q&A with Everest explorer Alison Levine

FEB 22, 2016 | BY [JOEL MAKHLUF](#)



Climbing Mount Everest taught Alison Levine how to lead a team in even the toughest of environments. (Photo: iStock)

Alison Levine was team captain of the first American Women's Mount Everest Expedition and is the author of a *New York Times* bestseller on leadership. No stranger to punishing environments, she skied both the North and South Poles, survived subzero temperatures, hurricane-force winds, avalanches and a career on Wall Street.

She shares some of the lessons she learned about leading teams in a hostile environment here and will be providing more insights at the Enservio [Property Innovation Summit](#) in Miami.

In your book [On the Edge](#), you talk about how “complacency can kill you.” How does a manager begin to stir things up to help people or teams break out of their own complacency, to shatter their norms of thinking and fixed habits that will liberate innovative thinking or new ways of doing things?



Alison Levine: It's so easy to become complacent, especially when there is so much routine in your day-to-day job. One idea to help people avoid complacency would be to have people step out of their regular role and take on a new job function on a temporary basis. When you can look at or experience something from another vantage point, your brain will start to think differently. On an expedition, I think it's a great idea to have everyone trade off in various roles when it comes to leading the team. Everyone should take turns breaking trail, navigating the route, organizing camp, etc. Everyone should have an opportunity to serve in a leadership role with varying

responsibilities. This not only prevents complacency, it also improves skill levels.

“Leadership is everyone’s responsibility” is one of your great mantras. Since leadership and innovation must be joined at the hip, what’s your recipe for getting companies to think out of the box, allowing more room for innovation to take root?

Alison Levine: Well, you have to have a culture of failure-tolerance, because if people are too afraid to fail (out of fear of punishment or embarrassment) then they'll never really take big risks. And it's nearly impossible to have innovation without risk.

You like to advocate how teams benefit from members with “big egos,” and how big egos should be encouraged. How can decisions be reached with consensus if a big ego insists on getting his or her own way?

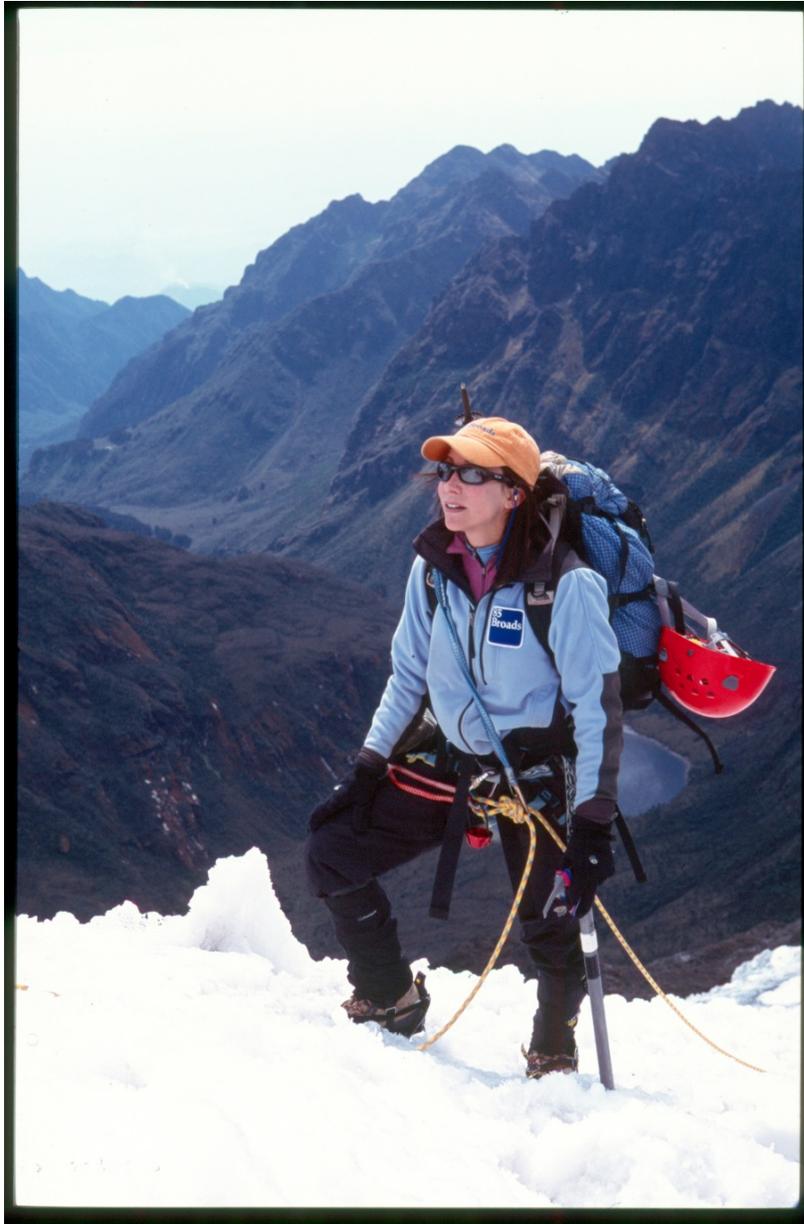
Alison Levine: The advice I give about egos came from a discussion with Duke University basketball Coach K (Mike Krzyzewski) who wrote the forward for *On The Edge*. He explained the two kinds of egos he looks for when recruiting players. The first type of ego he calls *performance ego*. He wants players who are good — and who know that they’re good! The second kind of ego he looks for is *team ego* — he wants people on his team who are going to be proud to be a part of something that collectively feels more important than the individuals. So if you have people who have that sense of team ego, they are going to want to make decisions that are best for the team. Having someone with a high level of performance ego but no team ego doesn’t work well in high-pressure situations. And just because you have a big ego doesn’t mean you are selfish (as selfish people are definitely not an asset to a team).

Motivating people or teams to work harder and be better at their jobs is no easy feat. What do you recommend leaders do to encourage results and motivate people and teams beyond just offering petty praise?

Alison Levine: Big bonus checks are always good ... but they’re not always in the budget. One thing leaders can do to motivate teams is to make sure they are out there on the front lines with their teams. They should be visible, they should be willing to get their hands dirty, and they should never ask anyone to endure anything that they are not willing to endure. People want to know that their leaders have a shared sense of values. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg who is uber rich still has a desk in the same area as his employees, stands in line for the taco truck at lunchtime, and sits on the ground and eats his food with everyone else. There is none of this “ivory-tower” mentality, and that helps build trust and loyalty. And if everyone shares that feeling of trust and loyalty, they’ll be willing to go the extra mile.

When you say “Success can be a problem” is that because you believe that too much success can breed complacency?

Alison Levine: EXACTLY! If you’re used to always succeeding, then you think you’ve found the magic recipe and you never want to change it up. But when you have a setback or a failure, you’re more likely to stop, analyze the situation, think about what you could have done differently, and realize you need to get creative if you’re going to overcome obstacles going forward.



You wrote, “Risk takers are the ones whose mistakes spur progress. Those who have never failed have not pushed themselves enough.” What’s the best way to ‘sell failure’ to upper management?

Alison Levine: Remind them about Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay — the first people to summit Mount Everest. There were dozens of climbers who tried and failed before those two reached the top; but Hillary and Norgay had the benefit from those 411 previous climbers. If those other guys hadn’t tried and failed first, Hillary and Norgay might never have made it. You have to look at failure as something that paves the way for success down the

road. And it might be your success or it might be someone else’s. Either way, it’s all good.

What do you believe are the commonly held myths regarding leadership? Are MBA programs for example missing the boat?

Alison Levine: Well, the commonly held myth is that leadership is related to title or tenure. It’s not. Leadership is a mindset, and if you wait until you get promoted to a certain title or rank you’re going to fail as a leader. You have to start thinking of yourself as a leader from day one when you walk in the door of whatever job you have. MBA programs need to encourage students to develop their leadership style early-on, and

not wait until they get a certain position or reach a certain level within an organization. Everyone is in a leadership position.

What's your number one takeaway lesson for teams and for the C-suite?

Alison Levine: Learn to take action based on the situation, and not based on your plan. Because whatever plan you came up with last year or last month or last week (or even that morning) is already outdated. When you're in an environment that is constantly shifting and changing (which is just about every business environment these days), plans are pretty much outdated as soon as they're finished. You can't be hell-bent on sticking to your plan. You have to be much more focused on executing based on what's going on at the time.

Was it your beloved black Labrador Trooper, to whom you dedicated your book, the one thing that kept you going on your final ascent to Everest?

Alison Levine: When I was heading off to Nepal I had never really been around dogs much at that point in my life so I was not yet the crazy dog-lover that I am now. On the mountain it was really the memory of my friend Meg Berté Owen (who passed away a few months before my climb) that kept me going. I had engraved her name in my ice-ax and was climbing in her honor. I held up a "Team Meg" t-shirt when I got to the summit. She had an incredible amount of determination and willpower. I knew she was watching from above and didn't want to let her down.

Joel Makhuf is a vice president for [Enservio](#) and the director of the Property Innovation Summit. For more information contact jmakhuf@enservio.com. Enservio is a leading provider of contents claim management software, payments solutions, inventory and valuation services for property insurers.