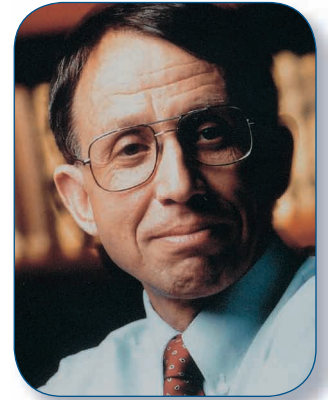


The Board That Conquered Everest

By Michael Useem (Jerry Useem, coauthor)

The mountain was too big for the most gifted climber. So they fired him and changed the game.



Michael Useem



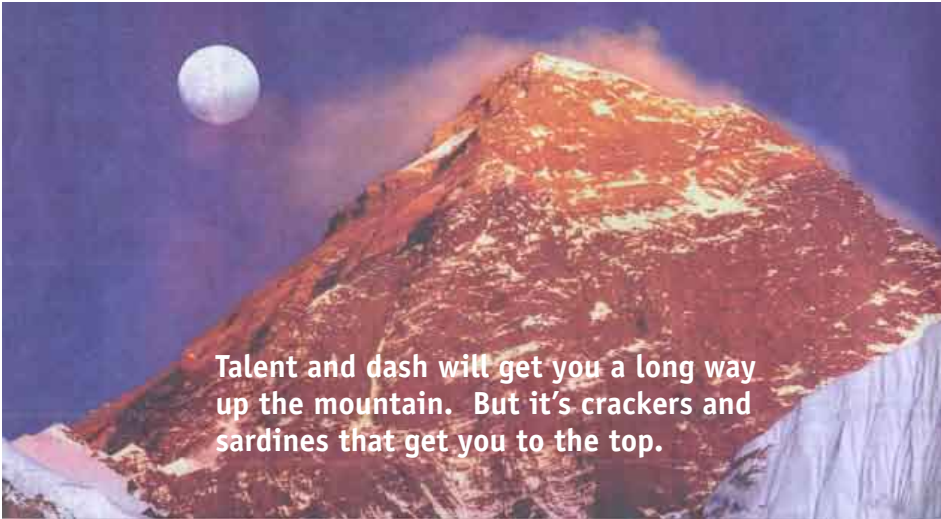
Everybody's heard the story of how Mount Everest was won. Fifty years ago, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay confronted the mountain, braved its dangers, and made it to the top through sheer talent and will. It's an inspiring tale—yet it obscures a deeper one.

The hidden story is less classically heroic—it involves an unassuming manager and, believe it or not, a board of directors—but it reveals heaps more about the nature of great achievements.

Hillary and Norgay weren't

supposed to be the first atop Everest. England's leading climber, Eric Shipton, seemed destined for that honor. A gentleman-adventurer in the romantic mold of Robert Scott and George Mallory, Shipton had been central to four of England's seven

. . . Michael Useem



Talent and dash will get you a long way up the mountain. But it's crackers and sardines that get you to the top.

Everest expeditions and knew the mountain better than anyone. No one was surprised when the worthies and scientists of the Himalayan Committee, an affiliate of the Royal Geographical Society, chose him to lead England's 1953 attempt.

Almost immediately, though, committee members had second thoughts. Shipton's lightly equipped, improvisational climbs had shown entrepreneurial flair. But his inattention to detail and planning was notorious; on one trip, he even forgot his backpack. And now the committee had a new worry: foreign competition. Just the year before, a Swiss team had come within a few hundred feet of Everest's 29,035 foot summit; should the British fail this time out, both the Germans and the

French would have a crack at reaching the summit first.

The committee didn't want another romantic failure—something gentleman-adventurers excelled at. So just six weeks after choosing Shipton, it did the unthinkable: It turned around and fired him. In the ensuing uproar, one climber withdrew. Others protested Shipton's replacement: a career military man whose name conveyed lack of dash. "Who is this John Hunt?" Hillary asked at the time.

Yet the committee had done something more profound than replace one man with another. It had replaced an old idea with a new one. This new idea was reshaping British industry, where the ideal of the gentleman

capitalist—an untutored amateur who relied on character and talent to get the job done—was running up against reality. The modern corporation was simply too big and complex for one man to run. Everest was big too. It required a new method—what some were calling the art of organization.

Col. John Hunt was the very picture of the modern professional manager. A demon for logistics, he specified that each box of rations contain 29 tins of sardines. His strategy—soon to become standard in mountaineering—called for an army of climbers, Sherpas, porters, and yaks that would methodically move up the mountain, shuttling supplies to ever higher camps. Hunt gave the human element systematic attention as well. Everest demands an "unusual degree of selflessness and patience," he later wrote. "Failure—moral or physical—by even one or two [people] would add immensely to its difficulties." The desire to reach the top, he added, "must be both individual and collective." That last point was important: The goal of this huge effort was to deliver just two climbers to the summit.

Who would it be? Had Shipton been in charge, it may well have been Eric Shipton. In

The Board That Conquered Everest . . .

the event, no fewer than ten climbers—including a 33-year old New Zealand beekeeper's son, Ed Hillary—were in the running. The final choice, Hunt declared, would hinge on impersonal factors: who was climbing well, and who was in high camp when the weather broke. On May 26, 1953, two men were selected for immortality.

They came within 300 vertical feet of it. Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans would have been household names had the limits of stamina, oxygen, and daylight not turned them back. Yet in retreat they laid a platform: a stash of oxygen canisters left behind and a trove of useful intelligence brought down with them. Hunt—who laid the platform's final plank by ferrying supplies to within 2,000 vertical feet of the summit—had a second team ready to go.

Tenzing Norgay and Ed Hillary moved out swiftly on the morning of May 28, reaching Hunt's supply cache, which made a miserable night at least survivable. At 4:00 AM they arose, five miles in the sky. The frozen air had turned Hillary's boots to steel. But there was a stove on hand to thaw them. There was breakfast too: crackers, lemonade, and, most satisfying of all, the final tin of Hunt's sardines. It was enough nourishment to give

them one shot at bringing 30 years of frustration to an end.

At 11:30 AM, Hillary snapped the photo: Norgay, ice ax raised aloft in victory, left foot planted atop the highest point on the planet.

It was an extraordinary feat of mountaineering that rightly made them instant legends. Still, to say that they "conquered" Mount Everest is a bit like saying that Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin conquered the moon. For when they stood atop the stone pyramid of Everest, Hillary and Norgay were also standing atop a pyramid of people.

Is the lesson here that the world needs more John Hunts—diligent organization builders content to dwell in the shadows of others? (He did, at least, get knighted.) Actually, the world has plenty of John Hunts; the problem is that boards of directors don't pick them. Star-struck with charisma and style, they pick Eric Shiptons. That's why the unsung hero of Everest isn't an individual at all, but a board of directors. By redefining the expedition as a corporate effort—and having the backbone to take the criticism that followed—the Himalayan Committee built the ultimate platform for success.

Talent and dash, it proved, will get you a long way up the mountain. But it's crackers and sardines that get you to the top. ✨

Used with permission by the author.

For more information on Michael Useem, contact the Leigh Bureau at 908.253.8600 or info@leighbureau.com.