

# A guide to invisible leadership

by Lauren Lipuma Staff Writer



## *An experienced mountaineer shares how he learned what it takes to lead a team*

**N**o matter the setting, the best leaders are invisible—they act by empowering the members of their teams to lead themselves. That was the message that mountaineer and global adventurer Paul Deegan,

Philadelphia, delivered to attendees at the ASOA Opening General Session of the 2015 ASCRS•ASOA Symposium & Congress in San Diego.

In a riveting and inspiring presentation, Mr. Deegan explained the philosophy of invisible leadership that he cultivated through a lifetime of participating in mountaineering expeditions to the world's highest peaks. Mr. Deegan described to attendees how he applies that philosophy to his everyday life, sharing his thoughts on what it means to truly lead a team.

## **Humble beginnings**

Mr. Deegan first found himself in a leadership role as a teenager, when he discovered that mountaineers climbing Mount Everest had been leaving trash on the mountain since the first ascent in 1953.

"I thought this was wrong, I thought something should be done about it, but nobody else seemed to be stepping up to the plate," he said. "So I figured that person may as well be me."

Mr. Deegan shared his idea with an experienced expedition leader, and the 2 men decided to lead a trip to clean up the trash at Everest base camp. But several weeks before they were to depart, Mr. Deegan's co-leader told him he would have to meet the team on the mountain a few weeks into the trip, leaving Mr. Deegan and the expedition doctor in charge of 42 volunteers.

"Back then I thought leading a team was all about standing in the front and telling people what to do," he said. "That attitude lasted for less than 3 minutes."

Mr. Deegan chronicled the mistakes he made as a novice leader on that trip and then recalled a climb he took soon after—an expedition to the top of Mont Blanc, the highest peak in the European Alps. This trip consisted only of Mr. Deegan and 2 other climbers, and none of them thought that they needed a formal leader with such a small team, he said.

The 3 men realized soon into their trip, however, that they had made a mistake. Weather conditions on the mountain deteriorated, they did not know the route to the summit, and Mr. Deegan was experiencing altitude sickness.

"At this point, we needed someone on our team to stand up and seize the leadership reins and to

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make an informed decision,” he said. “But none of us did this. Instead of regrouping and tightening our team, our team literally fell apart.”

The 3 men made it to the summit and back, but the grueling expedition left Mr. Deegan searching for a way to learn how to lead.

“Leading from the front on the Everest cleanup had been a nonstarter for me, and now this leaderless experiment had descended into leaderless chaos,” he said. “I realized I had so much to learn about leading a team.”

## **Empowerment and courage**

Mr. Deegan began attending lectures, reading books, and watching documentaries about leadership in a wide range of specialties. At one point, he came across a quote from the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse: “When the best leader’s job is done, the people say, ‘We did it ourselves.’” These words struck a chord with Mr. Deegan, and he adopted them as his personal mantra.

In addition to continuing to organize and lead his own expeditions, Mr. Deegan also began to seek out opportunities to learn from experienced expedition leaders. Two years after his Mont Blanc trip, he joined an expedition to Mount McKinley led by John Barry, a former commander of a British Special Forces Unit specializing in mountain and arctic warfare. Mount McKinley turned out to be significantly more unpredictable than Mont Blanc.

“The summit was static, but everything else was in a state of flux,” Mr. Deegan recalled. Weather conditions were severe, crevasses opened up, and the team members’ health was occasionally in jeopardy, but Mr. Barry’s leadership got the team through the ordeal.

“The way that John dealt with all these variables wasn’t by pushing on in the blind hope that things might get better,” Mr. Deegan said. “John had the courage to periodically press the pause button. This gave him time to evaluate our situation and to modify our plan based on what was happening to us and what was happening around us.”

Every day, Mr. Barry brought the entire team together to discuss what was going on and to solicit their thoughts before making key decisions, Mr. Deegan said. Mr. Barry asked less experienced team members to speak first so that their opinions would not be swayed by those of more experienced climbers.

“John instinctively knew that sometimes a less experienced person or a new person is actually in a better position to propose a novel solution to an existing problem than an experienced person who’s been accustomed to doing the same thing day in and day out,” he said. “I should know because I was the least experienced member on John’s team.”

In any organization, a profitable exercise can be to sit down with new staff members and ask them what anomalies they’ve seen in the organization, what can be improved, and

how they could be improved, Mr. Deegan said.

By ensuring there was a free flow of information among all members of the team, Mr. Barry empowered them to make their own decisions. With that empowerment, they were able to squash small problems before they became bigger issues, Mr. Deegan said. “John led us by empowering us to lead ourselves.”

## **No room for passengers**

In 1995, 3 years after the McKinley expedition, Mr. Deegan got the opportunity to return to Everest—this time to climb it instead of clean it.

On this trip, led by mountaineer Henry Todd, Mr. Deegan did not reach the summit, but with Mr. Todd’s guidance, set a personal altitude record.

“Henry’s style of leadership was very different than John Barry’s,” he recalled. “Henry’s was more like a soccer team player-manager, issuing instructions from the touchlines and occasionally coming onto the field of play.”

This “soccer team” style of leadership gave each climber a considerable amount of autonomy. While climbing under an overall framework, each team member was free to make all of his or her own minute-to-minute decisions—an aspect of climbing Mr. Deegan enjoyed.

But in the 1990s, a new style of “fully guided” expeditions to Everest

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emerged among the climbing community. In this kind of expedition, no team member sets foot on the mountain without an experienced guide or Sherpa close by, and those guides and Sherpas make every mountaineering decision for the team members, Mr. Deegan said.

Despite climbing Everest with all the physical effort it requires, in effect these team members become mental passengers. This guided style of leadership can be effective, he said, but only under one condition—that nothing happens to the guides.

Mr. Deegan joined Henry Todd on Everest again, a year later, to make a second attempt at the summit. During this trip, he happened to be a

day behind 2 large, fully guided expeditions. On the morning of May 10, 1996, a ferocious storm slammed into the mountain, just as the 2 guided expeditions were making their bid for the summit. In addition to freight-train winds, the storm caused the temperature to drop.

At one point during the storm, 21 members of those 2 expeditions went missing between the summit and the uppermost campsite. Now, in the midst of a terrible storm, members of those teams were forced to make their first climbing decisions on Everest—decisions that would make the difference between life and death. When it was over, the storm had claimed the lives of 5 members

of those expeditions, 3 of whom were guides.

“It doesn’t matter whether you represent 50% of your team, or 10% of your team, or 1% of your team,” he said. “There will come that day when your observation, your suggestion, your decision, or your action influences the outcome of a situation by 100%. And it’s for that reason I believe there’s no room for passengers on any type of team.”

## Embodying Lao-Tse’s words

Several years later, Mr. Deegan led an expedition to summit several peaks in central Asia that had never been climbed before, allowing him to test the leadership skills he had learned from those past expeditions. He worked hard to adhere to Lao-Tse’s philosophy of invisible leadership during the trip, giving his team members the kind of autonomy that Henry Todd had given him on Everest and periodically pressing the pause button, as John Barry had done on McKinley.

He described the incredible experience of ascending a mountain that no human had ever set foot on before. “While I remained a student of leadership, at that moment, surrounded by my team, I realized I had at least come a little way in my quest to learn about leadership since those first faltering steps picking up rubbish at Everest base camp,” he said.

As his team made their ascent, Mr. Deegan reflected on what he had learned—and knew what he needed to do. For the first time on this expedition, he led from the front—but a few feet short of the top, he stopped and waited for the rest of his team. Then, together, they stepped onto the summit as one. **OB**

*Editors’ note: Mr. Deegan has no financial interests related to his comments.*

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