



A1 (a) THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP

Paul Deegan - December 2007

As for the best leaders, the people never notice their existence,
The next, the people praise,
The next the people fear,
The last the people hate.
When the best leader's job is done,
The people say, 'We did it ourselves'.
Lao Tse

There are a myriad of reasons why people become leaders. For some, it is the only way that they can achieve a particular task or reach a certain goal. Other – perhaps less enlightened – individuals see it as a way to fame and fortune. Leadership exists throughout our society, but it is perhaps on expeditions where the art of leadership is brought into sharpest focus. After all, an erroneous business decision by the chairman of a large company could result in the loss of hundreds of thousands of pounds; a tactical mistake by the manager of a football club could cost his team the championship. But if an expedition leader makes a “bad call”, the toll could ultimately end up being measured not in pounds, pence and pride but in lives lost. The responsible expedition leader knows the stakes are high, recognises the risks, and plans accordingly.

Expeditioners who aspire to organise their own adventures would do well to remember that in many instances the expedition leader is not always the one who goes on to complete the objective. Chris Bonington, who masterminded the first ascent of Everest's South face in 1975 sent Dougal Haston and Doug Scott to the summit rather than himself. Experience had taught Bonington that by ascending behind the leading mountaineers he could keep his finger on the pulse regarding the weather and terrain his lead climbers were experiencing higher on the mountain, whilst continuing to ensure that a steady trickle of life-sustaining supplies reached the highest camps (Bonington finally summited on Everest a decade later, as a member of someone else's expedition). The individual who derives as much or more personal satisfaction from the fact that the objective has been reached, rather than achieving it personally, is likely to enjoy being an expedition leader.

Effective leaders do not constantly feel the need to lead from the front. Lao Tse reminds us that “To lead people, walk beside them”. With this in mind, I would like to go against the grain and suggest that the most successful expedition leaders are, in effect, *expedition managers*. Expedition managers do not necessarily have to be the most technically skilled member of the team, nor do they have to possess expertise in any one particular discipline – such as fluency in the local language – that no other team member has. What they must be able to do is successfully juggle the needs of the three ingredients that make up any expedition (the task, the team and the individual). Most importantly, they need to be able to do this in the constantly changing physical and psychological environments that surround all expeditions.

The wise expedition manager realises that throughout the expedition every member of the team will at some point become a leader: in a medical emergency, the doctor becomes the situation controller; at a border crossing with a suspicious armed guard, the linguist is – in the eyes of the



authorities – the boss. The most useful (and respected) expedition managers work as diligent subordinates when required to do so.

In extreme circumstances, the expedition manager will need to make difficult decisions. He or she will need to have the confidence to carry out the actions which they believe needs to be completed for the overall safety of the expedition, no matter how unpopular those decisions might be. The expedition manager who has worked hard to earn the respect of his or her peers will appreciate their support in times of trouble.

At an early age I was taught the advantages of adhering to the “Six Ps”: “Prior Preparation and Planning Prevents a Poor Performance”. Around the same time, a former Director of the National Centre of Mountain Activities explained to me that “flexibility is the first principle of any expedition”. How then to reconcile these two apparent opposites? I believe that the solution lies in learning everything known about the place you wish to visit (including the people you are likely to meet, and the weather and terrain you can expect to encounter), whilst all the time building flexibility into every part of the equation, from ‘catch-up days’ to accommodate delays through to a generous financial contingency on top of the overall budget.

Expeditions which do not achieve their objectives often blame their failure on unforeseen circumstances. Yet when you think about it, most problems that occur can be foreseen, either through reading about the experiences of previous expeditions to the same (or a similar) destination that you are intending to visit, or simply by dreaming up the most unlikely scenarios (“What would we do if...”) and then working out a recovery plan. This was brought home to me whilst I was in the middle of planning what was eventually to become the Motorola Pamirs Expedition, which went on to explore a previously unvisited mountain range in Central Asia. The expedition doctor asked me how wide the nearest metalled road was to my proposed site for Base Camp. At the time he asked the question, only small-scale maps were available; the enquiry seemed a preposterous one. I asked my medical expert why on earth he wanted to know how wide the road was. “Because,” the good doctor explained, “If *you* break your leg and I need to call in an air ambulance to fly you home, I need to know if a Lear Jet can land on that road”. Needless to say I found the answer to his question.

By working through as many possible scenarios before the departure with the whole team – from what to do if the flight is cancelled, through to action to be taken upon the death of an individual – everyone will be in a stronger position to react constructively to any situations that occur. In the unlikely event that something unexpected takes place, the team that is experienced in working through problems is likely to come up with a workable solution quickly.

When it comes to delegating tasks, most expedition managers usually fall into one of two broad categories; the ‘hands-on’ contingent, or the ‘hands-off’ brigade. The hands-on manager will want to be deeply involved in every sector of the expedition. He will request that team members regularly report to him throughout the planning process, be consulted before any steps forward in the preparatory phase are taken, and insist on making all the decisions personally.

By contrast, the hands-off manager will only have a finger in every part of the pie. After agreeing with all team members their individual roles and responsibilities, the hands-off manager gives each person the space and time they need to complete the tasks whilst remaining available to cajole, consult and encourage as required.



In my experience, the expedition manager who takes on too many personal responsibilities will simply not have enough time for the individual member who asks for advice or support, or have sufficient room in the diary to pick up the pieces if – as frequently happens – a member of the team drops out of the expedition for any one of a multitude of reasons before departure. You need a bit of fat in every system and a leader who is not overworked can provide much of it.

Finally, I would like to add a word of caution to the aspirant expedition manager who is desperately scrabbling around to find an objective to tackle and some people to manage. History shows us that the expedition that grows organically, from the seed of an original idea, is the one most likely to succeed. Manufactured expeditions, such as those done for purely commercial gain, often turn out to be unsatisfactory in some respect regardless of whether or not the objective is achieved.

It is my belief that an expedition is a living creature with a birth, a life, and eventually a death. The success that the expedition enjoys during its life is entirely down to its parent or parents (the individuals who dreamt up the idea in the first place) and its guardians (the individual or individuals who join the expedition during its life). At the end of the expedition – when all the members have returned home safely, when the expedition report has been sent to the relevant authorities, when sponsors, supporters and grant giving organisations have received the photographs promised to them – then the expedition dies (although its memory can live on through lectures, videos and websites). It is the moment when the expedition manager who wishes to continue to walk down the path that she or he has set out on remembers Shackleton's words "... that a man [or a woman] must turn himself to a new mark, directly the old one goes to ground", and begins to plan a new expedition.

Author's Biography

Paul Deegan organised his first expedition at the age of 18 when he co-led a 47-strong team to clean-up Everest Base Camp in 1988. Turning away from a promising career in refuse collection, he focused instead on expeditions. Paul has climbed and trekked in the Andes, the European Alps, the Himalaya, the Pamirs, Alaska and East Africa. He has been involved with a number of youth and charity expeditions, and in recent years he has visited a number of decidedly non-mountaineering environments, including Antarctica, Car Nicobar and Mos Espa. More than 250 of Paul's articles have appeared in newspapers and magazines, and his first book won an award in the USA. Paul speaks regularly about his experiences to organisations ranging from multinational corporations to primary schools. After two failed attempts to reach the summit of Everest in the 1990s, Paul returned to the world's highest mountain in 2004. The final score: Everest 2, Deegan 1. Paul still picks up rubbish. But only on Thursdays. www.pauldeegan.com