

Forbes Woman

From Everest to the Executive Suite: Three Tips for Aspiring C-Level Executives

by Susan Ershler

In my career as a Fortune 500 sales executive and a Seven Summits mountain climber, I've developed a set of guiding principles that have allowed me to achieve seemingly impossible revenue goals while simultaneously climbing the world's highest mountains. Yet I don't consider myself to be exceptionally gifted or unique. Anyone who is prepared to commit the time and effort can be equally successful if they Project • Prepare • Persevere®. These are the bywords to a systematic approach I've developed for achieving what some might consider to be unachievable goals.

To illustrate this, here are three lessons I learned from my most difficult and exhilarating climbs:

Project

Lesson: Every success begins with an ambitious and clearly articulated vision. It's essential to project your future and clearly define a vision for yourself and your team.

During my year of intense physical training for Everest, I visualized myself and my husband Phil standing together, triumphant at the summit. It was an image I would re-visit many times every day until it was so vivid and real, I could almost reach out and touch the snowy peaks and breathe the thin, frigid air. In 2002, my vision was realized when Phil and I stood atop Everest's highest peak, becoming the first couple in history to scale the Seven Summits.

I took exactly the same approach as a sales leader, consistently setting seemingly impossible goals and then surrounding myself with images that, to me, comprised success. For example, I would place placards showing my team's revenue objectives throughout my office and visualize our CEO congratulating us on having exceeded our numbers. After several months of this sustained visualization, I found myself gradually changing my viewpoint about my goal. What was once unthinkable became not only possible, but excitingly within reach. In my view, an extravagant goal both focuses and energizes you, simultaneously expanding your sense of your own capabilities and of life's possibilities.

Prepare

Lesson: No mountain is scaled in a single climb, no quota achieved in a single day. You must create a detailed roadmap that delineates every step of your journey and includes tangible benchmarks to measure success along the way.

I had been climbing for only two years when Phil and I set out to ascend Mt. McKinley, the highest peak in North America, which stands over 20,000 feet. The day was clear and cold when our small plane touched its skis down on the ice-covered landing strip. Towering ahead of us, I could see the massive bulk of McKinley. I fell in behind the other climbers, carrying a very heavy pack and pulling a sled weighted down with gear. The air was so thin I could barely breathe. As we approached a deadly crevasse field, I found myself gasping for air and thinking, "This is ridiculous. I'm nowhere near ready for this type of expedition. If it's so difficult now, I'll never make it to the top. I shouldn't even *be* here."

With every self-defeating thought, I slowed until I was down to a snail's pace, fighting back tears. As the only female, I was determined not to show weakness. Fortunately, Phil noticed and walked back to steady me. "Relax," he told me. "We're not going to climb the whole mountain today. We'll go up in stages, from one camp to the next. In a few weeks, with luck and good weather, we'll have one day left and that will be the day we reach the summit. Just like 'eating an elephant,' you do it one bite at a time."

From then on, I concentrated on reaching the next camp. When that no longer worked, I persevered in making it to the next rest break. When that became too much, I focused on picking up each leg and then stepping forward. In the end, we stood together on the summit, just as I'd imagined.

Phil's advice applies equally well to achieving any business objective. As a leader, you have to create a detailed roadmap that breaks even the most daunting goal down into manageable steps, with tangible benchmarks for success along the way. As a senior sales executive, I helped my team prepare for success by creating activity, territory and account plans that generated \$600 million in annual revenue, exceeding our quotas 120-200 percent for 13 out of 15 years.

Persevere

Lesson: All great achievements are realized by committing to a goal and then working ceaselessly to attain it.

After 63 days of climbing Everest, Phil and I had just one day left to make it to the top. We began our final ascent at 2:30 in the morning, struggling against the bitter cold and heavy winds blowing snow horizontally into our faces. When we were just 1,400 feet from the summit—an elevation of about 27,600 feet—we stopped on an icy ledge to change our oxygen bottles. Lightning strikes in the distance would briefly pierce the gloom with an unearthly light.

After assessing the conditions, Phil turned to me, shouting to be heard over the howling of the wind. "I can't take you up in this storm. We need to go down, can you live with that?" At first, I felt a great relief, simply grateful to be alive. But as we began our descent, I suddenly understood the climb was truly over. After 60 days of tough climbing, two years of relentless training and putting my personal life on hold, my dream of standing atop Everest would not be fulfilled that day.

As we began heading down the mountain, I saw Phil stumbling, something he had never done during any of our prior climbs. This worsened as we continued our descent. Finally, he turned to me and asked if there was something wrong with his eyes. I saw that there were small icicles hanging from his eyebrows and lashes. But when I peered closer, I realized that his brown eyes had turned a purplish hue. His eyes had frozen over! He later told me it felt like he was trying to see through waxed paper. Thank goodness we had turned around. Phil might have lost his vision entirely or suffered a fatal accident. It had been the right decision to stop, even though we were so close to reaching our goal.

A year later, we returned to Everest and reached the summit. It was a moment I will never forget, a dream finally fulfilled.

This kind of perseverance is equally important in business. I'm a strong believer in the value of hard work, dedication and disciplined teamwork within an organization. I taught my sales team to take every "No" as a "Not Yet," to understand every rejection as a challenge to improve, innovate and persevere. And then, like ascending Everest, to return again and again until the account was won and the sale closed. In business, as in life, if you persevere and stay focused, you will wake up one day and find yourself having achieved your loftiest ambition. When you do, it will be time to project your next achievement and begin the whole amazing process once again.

Susan Ershler – Business Executive, Everest Summiteer, Author and International Speaker

For more than 20 years, Susan has served in leadership positions for Fortune 500 corporations. During this era of corporate achievement, she climbed the highest mountain on each continent including Mt. Everest with her husband Phil, making them "The first couple in history to climb the Seven Summits." Susan is co-author of Together on Top of the World by Warner Books. She speaks professionally about pushing past perceived boundaries to pursue your greatest dreams and helps corporations transform their organizations into dynamic forces for revenue growth. For more information, visit www.SusanErshler.com.

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