



# THE EVEREST PARADOX

by CA Priest

## How 'Yes' Fails Us

**L**ike the jagged fangs of a long gone giant, the Himalayan mountains stretch across six countries for approximately 1,500 miles. At 29,032 feet above sea level, Mount Everest juts into the sky above them all – nearly four-thousand feet of the peak above the 'death zone'.

In 1991, Doug was the president of a burgeoning tech company with significant contracts with IBM and Xerox. They were competing and winning against a nascent Microsoft Corporation. Doug had built an international team of some of the best in 90's tech and he demanded a lot from them.

While his company was growing and his own fortune was nearing hundreds of millions of dollars, Doug wanted a new challenge. As an avid climber in the Pacific Northwest, he'd summited some of the largest peaks in the Western Hemisphere. So, he put his sights on a truly audacious goal – attempting the biggest, most difficult one of them all, Mount Everest.

He knew he couldn't do it without expert support and a seasoned team. He reached out to the climbing community and was put in touch with two expedition leaders.

The meeting with the first guide took place in his office on the top floor of one of Seattle's newly minted skyscrapers – a shard of glass 180 stories high. He explained his intent to summit Everest and asked the first guide if he could join his team.

The first expedition leader, Conrad, had led more than 20 teams to the top of the world. He

guided teams every season and he'd only lost one person – a Spaniard who had disappeared into a crevasse when he accidentally went off trail. He taught other guides had to lead teams and was widely considered an expert on Everest. Conrad agreed to take Doug to the summit, but only if he trained for three seasons. He explained that Everest was like no other mountain and certainly no other mountain Doug had attempted. The famed final push, the Hillary Step, when the summit is so close you can see the end of the ice just over the lip, is a Class 4 climb of almost 40 feet on sheer rock five and half miles above sea level.

Doug was disappointed. He had expected to be in Nepal later that year or the next year at the latest.

The second guide, Dean, met with him in his expansive home on the shores of Lake Washington. He had been to the summit a handful of times on a variety of teams, but he'd never led his own expedition. He felt that he was ready and after listening to Doug detail his mountaineering experience from Alaska to Colorado, he agreed to have him join his team. They were scheduled to make their first ascent in April, just seven months away.

**T**he Nepalese base camp on Everest is 17,598 feet above sea level – taller than most mountains in the world. It's a small, cobbled together community of tents and supplies. Helicopters drop climbers and gear almost every day during the season, but otherwise, it is as remote as most people will

ever experience. It is relatively safe and there are medical personnel available. Once you leave the camp though, you leave behind any real support and have to rely on yourself and your team.

Doug landed in Nepal in late March and was at the base camp at the beginning of April. He acclimated well (some people are unable to remain due to altitude sickness) and felt ready for the attempt. The team, led by Dean, set out on April 13th - they never returned.

This story was shared by a senior marketing professional during some free time at a conference. She called it the Everest Paradox.

Her point was Doug had chosen 'yes' over patience and preparation. He should have gone with the first guide who had more experience and advised him to be better prepared. He should have weighed what was at stake and made the smart choice rather than opting for the wrong team because they went along with him.

Many corporate leaders choose 'yes' because it gets them to the mountain faster, but they aren't prepared and they haven't put in the work to summit and get back down. Whether it is a reorganization of the entire company, major system upgrade or venturing into new markets, the most significant part of the initiative is the preparation and the patience to prepare properly for the entire process. It's also about forming a strong team and giving them the latitude to utilize their skills and talents to complement each other.

Unfortunately, the Everest Paradox is everywhere in corporate decision-making because we are wired to accept the positive (the 'yes') and to ignore or even avoid dealing

with the negative (the 'no'). And that's the difference between an excellent leader and someone who can't seem to ascend to the next level - that's the difference between someone like Dan Price and Doug.

Real leaders want to be surrounded by the best of the best and they want to utilize their team's experience, skills, and talents to create a dream team that collectively achieves success. They recognize strengths and weaknesses in their team and in themselves, and they utilize this to make informed decisions. They foster open communications - even if it means hearing warnings, honest criticism, and/or new perspectives - because they're working together for a solution.

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Too often, leaders will put their faith in someone who supports their position or agrees with things they say and ignore the issues - sometimes glaring issues - because it reaffirms their own decisions. When this

happens, it's not a dream team and it's not open communication – it's being surrounded by 'yes' women/men solely interested in making the boss happy, which is not a solution to a problem. In fact, it causes more problems and compounds existing issues.

Doug could have survived, and he could have summited the tallest mountain in the world and made it home safely. He could have learned from his guide and team so he could climb other peaks. Instead, he chose someone unqualified who told him what he wanted to hear, and he paid dearly for it. While we're not scaling mountains, we're still making complex decisions that have significant ramifications on the lives of countless people.

Just acknowledging the paradox and actively preparing to avoid it at all costs is a start. But, as leaders, we also need to foster an environment where constructive criticism, disagreements, and different ideas are welcomed and even adopted when they are the best option. Too often we delineate our corporate structures so we're not hearing from specialists on topics that impact our decisions – finance, IT, marketing, public relations, business development, etc. We're not listening to the guide, we're focused too much on what we think should be the answer, and it's to our detriment.

**T**o actually succeed, we need to not only summit, but make it all the way. We need to stop focusing solely on how one person gets up the mountain and start focusing on how we – the team – successfully make the entire trip.

