

Everything Begins With A Goal - The Importance Of Developing A Vision

“In the mountains, the key for the experienced mountaineer is to know his first step, to know exactly which mountain he will climb and especially which route he wants to take.”

The same applies to business, the leader must develop a vision because employees want to follow someone who knows where he is going”, two key sentences Albert Baehny said with his French accent during our interview.

Albert is standing in his garden in a small village close to Basel, Switzerland, full of beautiful roses, amongst other plants such as a Japanese Cherry and a Chinese Cornus and is enjoying an incredible view of the Black Forest in Germany. The garden is his territory during the weekends, when he is not working at his desk or spending time with his family. But back in the days, Albert would always be out and about, either in the mountains climbing, running in the forest, or ski touring.

One of the first things he said to me during our Skype interview was: “Next time you come and visit, I will show you my happy place, the place where everything began.” Albert is referring to the mountains. I then wondered if mountaineering has had an impact on who he is now – the person he became – a very successful businessman in Switzerland. And indeed, there is a parallel between his passion, and experiences in mountaineering and his professional life. Albert points out an example: “A leader sets clear direction or magnetic north for the employees to follow and ensure that everyone knows what the broad mission and purpose of the company is.”

Albert grew up in Payerne, e village in the French part of Switzerland surrounded by mountain ranges. Since the age of 15, Albert had been active mountaineering, starting off in his region, the French part of Switzerland. However, one day he decided to spend a summer in Chamonix, Switzerland, the Mecca for mountaineers. He remembers that after he reached a summit he stayed there for hours looking around himself.

He said: “Suddenly I had one of those moments when suddenly everything becomes clear to you. I instantly knew from that moment on that I was going to dedicate my energy and time to climbing.”

Soon, the Dolomites in Italy, the Himalayas, the Yosemite Valley in California, the Fitz Roy in Patagonia, and mountains in other parts of the world became his world.

Besides being an incredible climber, Albert has made a remarkable career path. All began with his studies of biology at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland where after graduating he started his first position in biochemical research.

When I spoke to his wife Angelica, I asked her what career path Albert wanted to pursue back in the days. She instantly started laughing and said: "As a University student, he used to always tell me that he would never wear a suit or and tie in his life."

Well, this didn't work out, because through various positions in different companies Albert is now the Chairman of two global companies and has left the chemical industry a long time ago. For ten years, he was the CEO of Geberit, a Swiss company that specialises in manufacturing and supplying sanitary parts and related systems. There he used and implemented with his team what he learned in the mountains as a young man. For example, having a clear and simple vision, articulating clear and concise objectives, working together with leaders rather than with administrators, inspiring the organisation to deliver extraordinary results, being passionate about what you do, and staying positive when facing unexpected problems.

"The right 'rope teammate' is just as important as trusting your subordinates," Albert puts emphasis on this phrase. "In the mountains, you must be able to fully rely on your rope teammate and he must be able to fully rely on you because otherwise, you will never achieve exceptional accomplishments." This is also key at work, what he learned from rock climbing, he applied in his leadership roles. "As a leader, you need to trust your colleagues and subordinates."

Albert gets straight to the point, he always knows what he wants to say, does not hesitate, and makes clear statements. Reading interviews in newspapers about Albert is not different. A Swiss journalist once wrote the following sentence about Albert in 2004: "Er plaudert nicht ungerne, doch Monologe zu halten ist definitiv nicht seine Art." Translated to English this means: 'He likes to chat, but monologues are definitely not his style.' Albert laughs, and nods.

Angelica confirms that he is even concise and direct at home and that he becomes impatient when other people take time to get to the point.

Angelica herself is very sporty, too, and started rock climbing because of Albert. Whenever he wasn't rock climbing difficult routes with a friend on the weekend, they would go rock climbing together, often with other friends. On the long weekends, they enjoyed going camping in the South of France which has great walls.

As he enters the house, I can see a love for art and one striking artist that grabs my attention. It is the famous American pop artist James Rizzi, I would say around 12 of his paintings are hung up around the house. Albert tells me that love for art is something he shares with his wife.

The house is very colorful, I notice, the kitchen has orange walls, the wall behind the stairs is dark red, and upstairs are even more colorful walls in the bed- and

bathrooms. Albert and Angelica's home feels very welcoming and warm – it reflects their characters.

A bit more than halfway through the interview I wanted to know how a person, successful not only in Switzerland but also globally, looks on setbacks. I received quite a revealing answer. "The direction when you are rock climbing does not evolve as a straight line, but as a wave", explains Albert pointing at a fascinating photo of the Himalayas which is one of his favorite photos.

"In other words, one day you might be better, another day worse, either way, you must accept it because otherwise, it can be fatal for your motivation.

"In business, every leader, even the most successful one, goes through periods of uncertainty, frustration, and failure. The best leaders show their mettle under fire. Every crisis is a test for leadership."

I asked him if there is a sportsman he looks up to or who he admires, and without hesitation, Roger Federer rolls out of his mouth. "Roger Federer once said that he became a champion as soon as he played against the best tennis players." Albert also credits Roger Federer's views on losing: "I never lose, but I always learn something thereby." Albert believes that Roger Federer would have never become the person he is now if he had only played against his friends.

A rather sad topic we discussed was the loss of friends during mountaineering. Albert lowered his voice when talking about these dramas. Some accidents he witnessed himself being only a few meters behind. He also had accidents, but thank God he always came back!

A shocking event occurred at the age of only 19, Albert was climbing in the Andes when he was hit by falling rocks leading to a dramatic accident. He spent six months fighting for his life in a hospital in Peru, without family nor friends. Apparently, it was too dangerous to transfer him back home. Once he returned to Switzerland, his recovery was not over. He spent more time in the hospital struggling with the fact that he risked being partially paralysed for the rest of his life. The one person who stayed with him and fought with him was his brother. I contacted him and he told me that he spent every single day in hospital to encourage Albert to fight, to get back on his feet, to gain back confidence and happiness. His brother said: "Albert has always been competitive and ambitious. He loves challenges and does not like giving up. That is why I knew that my little brother would make it back on track."

"But why taking the risk and climb again after nearly losing your life?", I asked Albert and he answered: "Because I always enjoyed it." He sees people around him whose lives follow the same mundane pattern year after year neither ambitions nor risk-averse. He adds: "It is also the people I climbed with and all the others I met who have made my life so rich and intense."

“Wherever, whether it is in the mountains or in your daily business, energy, ambition, and passion are the basic ingredients for achieving challenging targets.”
(Albert B.)