

Peak Performance: Lessons in Leadership from Mountain Guides by Knowledge@Wharton North America

Business leaders can find lessons even from unlikely sources such as mountain guides, who follow principles that apply in business settings, says Christopher I. Maxwell. He is a senior fellow at the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management and an adjunct professor at the school. Maxwell, an avid mountain climber, found that guides display six leadership traits — such as social intelligence and adaptability — that empower other climbers. He distilled these lessons in a new book, *Lead Like a Guide: How World-Class Mountain Guides Inspire Us to Be Better Leaders*. He discussed the main takeaways of his book on the Knowledge@Wharton show on Wharton Business Radio on SiriusXM channel 111. (Listen to the podcast at the top of this page.)

Below is an edited version of the transcript of the conversation.

Knowledge@Wharton: Let's start with the back story, because it's unique to correlate the leadership qualities of guides with the business aspects.

Christopher Maxwell: This began in somewhere around 2004-2005, when [Wharton management professor] Michael Useem, director of the Center for Leadership and Change Management here, gave me a little funding to go out to one of the most remarkable places in the country, and that's Jackson Hole, Wyoming. [It is] a beautiful place, with wonderful mountains and an expert group of guides. I climbed with them four or five times, and met the president of Exum Mountain Guides, who said, "I can introduce you to a bunch of the guides that you can interview." I had a wonderful week. At the foot of the Grand Teton [National Park], I invited eight guides to come in, one or two every evening, to have dinner with us, and just have a chat. I asked them the same question, "Why do you guide?" — I taped every interview. Reading through all the transcripts, I realized there were about six leadership strengths that they all seemed to demonstrate. I hadn't coordinated any of this with any of them. These leadership strengths were not just good and effective in the mountains. They seemed to apply to business, too.

I went from there and did trips in Nepal, Iceland, Quebec, Mexico, Patagonia and Peru, and interviewed more guides on these trips. I ended up doing 20 expeditions with guides around the world, in seven countries. From my notes and my thoughts, I realized that they all have the same set of leadership strengths. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could apply those strengths in another environment? For me and others here [at Wharton], that environment is business.

"Social intelligence is just that extra step of, 'I want to form a relationship that really works, and I'm going to manage that relationship.'"

The guides had the following strengths. First, they were socially intelligent. You can imagine to get someone to the top of a peak, a guide really has to be tuned into that person very quickly. [They have to] understand their client, learn a little bit about them, and especially, build a relationship that's not going to crumble. You're under tough conditions [like] bad weather and high peaks, so you've got to be socially intelligent and get this person to work with you.

The second was, they were adaptable. Every guide was flexible in the way they led. Sometimes they could just have a nice chat and a conversation with you. Other times, it was, "Don't step to the left, don't step to the right, or you're going to die." They had this power of being both "affiliative" — they were friendly and nice — and yet, they could be quite demanding when they needed to be. That's a quality that a business leader needs — to be able to be flexible and have different leadership styles.

Knowledge@Wharton: I would think there are many times when leaders aren't flexible enough.

Maxwell: [It's] the same with being coercive. There are times on the mountain when a guide would have to say, "Do this. And if you don't do what I tell you, you're going to have a problem." But if you're like that all the time, it's not going to work. So, guides have learned to be flexible and use the right style at the right time. That's one of the keys that business people need to learn. They can simply go and read Dan [Goleman's] great article in The Harvard Business Review, and it will give them a great list of the six styles.

Knowledge@Wharton: I want to go back to social intelligence. In the course of a day of business, we assume things that happen. We don't necessarily make that correlation with social intelligence all the time.

Maxwell: We often get it confused with emotional intelligence, which is, "I'm self-aware, and I'm aware of others. I have antenna that can pick up your emotions, and I can feel empathy." I think most people are pretty well in tune with emotional intelligence.

Social intelligence takes it a step further. It's about relationships. It's about building positive relationships. It's about making relationships at work, based on trust and intimacy. Social intelligence is just that extra step of, "I want to form a relationship that really works, and I'm going to manage that relationship."

Knowledge@Wharton: That seems to be something that more companies are doing these days, when you think about having the flexibility to work from home, or work from the office.

Maxwell: Yes. You're also dealing with so many different cultures in the workplace now. It really requires a manager to be socially intelligent, and be thoughtful about, "What kind of relationship do I want to build? And how do I maintain it?"

Knowledge@Wharton: Empowering others is a part of what these guides do. But when you think about it in an office setting, that's a core need — to be able to empower others to get the most out of themselves.

Maxwell: I think so, too. Guides empower their clients to reach a summit that they never thought they would be able to reach. And it definitely applies in business. We've talked about empowerment for years and years. Some authors say empowerment is really about removing obstacles in your way. That's pretty much what a guide would do. A guide would

help you manage the weather, manage the route, and get to the summit, and empower you.

A friend of mine who's a guide says, "My job is not to give you a hand up from the summit. My job is to provide the shoulders for you to stand on. But it's not my job to pull you up." In business, you need to tell people, "I'm here to remove the road blocks that are in your way. But you need to succeed. And it's my job to help you, in any way I can. But I can't do it for you. That's why you're needed here."

Knowledge@Wharton: That is the expectation of the people in that troupe or on that tour. Employees in a company also have that expectation of attaining that empowerment.

Maxwell: That's right. There's a great study by [Georgetown University professor] Natalia Lorinkova [along with Matthew Pearsall and Henry Sims, Jr.]. She did a study of 10 simulation rounds of a game they would play. They trained some of the team leaders to lead in a directive way. They trained some of the team leaders to lead in an empowering way. So, some told people what to do, and gave them clear guidelines. Others stepped back a little, and allowed their teams to think, to mull it over, and to meet and take their time to figure it out.

The study shows the difference between empowering and directing. The directed teams got off to a very fast start, because they had the [guidelines of]: "This is what you do, and this is how you do it." But they plateaued pretty quickly. The empowered team took much longer to get going — maybe two or three or four rounds of thinking, and talking. But they outstripped the directed team. If people just look at that simple study, it's a great demonstration of the real power of being empowered, rather than being told what to do.

Knowledge@Wharton: When you're in some of these situations with guides, and climbing up mountains or going through trails, the guide has to have the trust of the people that he's taking around. Or else, it could mean an injury or a fatality.

Maxwell: I call the guide "the trust-builder." Not only do you build trust in the guide, but you also build trust in yourself. When you climb on a rope, often the guide would go first, and then there would be four or five team members. Now, the guide's gone up and he's around the corner. You can't see the guide. I now am climbing, and I have someone behind me. That means I have to go up 120 feet and get on a ledge. Now I'm responsible for the person coming behind me.

So, not only do I have to build trust in myself, and my feet, I also have to earn the trust of the person behind me who's going to say to me, "Chris, I am now climbing. My life is in your hands." The great English sociologist Anthony Giddens came up with a beautiful little statement: "Trust is precisely the link between faith and confidence."

You want people to have faith in their feet, faith in their capacity to climb, and faith in their guide. But faith, in a way, is like hope. You know, "I hope I can climb. I hope my guide's a good one." What you really want is confidence. Trust is that link between just faith and real confidence. That's where guides really shine.

It's a thing that I've seen. I've seen a guide at 13,000 or 14,000 feet turn to a first-time climber, who is on a ledge about the width of this table, maybe three or four feet. He'll calmly say to this young lady — in fact, she was a nursing student at Penn— "Stephanie, I want you to put your back to the ledge. And I want you to step off the ledge. I want you to step backwards." She's attached by a rope, and she's now going to do 120-foot rappel for

the first time in her life. And he just calmly says, “Stephanie, just take a step back, and step off into the thin air.” This is what trust means.

“Trust is that link between just faith and real confidence. That’s where guides really shine.”

Knowledge@Wharton: Many companies focus on that team-building and that trust-building. For those people who remember the Super Bowl this past year, the Atlantic Falcons did a big team-building effort that they say helped them trust each other and get into the Super Bowl. So, this is a big industry now.

Maxwell: Yes, it is. In fact, when you go to climb in Jackson Hole, you have to pass a two-day climbing school. Day one, you have to pass. And day two, you have to pass. If you don’t pass, you don’t go up. They do this because they know that you need time to understand how your feet work on the rock, how to get a hand hold, and how to tie the knots. They know that it’s going to take a couple of days to build that trust. In business, if a manager takes the time to move from faith to confidence, and show people that, “I can build trust in you, and you can have trust in yourself and the teammates that you work with every day,” we’re all going to be better off. So, it does take an investment.

Knowledge@Wharton: You also talk about the fact that the people themselves need to be aware of the situations around them. You call it “risk-aware.”

Maxwell: Guides are risk-aware, that’s for sure. They’re aware of thunderstorms, bad weather and rock fall. They’re aware all the time. Their senses are just always switched on. But they’re not risk-averse. When you think about this — why would I try and get to the top of this ridiculous mountain, if I were averse to risk? You wouldn’t do it.

Guides have this wonderful balance. [They are] constantly risk-aware, but they’re not risk-averse. They will take clients in places that are risky. That’s why you need trust. If you don’t face risk, you’re not going to need trust. So, trust is important out in the mountains. But they’re very careful with this line between being aware and not being averse to risk, and they are also finely-tuned on, “Dan, this is just not your day.” They’re not afraid to say to somebody, “You can come back tomorrow. The mountain will still be here next year. This is not a good day for you, and we’re just not going to go any further.” So, they know this balance.

The same applies in business. You’re going to start a new enterprise. You can’t be risk-averse. You have to have some willingness to take the risk. But you must be risk-aware, that for instance, when you climb the mountain, summit fever kicks in. The only thing I want to do is get to the top. People rush to the top, and then get trapped by a storm. What they should have been was risk-aware, not suffering from summit fever. If they would have been risk-aware, they would have known that at a certain point, it was wise to turn around. This dividing line between risk-aware and risk-averse is something that guides are really schooled in. They can teach wonderful lessons to people who go with them.

Knowledge@Wharton: It is better to be a little more reserved and protective rather than pushing the envelope in many of these cases.

Maxwell: That’s right. There’s a great study in the British Medical Journal about those who

climb Mount Everest. And as it turns out, above a certain point, let's say 26,000 feet, you're now in the death zone. The deaths aren't coming on the way up. The deaths are coming on the way down. They get trapped in a storm, or they're exhausted and are in no condition to come down. A high proportion of the deaths on a major summit are on the descent, not on the way up.

Guides have made mistakes, especially on Everest. But the wise guide says, "You know, I'm looking at everything. And my risk sensors are up. I know you want to get to the summit. I know it cost you \$60,000 to be here. But this is not a good day."

Knowledge@Wharton: Looking at the big picture, whether it's climbing a mountain, or business-wise, you do have to have that perspective. You do need to take in everything that is around you, and not be the bull in the china shop.

Maxwell: The big picture is contrasted to, "We follow trends." All of us watch CNN. We read the paper. We're reacting all day long to small events. Sometimes we miss the big picture. Ronald Heifetz, [founding director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government] says, "You've got to get on the balcony. You've got to get off the dance floor, where you can't see anything developing. All you can see is the person next to you. You can't see the pattern on the floor. If you get up on the balcony and look down, now you have the big picture." I think guides are expert at developing the big picture.

"Guides have this wonderful balance. [They are] constantly risk-aware, but they're not risk-averse."

The summit is important, and everybody wants to get to the summit. But the guides seeing the big picture say, "You have to learn also to enjoy the journey." The journey is where the lessons are; there aren't many lessons to be learned on the summit. The lessons are on the way up and on the way down. Many of us, in life and in business, get lost in the details. [We get] lost in the events, and in the crush of information. Maybe we don't take enough time to get up on the balcony.

Knowledge@Wharton: Leadership is sometimes seen as an inherited trait. Is that true of these guides?

Maxwell: It's still a learned art. At Exum Mountain Guides, they say, "If you're a really great guide, don't apply. We'll find you." It takes years and years of practice climbing and taking clients up smaller peaks.

I know guides who've climbed the Grand Teton 400 or 500 times. I've climbed it five times. Can you imagine climbing it 500 times? Think of the skills that develop along the way.

Knowledge@Wharton: Even when you've done the Grand Teton so many times, you can't take it for granted. That is because things change, even on a mountain.

Maxwell: That's why [it is important to have] these leadership strengths — having the big picture, understanding risk, helping other people get to the top, being flexible in your leadership style. When you put them all together, you have a guide. Now, here's my proposal. What would it be like to work for someone who acts like a guide, rather than just

a manager or the fount of all knowledge, or the person that will come in and tell you how? How about a guide as a manager? Someone who you can go to, who will give you the strength and the empowerment to do what you need to do, and is there for safety — “I’ll back you up. I won’t let you fall off the precipice. But you must solve this problem yourself.”

Knowledge@Wharton: How do you think we could get more leaders to be like that?

Maxwell: They should all read the book. We get to that point by understanding more and more about ourselves, and understanding more about even our own emotional and social intelligence. How do I react to other people? Can I control my temper, my anxiety? Am I empathetic with other people? These are things that you learn — not quickly, but you often learn by making mistakes, by working your way up through an organization, and by observing managers who are good and [others who are] not so good. I don’t think there’s any quick answer to it. Working in an environment where people are guiding you toward your own personal summit, in work and in life, is the ultimate. That is developing over time. But it’s going to take a little work.