

Mountain Guides Teach Us About Leadership

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Bollywood is buzzing these days over *Poorna*, a new film that releases across movie theaters in India on March 31. The biopic tells the story of Poorna Malavath, who in 2014 became the youngest girl in history at age 13 to summit Mount Everest, the world's highest mountain. In a recent interview in *Condé Nast Traveller* magazine Poorna, now 16 and a high school junior at a boarding school in Telengana, India, said, "I had something to prove. I wanted to be a winner, and show the world what young girls are capable of."

As in Poorna's story, mountain climbers illustrate traits like grit, perseverance and personal courage. We can also learn a thing or two about leadership, both from climbers and their ever-present guides. A team of Nepalese guides — experts who understood all aspects of the mountain — accompanied Poorna on her quest to scale Everest.

Christopher I. Maxwell, a senior fellow at the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management, is an avid mountain climber who set out years ago to interview mountain guides, sometimes called sherpas, about their experiences leading people to the highest peaks.

Maxwell found that guides display six leadership traits that empower other climbers. These qualities, says Maxwell, can be adapted to our own leadership experiences in life and the business world. "How about a guide as a manager?" suggests Maxwell. "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.'" Maxwell distilled his 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](#).

Click [here](#) to listen to the full podcast with Maxwell, who began his research interviewing guides at the base of Grand Teton in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and ultimately tackled a total of 20 expeditions, to Nepal, Iceland, Quebec, Mexico, Patagonia, Peru and more, to interview guides. He found that guides had the following leadership strengths:

1. Demonstrating social intelligence. "First, they were socially intelligent. You can imagine that 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. 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.'"
2. Adopting a flexible leadership style. "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... friendly and nice — and yet, they could be quite demanding when they needed to be."
3. Empowering others. "Guides empower their clients to reach a summit that they never thought they would be able to reach. 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."
4. Trust. "I call the guide "the trust-builder." Not only do you build trust in the guide, but you also build trust in

yourself. Trust is that link between just faith and real confidence. That's where guides really shine...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 a 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."

5. Managing risk in an environment of uncertainty. "Guides are risk-aware. 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. Guides have this wonderful balance. They will take clients in places that are risky. [At the same time], 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."
6. Seeing the big picture. "Guides are expert at developing the big picture. 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...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."