Nine Minutes on Monday

The Quick and Easy Way to Go from Manager to Leader

JAMES ROBBINS
To my wife, Kelly.
Without you, I am less than I am.
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PART I

The Three Truths
Why Mountain Climbers Make Lousy Mountain Guides

The meeting lasted only a few minutes. When you are perched on the side of a mountain at 20,000 feet above sea level, it’s not a good idea to sit around. We had been steadily making our way up the southwest side of Mt. Sajama, the highest peak in Bolivia and one of the highest in the western hemisphere. We still had over 1,500 vertical feet to go before reaching the summit, and it was almost noon. As tired as we were, it looked like this was as high as we would get. Osvaldo, our guide, radioed base camp, informing the people there that we had stopped in order to make a decision. The choices were simple—continue on toward the summit or abandon our attempt to reach the summit and retreat. The entire expedition to climb Mt. Sajama now rested in the hands of our leader.

We had been in Bolivia for nearly three weeks, climbing and acclimating to get ready for our attempt at Sajama. That morning at 2:30 a.m. we left high camp at 18,000 feet under the cover of darkness. There were five of us roped together, moving slowly under the lights of our headlamps, ever upward toward the glacier. Before sunrise, Jack, one
of our team members, was having difficulty. After being assessed by our lead guide, John, the decision was made to take Jack back down to base camp. With our lead guide now departing for base camp with Jack in tow, there were just three of us left to go for the summit—Jim, a 33-year-old from North Carolina, Osvaldo, a Bolivian climbing guide who now took over for John, and me.

As we made our way up and onto the snow pack, the ground was littered with penitente, a type of snow formation common in South America that resembled pinnacles stretching up toward the sky. Our steel crampons chewed into the snow and ice as we made painstakingly slow progress toward a summit we could not see. Climbing at such altitudes can take a toll on your body, and just after sunrise Jim was beginning to feel the effects as he labored to continue. I could tell that Jim was getting tired as he stopped repeatedly and made comments about how hard this was.

The mountain was beginning to wear Jim down by slowly stripping away his will. The problem for Jim and me, however, was that we were down to our last guide and our last length of rope. If Jim quit now, we would all have to turn back; our quest for the summit would be over. Jim knew this and did his best to continue, but I began to doubt that he would last. What Jim needed now was motivation. What he could have really used was a motivational speaker climbing right behind him. Unfortunately, all he had was me, but, hey, I knew what to do. For the next hour I continued to spur Jim on with words of encouragement, looking for anything that would keep him going.

Then, sometime around mid-morning, something happened. It felt as if someone had sneaked up behind me and pulled my plug, draining away all my energy. My legs felt like heavy tree trunks, and an overwhelming feeling of fatigue washed over me. Because of a problem with our stove earlier in the day, we had limited water, and by not drinking enough, our bodies were beginning to feel the effects of dehydration. It was not long before I began to question my own ability to reach the
summit. Soon my doubts began to erode my desire to reach the top as my aching body redirected my thoughts to the down-filled sleeping bag awaiting me in base camp. My desires were no longer to conquer the mountain, but to end this agony.

Now I had a problem. If I called it quits, it was over for all of us. I would be the cause of the failed expedition. It even crossed my mind that this story might not make a very good speech. As I searched for a way to escape my situation, a brilliantly creative and innovative solution came to me. As has been said, necessity is the mother of all invention.

“I don’t need to quit!” I reasoned to myself, thinking with a brain a bit short on oxygen. “I just need Jim to quit.” Because if Jim quit, I could too. It would be like an honorable discharge from the mountain. I could still go home and tell all my friends that I would have made the top if it was not for this other guy. I also believed I could outlast him because I was in very good shape at the time. So my encouraging words to keep Jim going began to be fewer and farther apart. After all, I surely didn’t want to motivate him. However, I knew that Jim realized what was at stake and did not want to let me down. I knew what he was thinking and—I am ashamed to say this now, but I did something terrible—I opened the door a bit wider for Jim. I decided that, during one of our short rests, I would give Jim permission to quit. I would say to him, “Listen if you need to go down, that’s OK with me.”

I think Osvaldo sensed what was going on, which is why he decided to stop and call a meeting. Over the hours our pace had slowed, our attitudes had deteriorated, and I think both Jim and I wanted to give up, but neither of us wanted to be the first to suggest it. With crampons dug into the snow to keep from sliding down the mountain, Osvaldo got on the radio and, in his thick Bolivian accent, sent a transmission to base camp.

“Base camp, clients are tired. We are going to decide what to do next, whether to continue on or turn around and head back to base camp.”
There we sat, the Atacama desert a few thousand feet below, with only the sound of a light wind teasing the mountain. Vince Lombardi, legendary football coach, once said, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” Indeed, there we were, convinced we had reached our limit and longing for the home fires of base camp. The mountain demanded more than we could give, and now the fate of our expedition lay in the hands of Osvaldo, our leader. If we were to continue upward, it would require something extraordinary from him.

How do you get others to do something they feel they cannot do? How do you motivate people to do more, and be more, when they believe they are at their limit? Is motivation something we can do to people, or does it need to come from within the person themselves? Before we dive into these questions, let’s first consider another. What was Osvaldo paid to do?

**HOW CLIMBERS BECOME GUIDES**

Before he became a mountain guide, Osvaldo was a talented climber in his own right. Who would entrust their life on a mountain at high altitude to someone who was not competent to lead them? Certainly not I. When Osvaldo was merely a climber, things were much simpler. As a mountaineer, he simply climbed mountains. Getting to the top was the only goal, and, as his skills improved, so too did the number of summits he reached. Success was easily defined—getting to the top and returning home safely to tell about it, while having some fun along the way. For Osvaldo, the mountain itself was the challenge to overcome and the focal point of his energy and attention. Over time, his climbing skills impressed someone enough that this person suggested he consider becoming a mountain guide. Instead of simply climbing mountains, why not get paid to help other people climb mountains? This is the mountaineering world’s equivalent of frontline management.

While this is a natural evolution for a good climber like Osvaldo, it requires a monumental shift in his thinking. For Osvaldo, becoming
a guide meant that the mountain was no longer the focal point of his
energy and attention. Reaching the summit was now a by-product of
how well he managed his new job—moving people. Osvaldo’s expe-
rience as a mountain climber would serve him well in his new role.
Because of his own path, he could relate to the demands of the moun-
tains and their effects on people’s minds and bodies. This experience
alone would not make him a great mountain guide because mountain
guides don’t climb mountains; they help others to climb mountains.

So let’s return to the question. What is Osvaldo paid to do?

If you ask a group of people, you will get a variety of answers, such
as to keep us safe, to motivate us, and to make the trip enjoyable. While
all these are important—especially the part about safety (just ask my
mother)—in Osvaldo’s mind, he is ultimately paid for one thing—to get
people to the top of the mountain. And while there are parameters he
must operate within, such as safety and enjoyment for the client, suc-
cess for a mountain guide is primarily defined by getting people to the
top and then getting them back down.

In fact, getting people to the top is a bit like his scoreboard. It is
ultimately what he gets paid to do and what determines his success.
After all, do you want to climb with a guide who has never managed to
lead anyone to the top or, worse yet, one who has never returned anyone
safely home? If Osvaldo’s success is primarily based on whether or not
his clients reach the summit, who is more important in the equation?
Osvaldo? Or the clients? If you guessed the clients, you have answered
correctly, because although Osvaldo is an impressive climber on his
own, he has not been hired to climb mountains; he has been hired to
help others climb mountains.

Let’s leave the mountains for a moment and enter your workplace.
As a manager, you undoubtedly have a full plate that is constantly spill-
ing over with a seemingly endless list of to-do’s. The million-dollar ques-
tion, however, is what are you being paid to do? The secret to being a
great manager lies in answering this question correctly. Great managers
must make the same monumental shift that our friend Osvaldo had to make when he transitioned from mountaineer to climbing guide.

**WHAT ARE YOU PAID TO DO?**

Your primary job is to produce results, whatever they may be. Before you were a manager, you were also paid to produce results, but things were different then. Your focus was primarily on a set of tasks that over time produced a certain result. As a manager you are still paid to produce results, except that now it isn’t really you who produces them; it’s your people. The monumental shift required is moving from climbing mountains yourself to helping others climb mountains. As a manager you are paid to produce results through people, and because your success hinges on these results produced by the people you lead, you want to do everything in your power to help them be as successful as they can be.

As we sat at 20,000 feet, tired, dehydrated, and wanting to quit, Osvaldo could not afford to be just a mountain climber. What we needed was a mountain guide, a leader. With our summit bid in jeopardy, he had to figure out how to move and motivate us—to rally what we did have and apply it to the challenge at hand—Mt. Sajama’s summit.

Leadership is the art and science of moving people. Whatever had taken us to 20,000 feet was not going to be enough to get us to the 21,463-foot roof of Bolivia. More would be needed from us. But since we believed that we were at our vertical limit, going farther rested on great leadership from a mountain guide who had once been a climber himself.

That’s what this book is all about. How do you as a manager get your people to be the best they can be so that they get to the top of the mountain you’re climbing? In addition, how do you accomplish this so that they have such an enjoyable journey they want to do it all over again with you guiding the way? Last, how do you accomplish all this in a challenging environment where your schedule is already insanely busy, as if someone has set the speed of your treadmill a few miles
an hour faster than you can manage? In this new economy, managers around the world are pressed to find answers to these questions. Over the course of this book, you will learn a simple system to help you bring out the best in your employees, enabling them to produce results without adding hours worth of tasks to your plate. The nine principles found in this book will ignite the engagement, motivation, morale, and trust among your team members and will result in greater efficiency and higher levels of productivity.

Before we dive into these nine principles, I want first to introduce you to an invisible force that works in your favor to magnify your influence among your direct reports. Once you understand how this deeply ingrained psychological principle works, you will be even more motivated to devote yourself to excellence as a leader.

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LEADERSHIP TRUTH 1
Mountaineers climb mountains.
Climbing guides help people climb mountains.

TRANSLATION
You are paid to produce results.
These results are created by the people you lead.
Therefore, your job is to help your people be as successful as they need to be in order to produce results.

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