

What tragedies on Mount Everest can teach business about communicating in a time of crisis

By [Patrick Conroy](#), issued by [Ogilvy South Africa](#)

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As the world struggles with the impact of Covid-19 it may seem strange that a series of tragedies on the world's highest peak could serve as a lesson in crisis communications. We don't usually associate high altitude mountaineering with lessons for business, leadership and reputation management.



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In this article Patrick Conroy, now the head of strategy for PR and influence at Ogilvy in Johannesburg, reflects on the importance of crisis communications in the modern age.

For those who don't know, 1996 was one of the deadliest climbing seasons in Mount Everest's history and, arguably, the most controversial.

I had joined the South African team as a journalist covering the expedition for Talk Radio 702. It would be one of the biggest learning experiences of my life, but it took me 20 years to finally write about it in a book titled *Everest Untold*.

As the book took shape, I could identify a parallel story about communication and reputation management. Suddenly, I could see the failures from a business perspective; the lack of scenario planning, poor stakeholder engagement, the pressure of new business models being introduced and the failure to use

technology correctly.

As it turns out, mountaineering and business are very much the same.

But first the Everest story...

The story of Everest

In 1996, mountaineering was going through a shift. A few of the world's best climbers had realised there was big money in guiding high paying clients to the summit. The two men leading this new style of the business venture were Rob Hall and Scott Fischer. Clients would pay \$65,000 each to be part of their teams.

And then there were the traditionalists, those climbing to set a record or to place a national flag on the summit for the first time. Some were novices, like the South African team, and other small under-resourced expeditions.

Hall and Fischer were under pressure to prove their new business model. Success was vital to attract future clients. They were afraid that the smaller and less experienced teams would run into trouble on the mountain forcing them to abandon the summit and rescue their fellow mountaineers instead.

So, Hall and Fischer asked the smaller teams to stay off the climbing route during a period of good weather.

This provoked an angry response from the South African team leader, Ian Woodall, who declared quite correctly that Hall

and Fischer did not own the mountain and could not dictate to others when they could climb it.

Woodall was right, but as the saying goes 'you can be right or you can be in a relationship'.

The position taken by both sides alienated them from one another almost immediately. The animosity was palpable in an environment where you would have to turn to your fellow climbers in the case of a disaster. And that is exactly what was about to unfold.

As it turned out, Hall and Fischer were largely ignored and those who could ascend the mountain during the good weather window started moving up.

The big commercial teams reached the summit, as did a small team from Taiwan, while the South Africans stayed behind at the highest camp to attempt the summit the following day.



And it's at this point where everything goes wrong.

A sudden storm hits the upper parts of the mountain trapping Hall, Fisher and 19 other climbers on Everest's icy slopes. To make matters worse, some of their guides and clients did not have radios with them and could not relay critical information back to their base camp.

It now became clear there was no protocol for such a large scale disaster. Too much faith had been placed in the seemingly invincible leaders, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer. Now, these two men were neutralised by the storm and were fighting for their lives to get down.

The South African team had the most powerful radio communications equipment on Everest that year but, in the chaos, no one thought to switch the rescue operations to the small and inexperienced team's camp. It was assumed the experts would be able to save themselves and everyone else.

In base camp, it was becoming clear that most teams had not planned for the two most likely dangers on Everest: death and injury.

Even my own news organisation had failed to ask the question.

"How do we react when climbers die on the mountain?" In their enthusiasm to send me to Everest (and mine to go) we never once discussed the risks involved.

Sadly, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer paid with their lives. Both men died trying to get their clients to safety. Also, among the dead was a guide and five climbers bringing the toll to eight. Yet, more deaths were to follow, including a member of the South African expedition.

The South Africans made another summit attempt on 25 May. The plan was to leave at midnight with a self-imposed cut off time of 2pm to reach the summit. Any climber who had not reached the top was expected to turn back at this time.

Expedition leader Ian Woodall and climber Cathy O'Dowd reached the summit first shortly before 10am. On their way back down, they came across team photographer Bruce Herrod still making his way to the top. The time was 12pm, he had two hours to make the summit.

Woodall urged him to come with them, but given that he was still within the time limit he relented and let Herrod continue.

But Bruce Herrod broke his promise and never turned back when he failed to reach the top by 2pm. He just kept climbing, pursuing the goal as the risks mounted dramatically.

He reached the top just after 5pm and radioed us to say he had made it.

We never heard from him again. He disappeared on the descent – paying the ultimate price for disrespecting the protocols. His body was found two years later at the bottom of a cliff.

Woodall was blamed by the media for Herrod's death.

In anger, he cut off all communication from base camp hoping he could control the narrative when he got back to base camp several days later. It was a disastrous error. Woodall's reputation would never recover because during his silence the narrative of others became the official version.

Since the deaths on Everest, I continued to work in media before starting a consultancy and then joining Ogilvy in Johannesburg.

Many of the mistakes made on Everest have been repeated many times since, in business.

Now the world is gripped by the coronavirus pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of people have died. And these lessons are worth a reminder.

Lessons learnt

1. New ways of working

The virus has caused humanity to radically change the way it operates both socially and in business. Much like traditional mountaineering was upended by new commercial climbs, we will emerge from Covid-19 exploring new digital revenue streams and remote working.

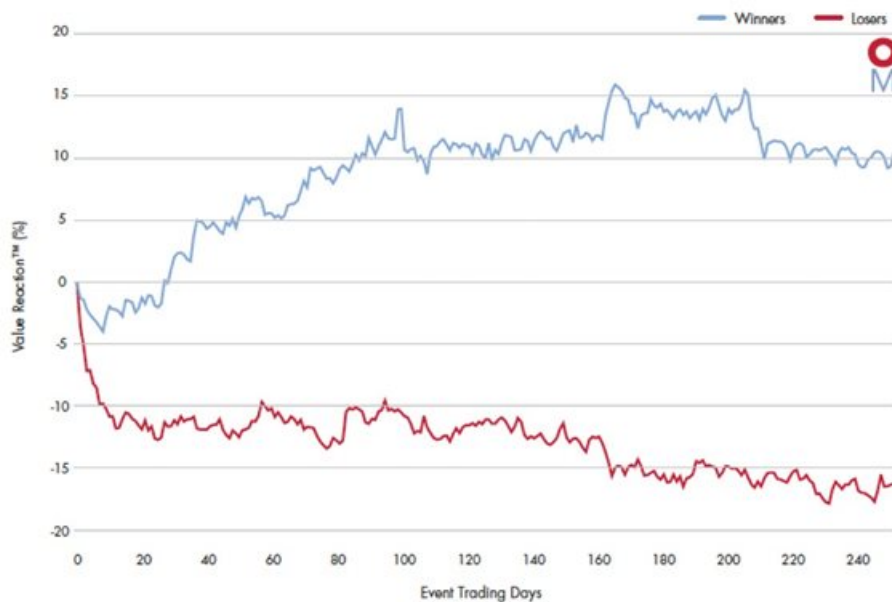
Retailers have been quick to embrace home deliveries, online orders and reserving trading hours for only the elderly to shop and thus minimise the risk of being infected.

2. Scenario planning has never been more important

Past successes are not a measure of how well you will cope in a crisis. Rob Hall and Scott Fischer were considered almost immortal in climbing circles. Yet, the failure to plan for a crisis, and equip everyone with the necessary tools, ultimately cost lives. Every business has inherent weak points and risks that must be mapped before a crisis occurs.

The Business Continuity Institute in London did a study of the financial performance between companies who managed crises well and those who failed over 250 days of trading on the stock exchange.

The graph below clearly indicates a financial upside to preparing for crises in advance.



3. Stakeholder engagement

Everest is so high (nearly nine kilometres) helicopters cannot reach the upper slopes due to the thin air. In a disaster, your rescuers are quite simply your fellow mountaineers.

Failure to acknowledge key stakeholders will leave you isolated in a crisis and prevent your business from forming new partnerships to overcome adversity. In the current pandemic, we have seen multiple brands come together in unity or partner to solve societal problems.

Retailers like Woolworths, Pick n Pay, Spar and Shoprite put aside their differences to pledge their support to serve South Africa. Discovery Health and Vodacom teamed up to offer free online testing for the virus.

4. Technology and data are critical tools

The ability to track the scale of a problem in real-time will vastly improve a company's ability to understand the scope and appropriate response to the crisis it faces.

On Everest, radio silence cost lives. Real-time data on climbers' whereabouts meant they could not be guided to safety or found by rescue teams. In business, not being able to deploy the right technologies quickly could be catastrophic.

Up-to-the-minute social media listening helps us gauge sentiment, track conversations and determine where the crisis is heading.

At Ogilvy, we have worked with large corporates like Anglo American that has effectively used WhatsApp to communicate with its host mining communities to educate them on the dangers of Covid-19 and how to seek treatment – a fine example of using technology creatively and effectively in a manner that resonates with the audience.

5. Avoiding the crisis conversation can cause reputational harm

Ian Woodall thought he could control the media narrative in his own time from Everest base camp. That was 24 years ago, before the age of social media. Today a Tweet can go global in seconds.

In the absence of your narrative, others will fill the void and it will become the historical record – whether true or not. In a crisis speed matters.

6. Beware the echo chamber

Each crisis is unique. Hall and Fischer had reached the summit of Everest many times before, yet no two storms are the same. Past success is not a predictor of future achievement.

Hall and Fischer were surrounded by starry-eyed clients or climbers who considered the two men to be living legends.

In a crisis, you will need an unemotional third-party to interrogate your thinking – somebody who is not afraid of your legacy or authority, but interested in helping you develop the best possible strategy in the circumstance.

Decide who your third party advisors are ahead of time, not in a crisis, and pledge to listen to them even if you ultimately make your own decisions.

7. Develop communication plan and share

Crisis communication plans should not be a secret to the people within your organisation. Being conscious of the risks and response protocols are vital.

During the initial stages of the Covid-19 outbreak in South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa was firm and clear in his message about the need for a national lockdown. The response was overwhelmingly positive with the majority of South Africans complying. Nobody builds unity out of confusion.

8. Be agile

Crisis situations are fluid. Not all scenarios can be a pre-planned and constant revision of what is possible needs to be considered.

The flower delivery company Netflorist quickly reframed its business during the coronavirus crisis to deliver fresh food and vegetables. This rapid adaptation meant the company was still in business and relevant despite their previous model being under threat.

9. Show compassion

On Everest, the once divided teams came together to share medical supplies to assist the injured and frostbitten survivors. In the days after the tragedy, we visited one another, sat together for meals and wept for the dead. It was a terrible time, but knowing we were in it together helped.

Brands have enormous power to address fears and concerns amongst their customers in a time of crisis. Simply knowing someone cares can do a great deal to lower the levels of anxiety and foster relationships.

10. Develop leaders

Hall and Fischer were good men. They gave their lives trying to save their teams. Sadly, Hall had allowed his second-in-command to lead a climb on a neighbouring mountain. Fischer's lead guide was with him, but also trapped in the storm and unable to make radio contact. This left a leadership vacuum in base camp.

Crisis management is a team sport involving management, employees, stakeholders and advisors. If one level of leadership is removed the next layer must be able to step in with confidence knowing they have the authority to act according to your crisis communication plans set out well in advance.

Conclusion

Ultimately, businesses will face two types of crises. The first is caused by their own actions or inherent risk points in their business. These can be mitigated against with planning and preparation.

The second is the unexpected disruptor they never saw coming. It could be as large and deadly as a blizzard on Everest or a microscopic virus that puts the world into lockdown.

These crises will test management's agility and the businesses' resilience. In this scenario speed, data and the ability to recover quickly will be critical.

But there is one thing no business is compelled to do – go through it alone. In a time of crisis reach out to partners to get you through it. Working together can often bring out the best in a bad situation.

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