

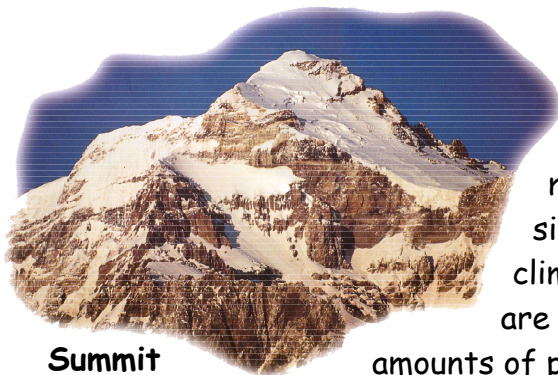
What Climbing a 22,841 Foot Mountain Has in Common With Project Management

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I have returned from a successful climb of Aconcagua in Argentina; at 22,841 feet it is the highest peak outside of the Himalayas. Our team of 12 people spent three weeks making the ascent, completing the traverse from one side of the mountain to the other, and making the descent. A traverse of Aconcagua is rare; so we consider ourselves most fortunate to be one of the few climbing teams to have accomplished this. At our highest camp at 19,800 feet we sustained several days of 80 miles per hour hurricane level-one force winds that destroyed one of our tents and eventually forced us off the mountain prior to making a summit attempt. The force of the winds was strong enough to blow us to the ground even when loaded with 80+ pound packs. Other climbers on the mountain experienced similar conditions and fate for the weeks prior to and following our climb.



Penitents



Summit

Preparing for and climbing a mountain of this magnitude has many challenges and risks. So does project management. As a veteran of three decades of experience managing projects, I can attest to the similarities between managing a project and climbing a mountain. First and foremost, both are far more likely to succeed if the necessary amounts of planning and preparation have been conducted. And, success is far more likely if a clearly defined and

agreed upon objective has been established, complete with intermediate goals and milestones. On Aconcagua, all of our climbing team members understood that the goal was to safely return from the mountain. It was further understood that the plan would involve a gradual ascent, which allowed for each of us to acclimatize and thereby minimize the debilitating effects of high altitude. Consequently, we all understood that this style of climbing would involve quite a bit of supplies, food, and equipment. Early in the climb, we carried 170 pounds per person; midway up the mountain the loads averaged 110 pounds each, and during the descent after we had consumed virtually all of the food and burned virtually all of the fuel, the loads were in the 80+ pound range. Moving the loads up the mountain took multiple trips, load carrying one day followed by a move of the camp the next day and then repeating this process as we progressed higher and higher. Rest days were included to further help with the acclimatization. It was all part of the plan.



14,500 Ft. Camp

The views at these high altitudes were spectacular: jagged rock and snow-covered peaks, cobalt blue sky, and steep-walled canyons. We saw Andean Condors, Llama-like Guanacos, lizards, and fox. The environment was desert-like with no moisture except for melted snow; there was no vegetation, and loose rock scree was everywhere. Footing was unstable. Winds were persistent at all

altitudes. Temperatures consistently ranged between -10 F to 30 F. The route we took is little known and virtually unused; consequently, we advanced for most of the climb in isolation without seeing other climbers on the mountain. The route involved climbs through snow fields, up a frozen waterfall, and over steep scree slopes where rocks broke free underfoot and would careen down the mountain. While we were on the mountain disastrous events unfolded which claimed the lives of a Czech climber, two Korean climbers, as well as four others. Our information about these events indicated that key success elements were either missing or not followed by these climbers. By all accounts these were novice climbers who were trying

to maintain their schedule when they exercised poor judgment by venturing further up the mountain during perilous conditions. While the consequences are almost never as severe for project managers, sound judgment based on experience can serve as the tempering effect for the pressure to blindly proceed according to plan when confronting unexpected problems and conditions.

The effects of this kind of altitude cannot be underestimated. Our guides evaluated our health and physiological condition daily. High levels of physical exertion resulted in the expenditure of 5-10 thousand calories of energy per day. Substandard sanitation resulted in intestinal problems including diarrhea. This, when combined with the overall loss of appetite and nausea, means that most climbers cannot sustain their weight. I lost fifteen pounds. The thin air, which had only 1/3 the oxygen of sea level, caused hypoxia and mental fatigue, and resulted in reduced reasoning ability. Drinking large quantities of water can be of some benefit; I averaged one gallon a day. One of the members of our climbing team did succumb to these effects and had to prematurely descend the mountain, thus ending his trip. I suffered these effects seriously for a day and a half and, fortunately, recovered, able to continue with the climb. Experience is the key in dealing with these circumstances. There is just no substitute for having dealt previously with altitude effects, knowing what to expect, and knowing what to do and not do. Again, the same holds true for the management of projects.



Author

Geographers have divided the world into seven continents. Mountaineers have identified the highest summit on each of these continents; Aconcagua is the second of the seven highest summits. It is a true world-class mountain. An enormous feeling of satisfaction comes from performing well on such a mountain; not unlike the satisfaction levels that come from well-managed projects.