

Twenty years ago climber Stephen Venables became the first Englishman to reach the top of Everest without using bottled oxygen. Today, Venables is all about motivating the management community. 'People want to be inspired,' he says. By **Nick Smith**

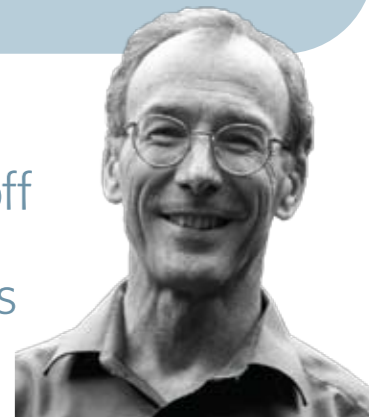


Stephen Venables crossing a crevasse on a rope bridge on Mount Everest in 1988

# mountains of motivation

ED WEBSTER, NICK SMITH

'In some respects business is harder than mountaineering. If I fall off Everest and snuff it, so what? But a bad business decision means other people's families suffer.'



"IT'S MY BRAND recognition," says Stephen Venables. He's talking about Everest, the mountain he climbed two decades ago. We're sitting in the front room of his smart terraced house in Bath, surrounded by mementoes of a career in mountaineering. "Of course I don't get to climb much now," he says, an oblique reference to the fact that you can't make a living directly from climbing.

Now in his fifties, he's a regular TV broadcaster as well as the author of a dozen books. He also lectures and guides on treks around the Himalayas. "I don't really have a single job description," he says, but nearly everything relates to mountaineering and in particular Everest, including a lucrative spin-off in the corporate sector, addressing the management community on self-motivation. The reason business managers turn to the world of exploration and adventure for their role models is because "we're seen as achievers who've survived against the odds and done difficult things."

Well over a thousand people have now climbed the highest peak in the world, but Venables' ascent back in 1988 was something special. When he set foot on the 8,850m summit he became the first Englishman to get to the top without the use of supplementary oxygen.

To put this in some sort of context, when you climb above 8,000m you are entering the 'death zone'. At this altitude there is hardly any oxygen and your body starts to shut down: your muscles deteriorate, you hallucinate, and simple tasks such as remembering to stand up become almost impossible. Dangerously dehydrated and continually on the verge of cerebral oedema, without supplementary oxygen you will die. You're operating on the edge of what is physiologically possible, and to do what Venables did requires colossal levels of physical fitness, mental stamina and sheer bloody will to survive.

Some experts think that to climb Everest without bottled oxygen is one of the greatest achievements in sport. The irony is that the only photographic record of Venables' presence at the top of Everest is a self-portrait taken of his reflection in an abandoned oxygen cylinder.

When Venables made his historical ascent it was still seen as being right on the furthest frontier of what was achievable. Ten years previously, Italian climber Reinhold Messner, along with Austrian Peter Habeler, became the first to ascend Everest "by fair means or not at all". Messner and Habeler were

it exists outside any formally regulated framework, and by its very nature tends to anarchy."

Venables doesn't look like much of an anarchist. His rather owlish spectacles and slightly donnish air make you think he'd be perfect to play Harry Potter's dad or maybe conduct an orchestra in Berlin. And while he seems approachable and calm on the surface, there is also something Machiavellian about him: his conversation is intense, animated and ablaze with epithets such as 'ruthlessness', 'determination' and 'self-motivation'. You can see how he reached the summit.

## GET MOTIVATED: THE VENABLES TOP 10 SECRETS OF SUCCESS

- Seize new opportunities: say 'Yes'
- Seek the unknown: predictability can breed boredom
- Don't be obsessed by one overriding goal which could prove unattainable: enjoy the journey
- Celebrate small successes on the way
- Take pride in every detail of a project: make your base camp beautiful
- Acknowledge other people's strengths: know when to hand over the lead
- Don't be afraid to push yourself forward when you know you are going well
- Accept temporary setbacks: there is often another solution to the problem
- Keep trying until you are positive you can go no further
- Don't rail against routine drudgery: sometimes hard graft is unavoidable

Venables' role models: "At the time I was 24 and the assumption was that they were supermen – supreme athletes in a different league. But, it was like the 'four-minute mile'. By the following autumn another climber had done it."

### HIGH-ALTITUDE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

A further 19 tried before Venables, four of whom died on the mountain. Venables agrees that this is "a sobering statistic". British Formula One racing driver David Coulthard goes a little further, claiming that to attempt to climb Everest (with or without supplementary oxygen) is "statistically an insane thing to do. If Formula One had the safety record that mountain climbing has, we wouldn't be allowed to do it." This amuses Venables: "One of the attractions of mountaineering is that

These are the characteristics of success in difficult situations: characteristics Venables feels transfer from the slopes of the Himalayas to the world of business management.

"Self-motivation is everything," he says, before explaining that any comparison between a mountaineering expedition and a corporate organisation has to accept the premise that the former is a microcosm of the latter. But the similarities are obvious: you take on a great project, bring a team of like-minded people together, while ticking off milestone achievements as you progress towards the final objective.

You can imagine the parallel. You're a chief product design manager and the CEO has decreed that 'Project Avocado' is going to be unveiled on your stand at the Hanover Fair next April. All is going well until it

becomes clear that a crucial component can't be delivered on time. You inevitably fall off your critical path with the result that there's no 'Project Avocado' at Hanover. It's tempting to think: "No one's dead, let's reschedule the launch". If you fall from a knife-edge ridge on the way to the summit of Everest, you'll find yourself pitching headlong down a 3,000m chasm into Tibet. Now that's serious – we can all learn from that.

"I understand the analogy," says Venables, which is a polite way of saying he disagrees. "Paradoxically, the thought of losing your company several million pounds and causing a lot of people to lose their jobs is more frightening than the thought of falling off a mountain, where you don't really have to face the consequences. In some respects business is harder than mountaineering. If I fall off Everest and snuff it, so what? But if you make a bad business decision other people's families suffer."

**MORE TIPS FROM THE TOP**

Venables, who admits that mountaineering can be "viscerally frightening", does not limit himself to motivating his audiences with tales of the great outdoors. He recalls in his pre-Everest days sending a book proposal to the eminent publishers Hodder & Stoughton. "One of the boldest things I have ever done was to sit down at the end of an expedition and draw up that proposal," he says. Even today, as an award-winning author, he finds the prospect of cold-calling newspaper editors with ideas for stories "terrifying". More terrifying than facing the next pitch of a difficult climb? "Yes."

For someone who lectures on self-motivation this might seem a bit of an admission, but his experiences at high altitude mean that he has become accustomed to getting a grip. He apologises for sounding arrogant, but he feels that it is the depth of experience gained on the world's highest peaks that enables him to compose

himself at will. When he discusses these ideas with audiences made up of managers he is often met with a reception that seems to say "what can a mountaineer tell us about what we do?"

"I think that one of the challenges is to overcome the scepticism. You must always remember that fear can be a good motivator. But I try to remember that above all you must always entertain an audience. Whether it is several hundred finance personnel from Tesco or a climbing club in the upper room of a pub, you have to engage the audience."

Once they are engaged, what sort of practical advice can you give these people? After all, how can you educate an inexperienced manager in the art of getting a grip? Venables says that it is not advice or knowledge that he is offering; rather he is hoping to transmit inspiration. "People want to be inspired," he says.

Typically the audiences he addresses are from larger companies that are in the process of transition. Often, disparate sections of an organisation that rarely work together are being brought together under one roof, and he is being used as an icebreaker. These can be departmental or even corporate mergers, or perhaps teams that are about to face difficult times with a lot of change ahead – instances where there are apparently insurmountable obstacles. That's when companies such as Glaxo, Powergen and Shell call on Venables to inspire their managers on topics such as teamwork, leadership, motivation, stress, planning, coping with change and making things happen.

Venables explains that, in corporate conferences, the delegates will often have sat through sessions of dry technical business involving graphs, internal affairs and facts and figures, all of which can lead to loss of focus. And while he doesn't consider himself to be the comic turn before the intermission, there is a strong sense in which his role is to get to the lectern and tell a



Stephen Venables at Death Bivouac on the North Face of the Eiger, 1986

really good story to restore focus, and inspire the delegates to "face their own challenges with renewed vigour". Reactions can vary: Venables gleefully recounts the tale of one delegate who was reduced to tears, before admitting that it is more common for pumped-up managers to ask him how they too can become mountaineers.

**MOUNTAINEERING BUSINESS**

Venables is convinced that in the management context there is more of a need for self-motivation than ever before. He says that there's no longer such a thing as a 'job for life', and so "what you make of your own circumstances, how you find your niche within a project, and how you motivate

yourself has become more important."

This is partly due to the increase in businesses that have adopted a horizontally layered management structure. And although in many cases it is glaringly obvious that this 'horizontal' structure is merely a pyramidal structure with a hasty coat of horizontal-coloured paint sloshed over it,

the result is an increased onus on the individual to define their own role in an organisation. The ability to take the initiative, rather than wait for orders to be handed down, is one that managers are being forced to add to their skills portfolio. The kind of uncertainty, constant change, and ever-present risk brought about by flat management structures is, according to Venables, "a fair description of a Himalayan expedition".

But do you have to belong to a certain personality type to be able to adapt to these fluctuating conditions on the mountain? "I don't know," says Venables frankly, "because I'm not sure what 'personality type' I am. I'm suspicious of questionnaires like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, psychometric testing and so on. They don't take into account the fact that one minute you can be a team player, while the next need to exhibit individual ruthlessness. When we went to Everest in 1988 we were a team of four, but one individual – me – made it to the top. If I hadn't pressed on by myself none of us would have made it." (See 'Difficult decisions on the roof of the world', right).

Venables sits back and thinks hard. He's been answering questions about Everest for 20 years, and it seems as though he is still distilling the experience and learning from it. He puts the finishing touches on the thought process before explaining the apparent contradiction of playing for a team while achieving personal goals: "In mountaineering you don't always get to the summit. In fact often you don't, but people imagine that's what it is about. When we went to Everest in 1988 we went to climb a new route. Four of us succeeded in making the new route and so that was the success. If you like, it was a good end of year result. The fact that one of us got to the top was a bonus." ■

■ Nick Smith is management editor and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society

**book extract**

**DIFFICULT DECISIONS ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD**

In this extract from Stephen Venables' new book the author recounts the closing act of the drama of summit day on Mount Everest. As the reduced team of three mountaineers near the end of its task, can Venables summon up the determination to reach his goal?

"The rope jerked falteringly across the black plateau and after about ten minutes I asked if I could take over the lead. Rhythm was our only hope, and for a while I managed a soothing pattern of 20 paces followed by a short rest. But as the slope steepened the rope jerked me back, breaking the rhythm.

"We've got to move faster than this," I insisted. 'Do you mind if we unrope?'

"I agree," gasped Robert. Ed was silent. I knew he wanted that psychological bond; but I also knew that at our stumbling pace we had little chance of reaching the summit today. 'I'll trail the rope,' I offered as apology, 'in case we need it higher up.' And then I ploughed ahead, leaving the other two to follow more slowly.

"It seemed a callous denial of the camaraderie that had sustained us over the last two months; but down in the valley Robert had stated repeatedly that each of us should be responsible for himself, each person deciding how far to push himself into what is often called, with justification, the 'death zone'. And I knew that I wanted to push myself right to the limit. After all these years of ambivalence and retreats and lingering regrets, I wanted to seize this opportunity; and I was determined, ruthlessly, that no one was going to hold me back.

"So I pushed on alone, still not quite believing that I was here, on this summit slope of the world's highest mountain, my whole world reduced to a flickering pool of torchlight...



Internet Resources: To find out more about Stephen Venables, including details of his public speaking visit [www.stephenvenables.com](http://www.stephenvenables.com)



"Six o'clock in the morning. I ploughed on. Twenty paces were now impossible: three or four seemed to be my limit, and the pauses were getting longer. Robert and Ed were still out of sight, hidden by the curve of the gully. But they had almost ceased to exist. The whole world had shrunk to this one human organism – to

this lung sucking at nothingness, trying to will life into leaden legs... "On the final ridge I was thrilled to find a firm crust [of snow] where I could walk on the surface. Now nothing could stop me, and for the first time since leaving London, I knew, with total certainty, that I was going to reach the summit. It was just a case of taking it slowly, carefully, patiently, not allowing legs to outstrip lungs and bring on a fit of coughing...

"And a moment later I was kicking up that final slope, one step at a time, drawing three breaths to every step, emerging onto the last few feet of the West Ridge, and tramping, deliriously happy, onto a white dome in the sky decorated with three empty oxygen cylinders...

"I had believed all along that I might be capable of getting up Everest without oxygen; what had always terrified me was the possibility of not being able to get down again. Now, as I started to grope through the cloud, trying to reverse my own tracks through the enveloping whiteness, mouth gasping, legs wobbly, I realised just how weak I was. Robert and Ed must by now have turned back. Neither they, nor anyone else could help me. I was utterly alone on top of the world and in two and a half hours' time it would be dark."

This edited extract is from 'Higher than the Eagle Soars' by Stephen Venables (Hutchinson, £18.99). Reproduced by kind permission of the author.