
Teamwork, the Everest Way



By [Randel Carlock](#), the Berghmans Lhoist Chaired Professor in Entrepreneurial Leadership at INSEAD

The first Singaporean women to reach the summit of Everest used a framework that defines effective teams.

There were no Olympic medals up for grabs when Sim Yi Hui and Jane Lee, the co-founders of the Singapore Women’s Everest team set out to recruit team members to climb the world’s tallest mountain in 2004. “When we first formed the team my goal was just to climb the mountain. It was really a pure passion to want to climb”, Sim Yi Hui told me on stage at the recent [FT Family Business Forum Asia](#).

Little did she know at the time but her goal would get a lot bigger. Once the newspapers caught wind of Yi Hui’s dream, she and her team members became the “Singapore Women’s Everest Climbing team”, the first group of Singaporean women to attempt to reach the summit of the mountain. The nation was watching and expectations were rising.

To cope with the enormity of their mission, the team developed a highly fluid, yet effective way of operating, which was crucial to their success. It comprised of four key practices which are widely considered to define team effectiveness; the GRPI framework (Goals, Roles and Responsibilities, Process

and Procedures and Interpersonal Relationships), from Richard Beckhard's 1972 study, "Optimising Team Building Efforts".

The GRPI model focuses the leader and team first and foremost on concrete goals. In 2007 Noel Tichy, an American management expert, found that 80 percent of team conflicts were the result of unclear goals. Agreeing on shared goals is therefore the highest priority. The next most important factors are roles and responsibilities, processes and procedures and relationships.

Shared goals

Yi Hui's team was very clear about its goal right from the beginning, which was a humble one considering the scale of its ambition. The six women from the equator knew that the freezing climb would push them to their limits so their main aim was to put just one team member on the summit. They were all prepared that they might not be the one to plant the flag.

They also set expectations; each team member had to commit four years to the endeavour. This meant putting off big life decisions such as getting married, which one of them duly did.

They also pledged to go together. When funds were lacking, meaning only two of them could go, they delayed the climb, which was originally scheduled for 2008, for another year to gather more sponsors.

The Singapore team's shared goal also aided shared decision-making. "There were a lot of times when we disagreed with decisions made and also because of different personalities, but we will always go back to the goal, which is that we want to get up the mountain safely and come down. If you put that goal as the overarching thing to look at, then it makes decision-making a lot easier," she added.

Clear roles

Yi Hui was joined by a mixed bag of team members; from a Major in the Singapore Armed Forces, to a pharmaceutical sales rep, all of whom were different ages.

Yi Hui and Jane weren't the oldest (Jane was actually the youngest), nor the most experienced or even the most physically ready. Unconventional in most places, especially so in Asia, but their team made all decisions together and

leveraged each other's skills from the beginning.

For example, Joanne Soo became the team mentor because of her background running her own outdoor adventure training company. A veteran leader of trekking and mountaineering expeditions, having led teams to Mount Damavand in Iran and Mount Halla and DeChongBong in Korea, it was a natural role.

The team quickly discovered that Peh Gee, the Singapore Army Major, was strongest in communications and ensuring order, so she was assigned to look after all equipment, especially communications kit like satellite phones and cameras.

Plucky processes

“We realised that in such a stressful environment you need to have certain fixed processes, and the daily debrief was one of them. So, every day we will always gather in the tent to talk about what happened in the course of the day and if there are certain things we needed to sort out we would be able to discuss and make any decisions based on the discussions.”

Such clear processes and group decision-making meant the team had to make one very difficult decision in the interest of achieving the goal. Yi Hui was diagnosed with costochondritis (an inflammation of the sternum) during the climb, which gave her an increasing amount of chest pain the higher she pushed up the mountain. Fearing she wouldn't make it and become a burden to her teammates, she made the hard decision to return to camp and let the others push to the top, which they duly did. In the end, five of them made it to the summit, far surpassing the original goal anyway.

Relationships matter

How members of a team interact with each other is critical to mutual trust and respect. The leader's style also influences the interaction of the whole group. Yi Hui as a co-leader was also called the “merry-maker” for her good humoured approach to difficult situations and Jane was a driven and tenacious go-getter, who the team saw as a natural leader. Both of them, however, instilled very open communication in the team and together, imbued it with a mixed sense of seriousness and fun. Their team was not defined by a typical hierarchy.

While hierarchy is said to improve a team, it can also undermine it. In research conducted by my colleague [Roderick Swaab](#) which looked at 5,104 group expeditions to the Himalayas over the past 100 years, he found that hierarchically-oriented teams climbing Everest had a higher chance of reaching the summit, but such teams had more climbers die on the way up. The less hierarchical ones had a lower chance of success, but a higher chance of coming back alive. One of his paper's key pieces of advice is to ensure that teams have a safe environment to speak out, which defined the less hierarchical teams, something Yi Hui's team did very well.

The closeness of the team endured victory too. "The most touching moment was when my teammate, she reached the summit and the first thing she said, it was not, 'Oh, I am at the top,' or, 'I have made it.' The first thing she said to me was, 'Yi Hui, this is for you.'"

The importance of having a shared goal was central to the team's success. Leaving someone behind, even one of the team leaders, was not something the team took lightly, but it was necessary for the overarching goal, which was not only for one of them to reach the summit, but for all of them to come home safely.

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