Success Secrets Learned from Rock Climbing

Executive Summary

Rock climbing provides a poignant analogy for life. The belayer’s role is to ensure the climber’s safety and help them reach their goals.

Source: Sarah Wallace, FSDA. Originally published as SDA Today article, 2015
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Introduction

Sometimes the most powerful learning experiences are not found in a classroom or in a book. In 2015 I attended the National SDA EDSymposium conference in Golden, CO, and signed up to participate in the optional rock wall climbing challenge one afternoon. I did not have any aspirations of mastering the sport of rock climbing but wanted to try something outside my comfort zone. While EDSymposium is known for its renowned speakers, elevated continuing education sessions, and premiere networking opportunities, I was blown away at what an amazing analogy this optional experience was for SDA, for my career, and for my life in general.
Section 1 – Your Role / Your Team

I had never rock climbed and was intimidated by the equipment, the wall, and the sheer task of the challenge. Just getting started was an accomplishment in itself. Our instructor provided a lot of encouragement and reminded us of some integral lessons as we climbed.

The Role of the Climber: The role of the climber is just to try. That’s all. You don’t have to get to the top, you don’t have to get there first, you just have to make an effort. If you make the effort, trust your belayer, listen to those with better perspective, you will surprise yourself with how far you can go! And even if you don’t “ring the bell” at the top, you will appreciate how much you accomplished.

“Every mountain top is within reach if you just keep climbing.”
Barry Finlay, Kilimanjaro and Beyond

The Role of the Belayer:

The role of the belayer is to communicate with the climber and to keep them from falling or getting hurt, but more importantly to make the climber feel safe so they can continue to try their best.

The Commands: There were several commands that were posted on the wall that the climber and the belayer use as you climb the rock wall, and two of the most important commands were, “Take” and “Gotcha.” The climber says, “Take” when they need to let go and the belayer says, “Gotcha” to signify they are locking the belay and it’s safe to let go.

Sometimes it feels counterintuitive to let go; after all your goal is to get to the top. Your focus remains upward and you begin to feel anxious when you sense fatigue, so it’s natural to try to power through that and not take a break. But, by the time you reach the top, if you don’t gas out before you get there, you’re so exhausted, you aren’t able or don’t want to climb again because it was not an enjoyable experience. Sometimes it actually can even take longer than if you rested periodically along the way up.
Section 2 – Perspective

When you are climbing, you quickly realize how limited your perspective and view is. You can’t always see the best place to put your feet or which handhold is best. It was really helpful to have a group of other people watching down below who could say things like, “There’s a ledge you can put your left foot on just up and to the right a little bit.” Even though you couldn’t see that and otherwise wouldn’t have known it was there, by trusting your fellow climbers, you quickly discover that you are able to move higher than you could without them. By saying, “Take,” and being able to lean back, you sometimes are able to see much more clearly where you want to reach or put your feet. And by gaining a new perspective, by leaning back and allowing your belayer to take your weight, it affords you the opportunity to see more clearly not just where you want to go but how to get there, which gives you more confidence. Taking advantage of the break to rest your arms lets you climb again with more strength than before, so you can try to reach those hand holds or footholds that might have been too hard to get to without resting.

“Getting to the top is optional. Getting down is mandatory.”

-- Ed Viesturs,
No Shortcuts to the Top: Climbing the World’s 14 Highest Peaks
Section 3 – Trust the Natural Features

Another thing that my instructor kept encouraging me to do was to “Trust the natural features.” That was one of the scariest things to do. I felt much more comfortable grabbing or stepping on the obvious handholds, but I never would have reached the top if I didn’t trust the natural features on more than one occasion. That meant sticking my fingers in a crack on the wall and trusting that it would give me enough leverage to pull myself up. Another time I had to brace my foot in a corner of two rocks and that was the only thing that allowed me to push up high enough to grab the next hold. It was a poignant reminder that sometimes in life, it is actually the less than obvious and seemingly innocuous things in life that help you make progress if you just trust the natural features surrounding you.

When you start to feel tired or feel like you might not be able to go any higher, it’s amazing how much energy a little encouragement can provide. Having a chorus of people cheering your success and progress helps keep you motivated enough to continue to do your one job as a climber, to try. And whether you reach the top or decide to stop along the way, it’s always a celebration of success. Because as long as you tried your best, you did your job and you did it well. Sometimes you can see failing to reach the top as a failure, but if you focus on the true goal of life, to try your best and push yourself beyond your comfort zone, then you will always see the successes you experienced on each journey.
Conclusion

We all are on our journey upwards in our lives and our careers and as we climb on our individual paths, we need a belayer: someone or something that keeps us from falling, makes us feel safe enough to keep trying, and who will provide a new perspective and advice to help us see what we aren’t able to.

My family has been my belayer throughout my life - my mom, my dad, and my sister have all locked the belay and said, “Gotcha” when I was too tired, too scared, or too intimidated to reach for the next handhold. I’ve been blessed by having a great extended family and friends who all encouraged me along my climb, pointed out options for my life, my career, those natural features that I might have otherwise missed.

My firm has been instrumental belayer in my career advancement. They have provided the necessary equipment for the climb by supporting my involvement in SDA from membership dues and chapter and national leadership opportunities to the many continuing educational sessions either remotely or in person that help provide valuable perspective and new resources to reach higher than before.

SDA has many different belayers: Chapters are belayers for their members, the Executive Committee are belayers for chapter leadership and Committee Chairs, Committee Chairs are belayers for their committee members, and our Executive Director is a belayer for the whole organization. Whether you are looking for the most relevant educational programming in the A/E/C industry, or for new leadership opportunities, SDA is there to say, “Gotcha” when you need to say, “Take.”

SDA is there to encourage you as you make progress toward your goals and to celebrate your successes along the way. SDA is just one of many organization that help us along our climb. Who else do you trust to say, “Gotcha,” when you need to say, “Take?”
References

No Shortcuts to the Top: Climbing the World’s 14 Highest Peaks, Viesturs, Ed.
Kilimanjaro and Beyond, Finlay, Barry.

SDA Resources

SDA Webinars:
Virtual Meeting/Webinar recording, Transformational Leadership, July 2018,
Virtual Meeting/Webinar recording, Leadership for Design Professionals, Oct 25, 2018
Virtual Meeting/Webinar recording, Leadership Training: Solving the Conflict. 2018

Blogs:  Key Attributes of a Leader, September 25, 2019


Other Resources

Mentorship and Sponsorship, Matthew Philpott, Journal of Accountancy, 14 May 2020,
https://www.journalofaccountancy.com/newsletters/2020/may/mentorship-
D=128489890&SendID=278802