

Interview with D. Christopher Kayes

How goals can lead you into disaster

Business leaders often set and pursue challenging goals. Like mountain climbers who seek to reach the world's highest peaks, business leaders are taught to hold onto goals with unwavering resolve. But when does the relentless pursuit of goals become destructive? Leaders who drive their teams by setting challenging goals could be setting themselves up for disaster rather than success, argues, D. Christopher Kayes, professor of organizational behavior at The George Washington University, USA and visiting professor at the University of Hull, UK.

Death on Mt. Everest

Dr. Kayes has studied teams all over the world and has noticed a disturbing trend among some team leaders. Some leaders push their teams so hard to reach goals that they actually drive their teams to fail. Dr. Kayes, points to the 1996 Mt. Everest disaster that grabbed international headlines. Two teams leaders in particular, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, were considered among the world's most competent high altitude climbers. Yet, their unwavering pursuit of the summit contributed to the deaths of not only these two leaders but six of their followers as well.

The Everest disaster represents a broader problem among teams, destructive goal pursuit. As Dr. Kayes explains in his new book, *Destructive Goal Pursuit: The Mount Everest Disaster* (Palgrave-Macmillan), destructive goal pursuit is not confined to high altitude mountain climbing, but can occur in all teams, as well as in a variety of

organizations. Destructive goal pursuit emerges when leaders identify too closely with a future, as yet unachieved goal.

The Limits of Goal Setting

Dr. Kayes believes that most leaders become too easily seduced by the promise of goal setting as a catch all strategy for leadership. Indeed, studies seem to confirm that goal setting gets results. But Dr. Kayes noticed that most of the findings on the positive effects of goal setting rely on simple tasks and simple goals. For example, goal setting works well when improving production in a manufacturing environment or increasing sales. Most situations in business and government, however, require far more complex thinking than traditional goal setting techniques. As any observant leader knows, leading involves complex, inter-related variables that are constantly in flux. Traditional goal setting techniques work best when the environment is stable and complexities are few.

Failing to account for the complexity of the problem is exactly where most leaders get into trouble. Take the two leaders on Mt. Everest, Hall and Fischer. They both set the ambitious goal of getting to the top of Everest. They hoped to get there by using the same tried and true tactics that had gotten them to the top before. But in 1996, the situation changed. The two experienced climbers failed to take into account the complexity of leading a team of new, more amateur climbers. Nor did the leaders consider the complex team dynamics and motivational forces and cultural differences among climbers that emerged during the climb.

What is particularly disturbing is that Hall and Fischer followed all the traditional rules of goal setting. For example, they set a stretch goal, pursue it vigorously and overcome challenging obstacles by keeping your focus on achieving your desired

outcome. As Hall and Fischer became overcome by their push for the summit, they forgot a key piece of wisdom from mountain climbing. Getting to the top was only part of the challenge – you still need to get back down. In the end, Hall and Fischer set an ambitious goal but fell prey to the destructive pursuit of an idealized goal.

Warning Signs

Dr. Kayes outlines several warning signs that a team leader may be engaged in destructive goal pursuit. These include:

1. *A narrowly defined goal* – the leader sets a single, narrow course of action measured by a short term outcome. An example includes a mountain climber who sets out to reach the top of a mountain but fail to plan for how to get back down.
2. *An idealized future* – the leader builds his reputation on a romanticized vision of what the world will look like after a goal is achieved. For example, a leader inspires a team to overcome a problem but says nothing about the day to day work involved in achieving the goal.
3. *Goal-driven justification* – the goal itself is used to explain setbacks as in a leader who ignores problems by saying ‘let’s cross that bridge when we come to it’.
4. *Public expectation* – many leaders fall prey to destructive goal pursuit because they face enormous public expectation to achieve certain outcomes. How many CEO’s have lost their job due to short term earnings drops?
5. *Association of the goal with destiny* – leaders that fail to recognize that not all goals can be achieved often pursue goals too far. Many great military leaders have accomplished their own demise, not because they changed course, but

because they believed that pursuing the goal was the only way out of an already bad situation.

6. *Face-saving behavior* – leaders that try to justify poor performance with more goal setting and fail to acknowledge mistakes, decrease their chances to learn and fail to fix detrimental problems.

Overcoming the Destructive Side of Goals

The best leaders move beyond these six pitfall of goal setting, Dr. Kayes argues. Leaders can overcome destructive goal pursuit by through seven practices:

1. *Recognizing and solving ill-structured problems* – leaders understand the nature of today's environment as a complex system. The best leaders recognize that most problems require a mix of traditional goal setting along with other types of open ending thinking like scenario building and critical thinking about existing goals.
2. *Learning from their experience* – leaders develop multiple strategies for achieving goals, assess their current situation and update with new strategies, especially when they face new situations.
3. *Recovery* – leaders develop psychological resilience to setbacks and mistakes by not taking them personally, but instead using setbacks as an opportunity to learn.
4. *Team learning* – leaders cultivate differences among team members to help the team gather a wider range of knowledge and reassess its situation than could be done by individuals working alone.

5. *Fostering trust* – leaders develop a culture safe for surfacing problems and accepting reasonable mistakes.
6. *Minding the gap* – leaders constantly seek to monitor the difference between goals set and goals achieved. They constantly guard against getting caught up by fast moving and dangerously difficult goals.
7. *Cultivating dual loyalties* – leaders manage loyalties to different sets of values that may be in conflict. This begins with identifying and prioritizing the competing values that guide their decisions.

Dr. Kayes concedes that this list of activities doesn't ensure effective goal setting and isn't the final word on leadership. Also, Dr. Kayes does not recommend abandoning goals altogether. Rather, he argues that leaders need a better understanding of when to focus on learning rather than idealized outcomes.

A Cautionary Note to Leaders

In his continuing research on destructive goal pursuit, Dr. Kayes has found convincing evidence that the destructive pursuit of goals can infiltrate all types of organizations. In fact, Dr. Kayes's current research argues that destructive goal pursuit can help us understand psychological aspects of a variety of organizational disasters. The list of potential victims of destructive goal pursuit include Enron, the failed search for Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, drug abuse in Major League Baseball as well as the impending mortgage crisis.

Ultimately, in the fast paced, ever changing world of business, leaders lead better when they understand that learning, not the blind pursuit of goals gives them the

competitive edge. When business leaders, like their mountain climbing counterparts, embrace learning, they are better prepared to achieve success and avoid the destructive pursuit of goals.