September 2009
The Dangers Of Going It Alone

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The Environment

One of my favorite "leisure time" activities is hiking. More specifically, mountain backpacking. My favorite destination for this fun and challenging sport is the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The White Mountains are not the tallest in the US but they have the dubious distinction of being one of the most dangerous places to hike. They earned this reputation by having one of the most rapidly changing weather patterns of any mountain range in the world. The reason is that three major storm tracks converge at the peak of Mount Washington and are constantly jockeying for position. I have hiked in weather conditions that went from sunny and 70 degrees to 30 degrees with ice crystal laden fog and 10 foot visibility in less than 1/2 hour. More than 135 people have perished hiking these mountains since 1849. Even though I have been hiking these mountains since the early 1970's (yes, I'm that old) and have a full complement of high quality gear there is one thing that I almost never do in the White Mountains...hike alone.

The Winter Hike

When my youngest son was around 16 years old I took him for a winter hike to try and ascend Mount Washington which is 6,288 feet tall. It was late November and there was about 16 inches of snow on the trail at the start of our hike at the base of Tuckerman's Ravine. I knew from watching the weather from the previous two weeks we could expect several feet as we neared the summit. I also knew that we would only have about 8 hours of daylight as the sunset that time of year is around 4:00 PM. Based on that I set a strict turnaround time of 12:30 PM in order to return to base camp mostly in daylight.

The weather as we left base camp at 7:00 AM was partly cloudy with light wind and a temperature of 22 degrees. The sun was just coming up. The forecast called for partly cloudy skies with some light snow squalls and a daytime temperature of 28 degrees. The hike started uneventfully as the early portion of the trail is fairly wide and gradual. The ascent up Tuckerman's Ravine was very steep with lots of ice and snow drifts. Avalanches are always a threat so it is important to always scan the terrain before proceeding and adjust your path accordingly. Another danger is fast running water under what appears to be solid snow. If you plunge through the wrong spot you can wind up soaked up to your thighs which can quickly result in hypothermia. As we hiked up to around 5,000 feet rapidly moving snow squalls started to drop some noticeable snow and reduced visibility at times to less than 100 feet. Then minutes later the sun would shine and you could see for miles.

My son was extremely excited to summit Mount Washington in winter and his excitement increased as it came into view. He was driven to reach the top. At about 11:30 AM we approached the rim of the summit. As often happens the high winds caused the snow to drift deeply into the large boulders that make up the mountain. We found ourselves "swimming" through drifts that were up to our armpits. Snow shoes do not work in this type of terrain so we had no choice. This dramatically slowed our progress and used lots of energy. Finally, we were less than 1/8 of a mile from the summit. I looked at my watch. It was 12:25 PM. I yelled to my son, stop. Let's have a quick snack, drink some water and start down. "What"?, he yelled. "We're almost to the top". "We'll summit another time", I said. "You can't take foolish chances up here. We set a strict turnaround time of 12:30 PM and it is here. Now let's go".

The Descent

The descent was tricky as I knew it would be. The snow squalls continued off and on and as the sun started to set it got cold quick. We kept moving.

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As we reached the bottom of Tuckerman's Ravine the sun burst out and the sky was completely clear. "You see" my son said, "we would have been fine". "Maybe", was all I replied. For the last hour we hiked in semi darkness. The trail was again wide with a relatively gradual slope but was now almost solid ice as the snow had melted in the sun and immediately froze when the sun set. We were tired but not tired enough to risk injury. We finally reached base camp at 5:15 PM. I could tell by the look on my sons face that he had expended the maximum amount of energy before entering a high risk state. The hike was just enough.

Lessons Learned

So what does this have to do with running a business? Let's see:

Environment - The White Mountains like the economy and the marketplace view you as an intruder. These systems will continue on as they will with little regard for your safety or security. If you are smart you may survive. If you are smart and wise, you may thrive. If you are neither, you may perish. You see it around you every day.

Wisdom - My son was very smart. He was very driven. He was reasonably knowledgeable for his age. However, he had not hiked the Tuckerman Ravine trail in the winter before. He did not know what to expect given the much more challenging winter environment. He had not yet achieved the wisdom that comes from having performed an activity over and over until you can anticipate almost all the unknowns. After our winter hike he began to obtain wisdom. The wisest leaders in the world always seek expert guidance to navigate unfamiliar terrain.

Objectivity - My son wanted to reach the peak of Mount Washington that winter day. He was totally focused on achieving that goal. I was also totally focused that day. I was totally focused on making sure I brought my son up and down that mountain safely. Whether we reached the summit or not was secondary. When we were 1/8 of a mile from the summit I was thinking objectively about our safety. My son was thinking emotionally about reaching the peak. People die up there that way. Companies die down here that way.

Self Sufficiency - If I continued to make my son reliant on me to safely hike the White Mountains I would be doing him and I a great disservice. Rather, I instilled in him the wisdom and knowledge to not only achieve on his own (with hiking buddies) the goals we reached together, but to surpass them. That 16 year old kid is now 22 and just finished hiking the 2178 mile Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. It took him 5 months. When an advisor works with you are you becoming dependent or self sufficient?

So, like the story of my winter hike you are on a high risk journey in very unique and unfamiliar terrain. So I ask you the question. Are you going it alone?

Bill Gately - Principal

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