In 1935, the Nepali Sherpa Tenzing Norgay made his first trip to Mount Everest. For 15 years previously, climbers had been trying to conquer the world’s highest peak.

The 1935 expedition had got as far as North Col, a flat area between Everest’s peaks. Just below this col the climbing party made a gruesome discovery. In a wind-shredded tent they found a skeleton sitting in an odd position, with one boot off and the laces of the other boot between its bony fingers. The body was that of Maurice Wilson, an Englishman who had sneaked into Tibet without official permission. To preserve secrecy, he had hired only three porters. As they approached the North Col, the porters refused to go any further. Wilson decided to continue the climb alone. That decision cost Wilson his life. Since Wilson’s failed attempt, over 200 other climbers have also lost their lives too - over 150 of which remain on the mountain to this day.¹

Only someone who has climbed a formidable mountain knows what it takes to make it to the top. Between 1920 and 1952, seven major expeditions failed to make it to the top of Everest. Tenzing Norgay was on six of these expeditions. Teammates joked that Tenzing had a third lung because of his capacity to carry heavy loads. But he learned that no one should underestimate the difficulty of the climb.

On one climb when conditions became difficult, Tenzing and his fellow Sherpas put on their crampons (climbing boot-spikes). George Frey, an experienced but overconfident mountaineer, decided not to wear crampons but slipped and fell 300 metres to his death. Tenzing wrote of careless climbers, “Like so many men before them – they had held a mountain too lightly and they paid the price.”²

In 1953, Tenzing embarked on his seventh expedition to Everest with a British team. By then, Tenzing was respected not only as a porter, but also as a fully-fledged teammate, an honour unusual at that time for a Sherpa.

Tenzing was responsible for hiring, organising and leading the team of porters for the journey. To get just two people to the summit, the team brought 10 high-altitude climbers, including New Zealander Edmund Hillary. Altogether the team would require almost 2.3 tonnes of equipment and food, delivered from Kathmandu on the backs of porters 290 kilometres up and down Himalayan ridges and over rivers crossed by narrow rope-and-plank bridges to the base camp. Tenzing hired over 200 people just to get the supplies to the mountain.

Another 40 Sherpas with extensive mountain experience carried supplies up the mountain. The best third of that team
carried 340 kilograms of necessary equipment in 14 kilogram loads to higher camps. Only Tenzing and three other porters would have the strength and skill to go to camps near the summit.

For each level reached, a higher degree of teamwork was required. One set of men exhausted themselves just to get equipment up the mountain for the next group. Two-man teams worked their way up the mountain, finding a path, cutting steps, and securing ropes. By this stage they were exhausted but made the next leg of the climb possible. Of the teamwork involved, Tenzing remarked:

“You do not climb a mountain like Everest by trying to race ahead on your own, or by competing with your comrades. You do it slowly and carefully, by unselfish teamwork. Certainly I wanted to reach the top myself; it was the thing I had dreamed of all my life. But if the lot fell to someone else I would take it like a man, and not a cry-baby. For that is the mountain way.”

The team, using the “mountain way,” made it possible for two pairs to make an attempt at reaching the summit. The first team tried and failed, so the other team of got its chance. That team consisted of Tenzing and Edmund Hillary. Tenzing wrote of the first team:

“They were worn-out, sick with exhaustion, and, of course, terribly disappointed that they had not reached the summit themselves. But still... they did everything they could to advise and help us. And I thought, Yes, that is how it is on a mountain. For where would Hillary and I have been without the others? Without the climbers who had made the route and the Sherpas who had carried the loads? ... It was only because of the work and sacrifice of all of them that we were now to have our chance at the top.”

Tenzing and Hillary made the most of their chance. In late May, 1953, they accomplished a human first: they stood on the summit of Mount Everest, the world’s highest peak!

Could Tenzing and Hillary have made it to the top without a great team? NO. This lesson in leading teams is no less important for team leaders today: **As the challenge ESCALATES, the need for teamwork ELEVATES!**

A smart team leader learns that people operate better as individuals if they consider themselves to be part of a well-functioning, supportive team. Teammates remain committed and loyal to their team if they adopt the attitude of mountain climbers – they always help each other. A great team is characterised by a great attitude – it may not come as a consequence of climbing Mount Everest but it goes something like: “I don’t care who gets the credit as long as WE achieve great goals TOGETHER!”

Tenzing was not concerned who got the credit for conquering Everest. His attitude was not dissimilar to Jethro’s counsel to Moses in ancient times:

“...the work is too heavy for you, you cannot handle it alone...select capable people...have them serve...That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you.” (Exodus 18:18, 21-22 NIV)

May God continue to bless as you achieve great goals with your team!

**Remember, there is no “I” in “T-E-A-M-W-O-R-K”! ♦**

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**Endnotes**

3. Ibid., 250.
4. Ibid., 255.
3. Are you humble?
A Christian leader knows he is incapable of doing his work in his own strength. Paul described his mission to Corinth like this:

“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.” (1 Cor. 2:1-3)

Moses, when he received God’s call to leadership, said: “O Lord, please send someone else to do it.” (Exodus 4:13)

Gideon’s response to his call was similar: “But Lord,” Gideon asked, “how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” (Judges 6:15)

This attitude of humility is the condition for spiritual power. As a leader, Paul recognised that “When I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor. 12:10)

4. Do you speak the word of God?
“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you” (Heb. 13:7). There are a lot of words in the church today. But are they effective? Jesus only spoke the words God gave him: “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63).

Human reason and eloquence, good as they may be, have a limited effect and only last until someone produces a better and more convincing argument. But God’s word is spiritual power that transforms human lives.

Paul said: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.” (1 Cor. 2:4-5)

A leader must be a man or woman of God’s word.

5. Do you live your message and values?
“Remember your leaders...Consider the outcome of their way of life” (Heb. 13:7). Life speaks more powerfully than words. All we say or preach cannot be fulfilled perfectly in our lives, but a man will apply the word of God to himself first, and only then will he be at liberty to share it with others.

Paul said: “For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.” (1 Cor. 4:17)

This is all a result of faith in God’s grace. Paul said: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” (1 Cor. 15:10)

A leader is a man of God’s grace.

6. Do you operate by faith?
“Remember your leaders...and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). A Christian leader has a faith that others want to imitate. Faith points to God who controls our lives and invites his power to lead.

7. Are you followed?
Jesus said: “Come, follow me ... and I will make you fishers of men”. Then, we are told: “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mk. 1:17-18).

Leaders in business have followers, because they pay them. Leaders in the church are different. The people are not always being paid, and are not under any compulsion to submit. If they are paid employees, they will not get more pay if they do what you want them to do. The whole dynamic is based on the relationship between God and man, not on reward.

A leader’s leadership will be tested by the way people respond to it. A leader who leads by the power and authority of God will be followed. If no one is following, the leader is not a leader.

This does not mean that a leader should seek to please the people. If you are a man-pleaser, you will be moved out from under God’s authority. A true leader does the will of God, which may not always please.

At times, a true leader is surrounded by people who have lost their faith in God and who do not wish to do God’s will. God will then call him to lead others.

8. Are you fruitful?
God plants leaders with the anticipation of reaping a rich harvest of fruit in the lives of his people. Paul referred to certain followers as his “dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4:19).
Fruitfulness in God’s people is the reflection of Christ in their lives. God does it by His Holy Spirit, in order to glorify him and to be a blessing to others.

9. Are you ahead of the people?
If you are to be followed, you need to be ahead of your people. Paul was bold enough to say: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

Leaders live under the responsibility of continually pressing on with God. It is often a lonely path, because you are breaking new ground for others to walk through later, but you yourself will only be following the path that Jesus has already walked. Through discouragement and fatigue, leaders often find they have not remained out in front and so their people have come to a standstill. When the church stands still, the leaders are standing still. You need to be ahead of the people. That is leadership. Being ahead also means to listen to your people, understanding their needs and ensuring that you bring God’s saving word to them which will fill them with hope, inspiration, and a will to go where God through your leadership wants them to go.

What is the fundamental, real key to all these questions? I have taken great strength from a passage in Henri Nouwen’s precious little book In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership (1989). He says as he comments on Jesus’ last conversation with Simon Peter:
Before Jesus appointed Peter as a shepherd, he asked him: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than the others do?” He asked him again: “Do you love me?” And a third time: “Do you love me?” We must see this question as the crucial question for our entire Christian leadership, for it is that question which both saves us from opportunism and gives us a true self-esteem. The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much will you accomplish? Can you demonstrate any results? But the question is: Do you love Jesus? ♦

1 For example, Laurie Beth Jones, Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership, Hyperion, New York, 1995.