Bringing teaching, learning and research to life

SAGE video
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Business & Management
Teaching with Case Study Video
Learning and Leadership in the 1996 Mt. Everest Disaster: The Role of Destructive Goal Pursuit

Professor Christopher Kayes presents a case study of a failed attempt to reach the summit of Mount Everest in 1996. His research on destructive goal pursuit can be used by businesses that do not want to get trapped in an unworkable or unworthy goal. The video case takes viewers through the events detailed in the book Into Thin Air and the movie Everest and details how poor decision making and dysfunctional goal pursuit led to the deaths of several climbers, including the two team leaders. This video is based in part on the article available in SAGE Journals, “The 1996 Mt. Everest Climbing Disaster: The Breakdown of Learning in Teams”, which appeared in Human Relations, October 2004. Retrieved from http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0018726704048355

Suggested Courses or Topics
This video can be included in courses or programs in business, counseling, education, public health, public policy, psychology, and project management. Specific topics might include:

- coaching,
- communication,
- conflict resolution,
- human resource management,
- leadership,
- management,
- motivation,
- negotiations,
- organizational development, and
- teams and groups.

Classroom Clips
Listed below are a few examples of clips that focus on key concepts:

- Many of the climbers ignored a simple rule of thumb that climbers use to guide their ascent: “getting to the top is optional, but getting back down is not.” Clip 06:17 – 06:59.
- The destructive goal pursuit (Clip 07:43) and its characteristics are described in this clip.
- The actions and beliefs that organizations can take to overcome destructive goal pursuit are outlined. Clip 10:40.

Research Assignment
See below for some example assignments that you might use for students

1. This video discusses other situations where organizations and their leaders continued to pursue a predefined goal, even though the pursuit led to disasters (Clip 01:59 – 02:43 and Clip 09:11). Conduct a search of recent organizational crisis, scandals, or breaches of ethics to identify examples of a destructive goal pursuit. Write a short summary of the situation and describe why you think it might be an example of a destructive goal pursuit.

2. Watch the motion picture Everest, and try to identify the characteristics of the destructive goal pursuit.

Classroom Discussion
Here are some example questions that might be used for in-class discussion.

1. Imagine you are on a team of climbers heading to the summit of the mountain and one of your teammates becomes too weak to continue the climb. Should you continue to pursue the summit without the weaker team member or turn back and help your teammate get to safety? Discuss the values that lead to your decision. See SAGE Journals, “Dilemma at 29,000 Feet: An Exercise in Ethical Decision Making based on the 1996 Mt. Everest Climbing Disaster” in Journal of Management Education, June 2002. Retrieved from http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1056290202600206

2. Can you think of any situations where you pursued a goal, even though you knew that you should abandon the goal? What were the circumstances that led to the decision? Did you ever abandon your pursuit of that goal?


4. Describe the characteristics of the destructive goal pursuit and four of the six actions that an organization can take to overcome destructive goal pursuit.