



# Mount Everest – 1996 – Case Analysis

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## Executive Summary

The case revolves around the disaster tragedy that happened on Mount Everest on May 11, 1996, making it one of the deadliest days on Mount Everest up to the years 2014 and 2015, when 16 and 18 fatalities occurred during each year, respectively. On May 10, the summit of Mount Everest was reached by 23 climbers. During their descent, unfortunately, 5 climbers, including expedition leaders Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, lost their lives as they were caught in a blizzard.

Different conclusions have been drawn regarding this tragedy from different people, including the climbers themselves. This assertion is an analysis of the whole situation, paying meticulous attention to the decisions made during the ascent and descent, leaders' role on this expedition, team management, and process management, thus, trying to provide answers on what led to this tragedy and could it be avoided.

## Mount Everest

With a height of 8848 meters above the sea level, Mount Everest is the world's highest mountain. As such, it is no surprise that the reach of Mount Everest's summit became a major goal for almost all climbers. Expeditions to this mountain started as early as 1922, when George Mallory and his team unsuccessfully made an attempt to reach the summit for the first time. On the second attempt, two years after the first one, to reach the highest point on Earth, Mallory and his climbing partner disappeared never to be heard from



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again. Finally, the Mount Everest summit was successfully reached on May 29, 1953 by both Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay.

By the 1980s, more climbers had reached the summit. However, the highest point on earth still remained a dream that only professional climbers could dare to pursue. Nevertheless, after successfully guiding Dick Bass, a Texas businessman, in 1985, David Breashears expanded the dream of climbing Mount Everest to regular people as well. Following this trend, professional climbers believed that this was a great opportunity for them to make a profit from wealthy people who aspired to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Accordingly, commercial expeditions began to be marketed and took on a worldwide recognition.

## **Adventure Consultants and Mountain Madness**

The case focuses on the two largest commercial expeditions that set out to climb Mount Everest on May 10, 1996. One commercial expedition was led by Rob Hall under Adventure Consultants, while the other commercial expedition was led by Scott Fischer under Mountain Madness.

Rob Hall, was one of the most experienced mountaineers of his time. Together with his partner Gary Ball, Rob reached the seven summits within a seven-month period. In 1992, with the goal to organize and lead guided expeditions, Rob and Gary founded Adventure Consultants. Enjoying the success of 1994, when 39 of his clients reached the summit of Mount Everest, Rob organized another expedition in 1995, but failed to guide his clients successfully to the summit. Eager to repeat the successful expedition of 1994 and to strengthen his company's positions in the commercial expedition business, Rob planned another expedition for the year 1996.

Scott Fischer, looking at the current trends of commercial expeditions, in the year 1984 founded a company called Mountain Madness, offering guided expeditions and climbing instruction. Fischer was known for his



brave adventures. Characterized by his charisma and ambition, Fischer gained his reputation by climbing several other 8000 meter peaks and reaching the summit of Mount Everest without using supplemental oxygen. In the year 1996, Fischer decided to organize an expedition with the goal of guiding people to the highest point of Everest.

Rob's expedition team consisted of himself as the team leader, 2 guides, 8 clients, and 7 climbing Sherpas. The team totaled a group of 18 people. Scott's expedition team consisted of himself as the team leader, 2 guides, 8 clients, and 8 climbing Sherpas. The group totaled 19 people. Thus, altogether, the expedition to Mount Everest was composed of 37 people (Appendix 1).

## **Journey to Base Camp, Problems, and Preparations for the Summit Attempt**

On March 31, Rob's team was gathered in Kathmandu, where members were introduced to each other for the very first time. On the next day, from Kathmandu, Rob's team traveled to a Himalayan village called Lukla, which was 2,804 meters above the sea level. From there, the team hiked for 9 days, 3 to 4 hours a day. By the 9th of April, Rob and his team arrived at Base Camp. During the journey to Base Camp, many of the team members suffered health related issues due to the hazards posed by the polluted air and unsanitary living conditions that the villages provided.

In his journey to Base Camp, Scott encountered several logistics problems. For example, delivery of supplemental oxygen tanks and other equipment to the Base Camp was delayed. An important note to mention is that Scott only ordered enough oxygen for the use at higher attitudes, two tanks on the ascent and one on the descent. Dealing with these issues, Scott spent most of his time solving the unexpected



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logistic problems rather than planning the expedition and acclimating himself to higher altitudes as he had done in previous expeditions. Scott's team arrived at Base Camp on April 8.

After arriving at the Base Camp, members of both teams followed the standard procedures of acclimating themselves to the high altitudes. These procedures involved strenuous physical activities and exercises such as a series of increasingly difficult and longer climbs. During these expeditions, the two expedition teams climbed higher than Camp III and along the path to the summit, built additional camps which would serve for the final stretch to the summit. These expeditions served to prevent diseases associated with high altitudes and prepare climbers for the limited supply of oxygen at high altitudes. Even though, these expeditions helped climbers to prevent diseases, it did not prepare them completely for facing the lack of oxygen. Therefore, supplemental oxygen tanks were carried by the climbers for the final journey to the summit. However, this was not the case with Boukreev, who planned to climb without oxygen. Even though, Boukreev was one of the few climbers who managed to reach the summit without the use of bottled oxygen in the past, this case was completely different. This was the first time that he was guiding a commercial expedition and many client climbers were concerned as they felt that a guide should have the physical and mental capabilities to assist clients in the event of an emergency that could only be assured through the use of supplemental oxygen at high altitudes.

Generally, all team members performed well during these exercises. There were some exceptions to this, however. From Rob's team, Hansen discovered early stages of frostbite on several toes and his larynx froze at one point. Even though, Hansen terminated his chances for the final push to the summit, Rob was encouraging him not to surrender.

From Scott's team, Pete Schoening was facing breathing difficulties, making him use bottled oxygen while at the Base Camp. During the second expedition, Schoening failed to complete the climbing to Camp II. In



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that case, Scott had to return Schoening to Base Camp, while everyone else was taking the required rest. Another problem that Scott faced was the illness of one of the Sherpas. Refusing Scott's advice to go down to Base Camp, after reaching to Camp II, it was clear that he was suffering from HAPE. Considering his critical situation and no air transportation, Beidleman and Madsen had to carry him down to Base Camp. From there the Sherpa was carried to the nearest hospital, where he died two weeks later.

At this stage, both teams had a member facing health related issues, while Scott's team now consisted of 18 members. Mountain Madness also had less bottled oxygen for use at high attitudes and a leader who was exhausted from all the problems he had to face before the final journey.

## The Summit Attempt

After warning their clients about the rules that they have to obey, the leaders Hall and Scott, together with their teams, began the journey to summit from Base Camp on May 6. Clients had been told that if the summit was not reached by 1:00 p.m. or 2:00 p.m., they would have to turn back, no exclusions, even if they are only hundred meters away from the summit. Time and time management was an important rule that all the clients were supposed to obey, including the expedition leaders.

An important note to mention is that communication among the expedition team members was limited; radios were only issued to the team leaders and guides. Furthermore, the models of the radios were antiquated and bulky, which added to the physical cost of carrying them during the ascent. Clients were not provided with radios to communicate, even though the cost of carrying them is zero, according to Adams. Leaders would lead the team, while the second guide would remain at the back and the third guide would stay in the middle of the group. Another important note to mention is how the team members did not feel as part of the entire group. For all of them, this was the first time being part of a team; there was comradery



among them. As it is mentioned in the case, “in climbing, having confidence in your partners is no small concern.” This is because the actions of one member can have detrimental and irreversible effects on the wellbeing of the entire team.

As both teams departed Base Camp on May 6, they reached Camp II on the same day. Spending a day at Camp II, on May 8 they would climb to Camp III. The journey from Camp III to Camp IV would occur on May 9. On the same day, half an hour before midnight, both teams would depart Camp IV for the summit. The round trip between Camp IV and the summit should be completed in no more than 18 hours, in order to avoid the possibility of returning in darkness and without supplemental oxygen.

The journey from Base Camp to Camp II was followed by Kruse illness, who had to turn back to Base Camp. Instead of arranging one of the Sherpas to take Kruse back, Scott himself decided to turn him back. In this case we have a behavioral issue. Fischer was emotionally attached to Kruse, and instead of leading the team as a team leader, he decided to leave the team and turn Kruse back himself to the Base Camp. This was a major red flag and conflict of interested demonstrated early on by Fischer, pointing to his inability to make rational decisions. On Rob’s team, Hansen continued to the ill effects of frostbitten toes and frozen larynx. As a team leader, considering Hansen’s state, instead of encouraging Hansen to continue his push to the summit, Rob must have stopped him right there and order his return.

The performance of Mountain Madness team was generally satisfactory during the journey from Camp II to Camp III. However, from Rob’s team, Kasischke and Fischbeck struggled considerably during their ascent. As climbers reached Camp IV, Hansen’s continued to experience deteriorating physical condition. Even at this time, Rob does not order Hansen to not continue to the summit.



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## Summit Day

The teams continued the final push for the summit on May 9, at 11:30 p.m. During the climb, four clients of Adventure Consultants' team decided to turn back before reaching the summit. At this stage, Rob's team had 14 people. On the other hand, members of Scott's team were good to go. As the teams pursued climbing, Krakauer and one of the Sherpas realized that the ropes were not fixed along the last 500 meters of the route. Before the summit bid, Rob and Scott planned to send some Sherpas to fix the ropes, but they did not do so after hearing that one of the expeditions had installed ropes during its earlier summit bid. In this situation, we must ask: "even if the ropes were fixed from an earlier expedition, is it professional not to check the ropes out, just in case?"

On top of this, safety procedures set by Rob did not allow any of the team members to fix the problem, before proceeding to the Balcony. As Krakauer and one of the Sherpas (Dorje) could not fix the ropes, they had to wait for more than an hour for Rob's team. On the other hand, Scott could not help solve the problem, as his safety procedures required him to remain at the back of the team on the summit day. Even though, Scott was required to serve as the "sweep", he was far behind the others due to his health problems caused by previous logistics problems, tiredness, and chronic illness. He could not even guide his clients to turn around due to these delays. At the same time, one of the Sherpas from Scott's team, who was supposed to be near the front of the team to be able to help Dorje fix the problem, was helping Pittman who was struggling shortly after departing from Camp IV. This final delays by the team leaders can surely be considered as the root causes of this disaster.



## Analysis

The first question that we should ask is “what is considered a successful expedition?” An expedition would be considered successful if the team reaches the summit and makes it back safely. A success would also be measured by the degree of rational decisions made by the leadership provided by Hall and Fischer in leading their teams through the climb of Mount Everest. Their decision making and judgement under pressure and time constrictions would be paramount especially in the instance where the summit is within eye sight but the weather conditions have degraded so much that turning back is the best alternative if survival is the ultimate goal. Under this criteria, there are several factors that caused this tragedy.

In the Mount Everest case as well as in a business operation, everything that is essential to conduct the operation must be well resourced. In the business world, leaders must be well prepared to make sound decisions when they face challenges. One of their biggest challenges is predicting what is going to come their way and place bets. This is why allocating the right amount of resources—time, money, inventory—so that the team has sufficient room to explore the uncharted territory that is Mt. Everest and Wall Street. Also, the commercial expedition enterprises encountered in this case as any business that provides services should know that we must think, rehearse, and execute. Hall and Fischer were not able to rehearse and give themselves and their guides long enough time to prepare before the endeavor to guide inexperienced people to the summit of Mt. Everest. It should be pointed that having at least three guides should have been the norm. It always helps to be over prepared, over staffed and over resourced especially when you will be dealing with a fearful foe as Mt. Everest has proven to be. The success of a team is determined by the weakest member of that team. The leaders, Hall and Fischer, should have been clear of their business goal. For example, in order to meet the objectives of your business, you should not recruit weak teams or clients.





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Doug Hansen and Dr. Dale Kruse proved to be the Achilles' heel of both Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, respectively. These two clients posed major delays in the operation. Finally, every successful business knows how to respect critical parameters, including cut off times. For example, in a business one key parameter is "free cashflow," which is equivalent to Hall's 2:00pm cut off time, and must be respected if the business does not want to file for bankruptcy.

The first and foremost reason is the lack of leadership and managerial skills demonstrated by the two team leaders. Scott Fischer reached the summit at 3:45 p.m., one hour and forty-five minutes later than the time deadline that had been set by Rob Hall. Even though, his team survived the disastrous expedition, Scott failed as a team leader since he did not lead his team on its ascent to summit and descent to Camp IV. If we recall, Fischer helped Kruse make his way back to Base Camp after becoming ill, leaving those who depended on him to fend for themselves. On the other hand, despite that Rob reached the summit at 2:30 p.m., he also failed his role as a team leader, as he decided to help exhausted Hansen to reach the summit at 4:15 p.m. and leave the other team members without a leader (Appendix 2). The decision not to turn Hansen back while at Camp II or III and help him reach the summit at such a late time, cost Rob and Hansen their lives as well as the lives of two other members, Andy Harris and Yasuko Namba. If Rob and Scott had shown more determination on their decisions in turning back some of their clients, the participants would not have been so adamant about reaching the summit at all costs. Hansen as well as Pittman would be turned back. Problems were exacerbated by the indecision of the guides to second-guess their leaders. The guides, unlike most of the clients, were no amateur climbers and should have been more vocal in questioning the decision making by their leaders.

As managers, both Rob and Scott failed to conduct their duty. The first mistake that they did was not providing all the team members with a radio. The use of radios to communicate would be essential if a team



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member was separated from the rest of the team during a blizzard or became injured. Furthermore, the bottleneck created while ascending the summit would have probably been avoided if Krakauer could communicate with Rob and receive orders to remedy the problem, instead of waiting more than one hour, creating an unnecessary traffic. Moreover, these delays caused the team members to use the supplemental oxygen that was spared for the descent. The second mistake comes from Scott as he did not purchase enough supplemental oxygen for emergency cases, as emergency cases occurred even while at Base Camp.

Nevertheless, considering the instability of the weather conditions during their ascent to the summit, if both leaders decided to turn back at the bottleneck, the tragedy could have been avoided. The duty of Rob and Scott was not to only lead the team, but also to manage the entire expedition. For example, there was poor supply management in that no ropes had been affixed along the ascent to the summit. Hall's and Fischers's original plan had been to send several Sherpas ahead to affix the ropes but they had scrapped the plan because they decided to rely on an unfounded rumor that a previous expedition had installed rope lines during its summit bid not too long ago. Therefore, Rob and Hall's decision making, leadership and managerial mistakes, behavioral issues, together with logistics problems are the main reasons why this tragedy occurred.

In order to increase the 'profitability' of the 'Climbing Mount Everest Business', as operations managers, the first step would be to determine the criteria of the success. Clients have to understand that, as Rob said "With enough determination, any bloody idiot can get up this hill. The trick is to get back down alive". Clients must know that by climbing this mountain, they risk their lives and the other's. Therefore, the team leader can turn anyone who does not have the required health condition to pursue. They can be stopped from pursuing the ascent at any time, even at Base Camp. The team guides are the second people in charge and, in accordance with the team leader, have the power to take important decisions when required. If one of the



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clients faces health problems, by informing the team leader, they can arrange the Sherpas in charge to return them to any of the camps. The team leader should always lead the team and respect the schedules.

The operating system of climbing Mount Everest would improve by employing extra Sherpas who would be in charge only for turning back everyone who experiences health problems. Other Sherpas who assigned on the team, should always climb at least one day before the group, assuring that the ropes are affixed and extra oxygen is placed at each camp. Their duty is not to reach the summit, but to ensure that the climbers are well-supplied along the route. Every single member of the group should be equipped with a radio, this is non-negotiable and each must be and active communicator of any issues or concerns. By doing so, there would be more control over the operation, thus bottlenecks can be avoided, and the risk of tragedies could be reduced or eliminated. Unless, unexpected weather change occurs.



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## Appendix 1

Adventure Consultants		Mountain Madness	
Rob Hall	Leader	Scott Fischer	Leader
Mike Groom	Guide	Anatoli Boukreev	Guide
Andy Harris	Guide	Neal Beidleman	Guide
Doug Hansen	Client	Sandy Hill Pittman	Client
Dr. Beck Weathers	Client	Charlotte Fox	Client
Frank Fischbeck	Client	Tim Madsen	Client
Lou Kasischke	Client	Pete Schoening	Client
Dr. John Taske	Client	Klev Schoening	Client
Yasuko Namba	Client	Lene Gammelgaard	Client
Jon Krakauer	Client	Martin Adams	Client
Dr. Stuart Hutchison	Client	Dr. Dale Kruse	Client
Ang Dorje	Lead Sherpa	Lopsang Jangbu	Lead Sherpa
Six climbing Sherpas		Seven climbing Sherpas	



## Appendix 2

### May 9

11:30 p.m. The expeditions began to depart from Camp IV.

### May 10

5:30 a.m. Krakauer and Ang Dorje arrived at the Balcony (8,500 meters).

10:00 a.m. Beidleman became the first climber to reach the South Summit (8,748 meters).

11:30 a.m. Taske, Hutchison, and Kasischke turned back below the South Summit.

1:00 p.m. Boukreev, Harris, and Krakauer arrived at the summit.

1:25 p.m. Beidleman and Adams reached the summit.

1:45 p.m. Klev Schoening arrived at the top of the mountain.

2:30 p.m. Hall, Groom, Madsen, Fox, Gammelgaard, Pittman, and Namba reached the summit.

3:10 p.m. Beidleman began to lead a group of clients down the mountain.

3:45 p.m. Fischer arrived at the summit.

4:15 p.m. Hansen reached the top of the mountain.

5:00 p.m. Boukreev entered Camp IV.

7:30 p.m. Beidleman, Groom, and a group of clients began to huddle together near Camp IV.

8:00 p.m. Adams and Krakauer arrived at Camp IV.

11:30 p.m. Beidleman, Groom, Schoening, and Gammelgaard found their way to Camp IV.

### May 11

4:30 a.m. Boukreev rescued Madsen, Fox, and Pittman.

4:43 a.m. From above the South Summit, Hall reported to Base Camp that Hansen had died.

7:30 a.m. Hutchison located Namba and Weathers but concluded that he could not save them.

9:00 a.m. Hall breathed supplemental oxygen for first time in 16 hours at South Summit.

10:00 a.m. Several Sherpas tried to rescue Fischer, but he appeared completely unresponsive.

4:30 p.m. Dr. Weathers walked into Camp IV.

6:20 p.m. Hall spoke with his wife for the final time.

Sources: Boukreev and DeWalt; Coburn; Krakauer.



## Appendix 3

Socio – Technical – System for Adventure Consultants and Mountain Madness

Inputs	Actual / Expected Behavior	Outputs / Outcomes
<b>Human</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leaders, guides, clients &amp; Sherpas</li> </ul>	<b>Activities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acclimate body for low O<sub>2</sub> conditions through strenuous physical training</li> <li>Climb Mt. Everest</li> <li>Not question their leaders' judgement</li> </ul>	<b>Production &amp; Productivity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low: bottlenecks and low morale</li> </ul>
<b>Technological</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communication radios, mountaineer equipment (ropes, picks, etc)</li> </ul>		<b>Satisfactions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guides and clients were not satisfied with their leaders but would not speak up against it because independence had been taken away</li> <li>Could only be satisfied if they reached the summit... Many considered the Sunk Costs</li> </ul>
<b>Organizational</b> <p><b>Formal:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leaders made all decisions</li> </ul> <p><b>Informal:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guides had little to no authority</li> </ul>	<b>Interactions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No interaction before arrival in Nepal</li> <li>Limited interaction during acclimation training</li> <li>Team-effort &amp; team-spirit lacking</li> </ul>	<b>Learning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Team was in name only</li> <li>Every member was a stranger</li> <li>Acclimation training did not build up trust among team members</li> </ul>
<b>Social / Cultural</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mistrust each other</li> <li>trust only your leader</li> </ul>	<b>Sentiments</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Could not depend on fellow team members</li> <li>Developed strong dependence on their leaders for all decision making</li> <li>Heavily invested in reaching the summit</li> </ul>	<b>Morale</b> <p>Low morale; apprehensive about leaders' judgement and likelihood of survival</p>