



# CompanyCommand

## *Building Combat-Ready Teams*



**To:** Company Commanders

**From:** Company Commanders

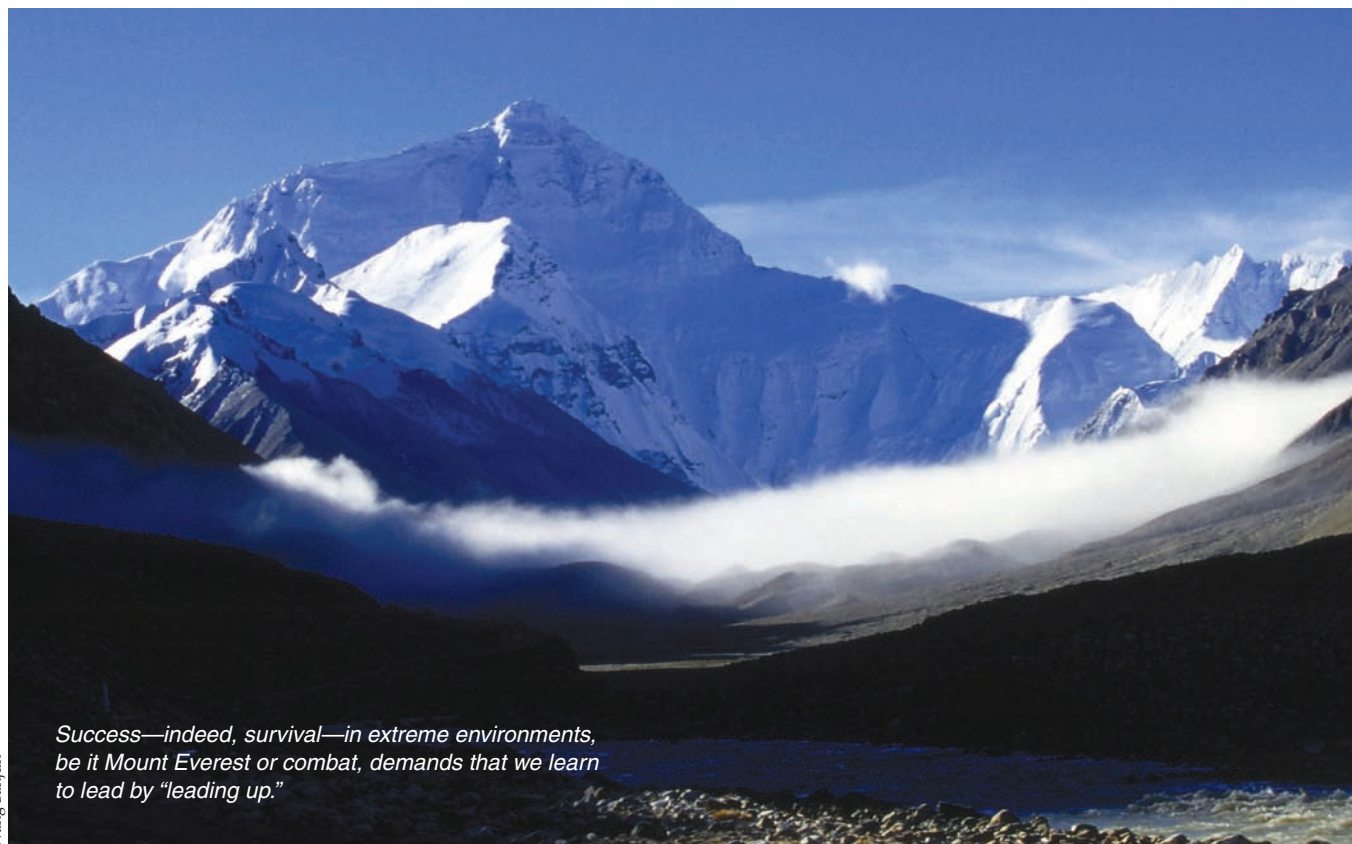
### **“Leading Up”**

May 1996 is marked by tragedy in the extreme mountain-climbing community. While seeking to summit the earth’s highest peak, eight climbers died of exposure and several others lost frostbitten hands and feet during a courageous fight against the elements. What makes this event even more tragic is the likelihood that it might have been avoided had team members “led upward.”

Among the teams seeking to summit Mount Everest that day, one was from New Zealand and another was from the United States. The New Zealand team with fifteen members was led by the legendary Rob Hall, who in the span of seven months ascended the world’s “seven summits”—the highest point on each of the seven continents, including Mount Vinson in Antarctica. Meanwhile, the U.S. team with twelve members was led by Scott Fischer. His numerous climbing exploits include an ascent of Mount Everest with-

out the use of bottled oxygen. Both team leaders were widely regarded as experts among climbing experts. If your objective was to climb Mount Everest, you couldn’t pick more qualified expedition leaders.

At around midnight on May 9th both teams departed Camp IV—the highest camp on Mount Everest at 26,000 feet—with the objective of reaching the peak by 1300 on the 10th. Due to the extreme nature of the environment, surviving this last push to the top of Everest is literally a race against the clock. Accordingly, both teams had established a turnaround time of 1400. To continue a push upwards past this deadline—no matter how illusively close the summit was—would be to jeopardize lives. Bottom line: If a climber hadn’t reached the top by 1400, he wasn’t moving at a rate that would get him back to Camp IV before the darkness and extreme cold of night set in and lack of oxygen took effect.



*Success—indeed, survival—in extreme environments, be it Mount Everest or combat, demands that we learn to lead by “leading up.”*

Wang Sanjun



During the climbers' arduous ascent, a bottleneck occurred at one of the more difficult points along the path. 1400 hours came and went. In spite of this, several climbers, including team leads Scott Fischer and Rob Hall, continued on. Moreover, upon summiting, Hall waited until 1600 for an additional member of his team to reach the top—it was Rob Hall's fifth and final summit of Mount Everest.

At this point in the day a snowstorm that climbers had observed building for several hours blew in, reducing visibility to near zero. Teams became intermixed as they fought to survive. One group of eight climbers huddled together against the elements, pounding on each other to keep each other awake and from freezing—little knowing that at the time they were just 300 meters away from Camp IV.

Meanwhile, Rob Hall was caught by the storm near the summit. Rescue attempts to reach him were mounted the following day, but due to the weather, none could approach to where Hall and a few others were trapped. When these efforts proved fruitless, Hall was patched through to New Zealand via his hand-held radio linked to a satellite phone for one last conversation with his wife. He had survived 32 hours at 28,700 feet but he was frostbitten, out of oxygen, and could not move.

In all, Mount Everest claimed Rob Hall, Scott Fischer and six others that day. Their memory lives on, especially among the survivors.

There are many lessons to be learned from the experience of these climbers, one of which involves a failure to lead up. As one example, team members expressed regret that they didn't speak up and encourage enforcement of the established turn-around time.

In extreme environments like this—and combat—every member of the team must think and act like a leader, and in a sense collectively make leadership happen.

With this experience in mind, how are you doing at leading up? Mission accomplishment and the lives of our men may depend on our ability to do so.

As the CompanyCommand team interacts with leaders in combat, this very issue is consistently raised. The question remains, how do we do this? In the pursuit of leading up effectively, three principles we might choose to adopt are:

1. It is up to us to manage the relationship with our boss, and the time to think about leading upward isn't during a crisis. The ability to do so in chaotic and tense situations is built beforehand and is based on trust—our commander's trust in both our competence and our character. The best way to increase our ability to influence upward is to lead and grow a competent and motivated team. And regardless of how we feel about our commander, we seek to treat him with respect on a day-to-day basis. We aren't talking about ingratiating behavior here—we have professional demeanor and positive assertiveness in mind. If our commander thinks we disrespect him, the likelihood of our being able to influence him during crisis is greatly diminished. In sum, we work towards a positive and professional working relationship with our commander. The concern is less about us and more about the effect a bad relationship may have on our soldiers and mission accomplishment.

2. Leading up takes courage and a sense of ownership for all that is going on. We possess the strength of character necessary to support our commander in difficult situations and to speak up when appropriate. When a plan is





flawed or a lack of integrity is displayed, we have perspective for what's at stake for the unit and our soldiers and we possess the courage necessary to overcome our natural concern for what the personal consequences may be. Fischer and Hall, in spite of their competence and experience, put their teams at risk by violating an agreed-upon decision point and by ignoring cues in the environment that foretold a change in weather. Likewise, there may be a time that my commander, regardless of his expertise, needs me to address a decision or identify changes in the operating environment that could prove catastrophic. (A word of caution: This principle may only be applicable in a relationship with a commander who is trustworthy. Each of us in our own situations must make this determination. However, we can always pursue the goal of being trustworthy ourselves and of fostering a leading up culture within our own units.)

3. Leading upward includes creating a leading-up environment within our own units—an environment in which we encourage our junior leaders to voice ideas and concerns that could impact mission accomplishment and soldier care.

Two recommendations made after the Mount Everest disaster can be applied to our own context as well. The first recommendation was to assign within the climbing team a “devil’s advocate,” someone whose function during the climb is to observe changes in the environment and to appropriately and professionally challenge the leader’s assumptions

and decisions. A second recommendation is for the climbing team to maintain communications with a seasoned climber who is at the base camp and is not tied to the face of the mountain physically and emotionally—a peer mentor who is outside the situation and can provide perspective and ask questions that may not be considered otherwise.

### **Company Commanders Sound Off With Insights About Leading Up:**

#### **CO CDR #1:**

Just wanted to comment on your great newsletter about “leading up.” That is absolutely awesome stuff. The failure to “lead up” at times can be catastrophic in our profession and in some others as highlighted by your vignette about the Everest climb.

What is particularly poignant to me was the point you made about establishing trust and building a good relationship with your boss so that when the time comes to “lead up,” you haven’t expended all of your capital on minor things. This is a lesson that I have only learned myself in the last couple of years.

Having the intestinal fortitude to “lead up” is also known as being willing to “fall on your sword.” I previously ignored advice to not “fall on my sword” for everything and, in the process, was not focused on building relationships and establishing trust and confidence between myself and my boss. The result was that I made myself irrelevant and had no credibility left when it came time to “lead up” on a truly important issue. Having the ability to distinguish between what issues really require you to “lead up” and which ones really require you to just “shut up” has to be developed in order to be able to effectively “lead up” on the right issues and at the right moment.

I feel that I am far better at that now than I used to be but I still have to constantly monitor myself because it is part of my nature to try to take on every issue that I personally disagree with.

#### **CO CDR #2:**

One part of the newsletter that jumped out at me was this: “The concern is less about us and more about the effect a bad relationship may have on our soldiers and mission accomplishment.”

I have personally been working on this. I call it “getting over yourself.” I encourage my leaders constantly to “self-actualize” and to “sublimate your ego” as much as possible so that your own self never enters into the equation in determining what is the correct action to take and what is best for the unit. My personal philosophy is that there is nothing I won’t do (within the bounds of ethical, legal, and moral behavior) if it helps the unit. If that means that I have to suck up to someone, apologize for something that I don’t think I was wrong about, develop a good relationship with someone I don’t like or who I think is an idiot, or do a number of other distasteful things for the good of the unit, then I will do it. As I tell my leaders all the time, “it’s not about any

of us, it's about them—our Soldiers—and the BN.”

Anyway, just wanted you to know that your message struck home and was consistent with a couple of the truths that I have discovered lately and that I have worked to improve on in my own self-development.

### CO CDR #3:

That is where we like to say you have to choose your battles wisely. What I have found that works is to gather your fellow commanders and work as a combined arms unit in influencing the S-3/XO/CO to get what you need done. The other way it has worked for me alone is to plant the idea initially then leave it alone and come back to it several hours or days later and address the specifics. It gives the commander time to think about it on his own with an open mind versus shutting the idea down immediately. The other thing is to ensure you address the situation with social tact—don't get defensive, and be sure you describe the logic in your COA.

### CO CDR #4

**(4-time USMC company commander to include Company L and Weapons Company 3d Battalion, 6th Marines)**

The technique of leading up can be very effective if applied in a tactful manner at appropriate times. A secret that many senior leaders will never share is that there are plenty of times in which the leader knows he does not have all the answers. Another unknown insight is that senior leaders value those that speak up more than those that don't. I certainly value someone that is willing to challenge a position I take. I always try to encourage this as part of a command climate, but sometimes service or organizational culture impedes this. Problem solving involves many in any organiza-

tion to achieve positive outcomes. It is too rare an occasion that a younger leader speaks up in a savvy manner.

The person who is a battalion or brigade/regimental commander is a lot different mentally, physically, and tactically than he or she was as a lieutenant or captain. In today's armed forces the amount of organizational and technological change that all levels of command have had to sort through in the last twenty years is staggering. Add on top of this the requirements of contemporary military service where the senior leader may not have been in an operational billet for a lengthy period of time, and one begins to see some of the challenges associated with aging in the armed forces. We affectionately call our bosses, “the Old Man” for a reason.

One constant that has not changed, however, is the need for leadership.

Leading up is a two way street. Senior leaders must adhere to the time honored leadership trait of knowing their subordinates, while junior leaders must understand all that moral courage implies: speaking up when not asked, knowing that it is the right thing to do to take care of Soldiers or Marines in a given circumstance. I have done this and have seen leading up best accomplished in private, not public forums.

**Company commanders:** *Through the CC Forum, you have access to an incredible network of leaders who are passionate about leading Soldiers and growing combat-ready teams. We count it a privilege to serve you as you lead Soldiers and build an exceptional unit. We invite you to participate, to engage in your forum, and to help make a difference. Together, we are unleashing the power of our great profession!*

**WANT TO READ MORE?** The concept developed in this newsletter comes from Michael Useem's book *Leading Up: How to Lead Your Boss so You Both Win* (2001). Three chapters and several articles, to include the complete Mount Everest climbing disaster, are available for free online at the Wharton School Leadership web page: <http://tinyurl.com/jp7bx>. What a cool leader development resource!

### CC is Company Commanders.

The CC forum is a voluntary, grass-roots forum that is by-and-for company commanders. The forum is positive and practical—focused like a laser beam on the practice of company command and those things that are important to company commanders. Send article ideas to [nate.self@us.army.mil](mailto:nate.self@us.army.mil).

## Connecting leaders



Company Commanders, connect at <http://CompanyCommand.army.mil>

Art by Jody Harmon