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## Scaling the Summit

### Leadership Lessons from the Life of Sir Edmund Hillary

By [Austin Knuppe](#)

"Well, George, we knocked the bastard off." These were the first words Sir Edmund Hillary spoke to his close friend and colleague George Lowe after completing the first successful summit of Mt. Everest—the highest peak on planet earth.

The names of Edmund Hillary and his Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay, are well known in the mountain climbing community. These are also revered in the public square due to Hillary's efforts in environmental conservation and international philanthropy. After his death in early 2008, *TIME* magazine named the climbing duo two of the [most important figures of the 20th century](#).

The life and times of Sir Edmund Hillary offer both mountaineer climber and armchair explorer some key lessons in leadership. As we explore his life, it's my goal that readers reflect on their own life experience, learning how Edmund Hillary's achievement can inspire them to become better leaders.

Hillary was born of humble origins in a small suburb outside of Auckland, New Zealand. Growing up, his father was an editor of a local newspaper and his mother was a teacher. Hillary excelled in primary school and graduated two years before most of his classmates. This academic excellence, however, was both a blessing and a curse. Due to the fact that he was two years younger than most of his classmates in secondary school, he soon became overwhelmed and managed only average grades. Hillary also struggled to find greater meaning in life, deciding finally that religion of any sort was an escape from life's pain.

Because of his long commute to and from school, he didn't have time for formal athletics, but did fall in love with mountain climbing when he turned sixteen. When it was time for college, Hillary chose to study the law. After two years in college, however, he dropped out to join his father in the bee keeping business. Like many other men his age, he felt an impetus to serve in the armed forces during the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1943 he joined the Royal New Zealand Air Force as a navigator on a [Catalina flying boat](#). Hillary was also deployed to Fiji and the Solomon Islands where he was injured in a boating accident.

After the war he returned to mountain climbing. He scaled the New Zealand Alps and reached the summit of [Mt. Cooke](#). He also hiked the Swiss and Austrian Alps. In 1951 Hillary joined the British Everest Reconnaissance expedition and was invited to join the adventure up Mt. Everest. The goal was ambitious. From 1921-1953 eight previous expeditions attempted to scale the summit of Everest and all eight failed miserably—sixteen people lost their lives trying to climb to the top.

The British expedition lacked sufficient funding, but was comprised of a talent group of 15 expert climbers, including his Kiwi friend and colleague, [George Lowe](#). In addition, the party consisted of over 400 people, including 362 porters, twenty Sherpa guides, and 10,000 lbs of baggage.

The expedition waited for the early summer months before travelling to Nepal to begin the trek. A base camp of operations was set up in May 1953 to oversee the ascent up the mountain. [Col. John Hunt](#), the expedition's leader, named two climbing teams to attempt the summit: [Tom Bourdillon](#) and [Charles Evans](#); and Edmund Hillary and [Tenzing Norgay](#). One May 26, the Bourdillon-Evans team made their first attempt and failed due to a malfunction in their oxygen supply. After a brief snowstorm, it was Hillary's and Norgay's turn to make the climb.

On May 28, the duo started their climb with George Lowe, Alfred Gregory and Ang Nyima providing logistical support. At the end of the day, Hillary pitched a tent at 27,900 to rest for the ascent to the summit the next morning. When they awoke on the morning of the 29th, they discovered that much of their gear (including their shoes), had been frozen solid. This delayed their final climb by several hours. The team scored a crucial victory after successfully traversing what was later named "[Hillary Step](#)," a forty-foot rock face covered in snow and ice. Noticing a slight crack in the rock, Hillary and Norgay scaled the step and reached the summit at 11:30 AM. Their oxygen supply allowed them to stay at the summit for fifteen minutes, where they took a few photos and buried some keepsakes at the top of the peak.

Weeks after the Everest climb, Edmund Hillary collected a panoply of rewards for his expedition, the most important being his appointment as [Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire](#). Interestingly enough, he also became an honorary citizen of Nepal as a commemoration of the 50-year anniversary of the climb.

Life adventures continued on for Sir Hillary. In 1958 he joined an expedition to cross Antarctica, becoming the first explorer to reach the South Pole on a Massey Ferguson tractor. In the decades to follow he explored the entirety of the Ganges River on a jet boat titled "Ocean to Sky."

When he was not out exploring, Sir Edmund Hillary busied himself with his work as a budding philanthropist. In 1962 he started the [Himalayan Trust](#), a nonprofit company that constructed 30 schools, two hospitals, 12 medical clinics, and two mountaineering clinics in Nepal. He did additional development work in the poorer regions of the country, planting trees and restoring monasteries for local populations. Even in his senior years Sir Hillary spent half the year travelling the world as the Foundation's chief fundraiser and spokesman.

He was also an avid conservationist, taking concern at the littering of Mount Everest by the dozens of expeditions that followed suit. The fact that a climber could pay \$35,000 to reach the summit agitated him as well. An ambitious journey that took Hillary to the top of the world now became a tourist attraction for adrenaline junkies with enough money and time to make the trek.

Life was not without tragedy for one of the world's most prestigious mountain climbers. In 1975, Hillary's wife, Louise, and one of his daughters, Belinda, were killed in a plane crash in Katmandu. Reflecting on the loss, he later [recalled](#), "My life disappeared... I didn't believe that time would heal the loss." It seems as if time did mend Sir Hillary's personal life—he remarried in 1989.

Throughout the 1990s he continued with his visits to Nepal, even though the decline in his personal health meant that he had to take helicopters to the more mountainous regions. When Sir Hillary left this earth on January 11, 2008, he received a state funeral in New Zealand, with flags around the country flying at half-mast. His birthday (July 20) also became a national public holiday.

The life of Sir Edmund Hillary offers us all many lessons in leadership. The fact that he was a sincere family man highlights the importance of building and maintaining personal relationships. During a time of rest and relaxation in the study of his Auckland home, he received a [telephone call](#) from his son Peter. "Where are you?," the father asked. "Everest," said Peter, "The top of Everest." His friendship with Tenzing Norgay reflects the strong bond that was formed during the five-hour climb to the summit as well. Stories such as these demonstrated the strong personal bond Hillary had to his friends and family.



Tenzing on the summit of Mount Everest. Photo taken by Sir Edmund Hillary, 29 May 1953.



Excerpts from a 1996 interview with Sir Hillary

Humor and humility also played a big part in Sir Edmund Hillary's success. He believed that a good sense of humor helps to build rapport among members of any team. Not taking one's self too seriously is a key ingredient as well. His friend Michael Dillon recounts a time when the two were trekking in Nepal several years ago and Sir Hillary took a brief moment to rest. An American hiker passed Hillary, and seeing his exhaustion, demonstrated to him how to properly hold an ice axe. Dillon [recalled](#), "Hillary listened and thanked him, but said nothing else."

In dealing with the fame that the Everest climb had brought him, Sir Hillary was always a bit reticent. In his memoirs, he wrote that his fame was mostly a media creation. He was also slightly embarrassed by his knighthood and commonly refused to talk about it with outsiders. In an interview during his senior years, Hillary [stated](#), "I never deny the fact that I think I did pretty well on Everest...But I was not the heroic figure the media and public made me out to be."

Finally, planning and perseverance played a large role in Hillary's accomplishments. Because he considered himself to be of mediocre talent (and even a bit fearful), he would constantly make contingency plans during his treks, using foresight to predict what difficulties might arise. He believed that luck was [90 percent self created and 10 percent risk](#). Through skill, fitness, and the proper degree of planning, one can take advantage of lucky opportunities. These traits also lead an individual toward a track record of steady achievement.

From the beehives of his small Auckland suburban home, to the highest peak on planet earth, the life and times of Sir Edmund Hillary provide everyone with key lessons on a life of leadership.