

Leadership development today requires that faculty act less as experts, more as Sherpas



Given the appreciative response to [my article](#) on why we need a radical change in how we develop leaders, I wish to expand on its most quoted message: that leadership development in today's dynamic landscape requires that faculty acts less as *experts*, and more as *Sherpas*.

The reason I contend this is that the leadership skills required to navigate today's changing times, set out in my latest book, [Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change](#), are those that can only be learned in non-cognitive, personally confronting, novel experiences – the developmental equivalent of a perilous mountain climb. You don't learn how to climb Mount Everest by sitting in a classroom listening to abstract theory, or even studying cases of other expeditions.

For leaders to unlearn habitual responses, and engage their minds in new agile response for today's disruptive world, they need to encounter experiential development terrains, ones that touch the deep and at-times-vulnerable nature of their very 'being'. It takes a wise, skilled and compassionate guide to help leaders do that.

Sherpas are a tribe from the Nepalese Himalayas, whose social custom has been to provide humane and courageous guides to climbers visiting their region. There are five features of the Sherpa role that I believe form the essence of the leadership development faculty requirements of today:

1. Sherpas can take people to their 'edge', without having them fall
2. The Sherpa's place is to walk alongside the climber – not from afar, or, from the front
3. The key Sherpa's skill is one of deep listening, to make continued and wise adjustments to the journey
4. Having said that, good Sherpas plan the route carefully, knowing (enough of) the terrain, fixing the ropes in place
5. The deep social custom of the original ethnic Sherpas group was to help imbue each tour with spiritual meaning – climbing the peaks is a sacred act.

1. Sherpas can take people to their 'edge', without having them fall

Neuroscience [shows us](#) how most movement, change and learning happens in the non-comfortable space. A space that could be personally unsettling. However, much traditional leadership development is evaluated based on how 'happy' people were with the experience, what did they like versus dislike.

The deepest learning in life, let alone leadership, can be risky and provocative, requiring us to go to ego-challenging places we normally wouldn't choose to go to. For example, sitting in deep silence with your colleagues, peering into your insecurities and how they were formed, inviting live, open frank feedback from your team. Such conscious-expanding experiences only feel safe when you know you have faculty guides alongside who can encourage you to take that step to the edge, and hold you if you fall.

Just as famed Sherpa, Tenzing Norgay, saved Sir Edmund Hillary from a near-death crevasse fall on Everest by his prompt action to secure Hillary's rope with his ice axe, so do skilled leadership development faculty know when and how to intervene in the risky act of live developmental experience.

2. The Sherpa's place is to walk alongside the climber – not from afar, or, from the front

Because the famed photo of the first Everest ascent is of Tenzing, not Hillary, it is said that perhaps it was the Sherpa who got to the summit first. However, speculation continued until Hillary later wrote:

I continued on, cutting steadily and surmounting bump after bump and cornice after cornice looking eagerly for the summit. It seemed impossible to pick it and time was running out. Finally I cut around the back of an extra-large lump and then on a tight rope from Tenzing I climbed up a gentle snow ridge to its top. Immediately it was obvious that we had reached our objective. It was 11.30 a.m. and we were on top of Everest!

So, what does keeping a tight rope look like for leadership developers? How do you do that? What does it require? In any case, it requires not wanting to get there first, having an ego small enough to be the rope provider, looking out for the other person and keeping a focus on your own health – helping carry the load but also letting the leader do their own climbing. Sherpas don't explain what to do and then stay at base camp, leaving the perilous trip to you. Neither do they leap ahead, saying, 'do it my way, follow me!'

I have often seen leadership development facilitators (including myself) either 'preach to the classroom', leave participants to an activity, and then, if they struggle, (secretly) believe that 'they just don't get it', or, provide the input, brief the exercise, and then jump in to the task to show participants the way – 'here's what I would do if I were you!'. Neither modes help leaders best learn.

3. The key Sherpa's skill is one of deep listening, to make continued and wise adjustments to the journey

When leadership development is comprised of 'living laboratory' experiences, i.e., deep learning activities that replicate the leaders' contextual landscape, then faculty need to be continually on their toes. Learning in this form will not follow a prescribed training design and set of lecture notes. Running a business simulation with a group of thirty-odd leaders about change and innovation will by its nature take an unpredictable path!

Just as good Sherpas listen to the climbers (tuning into their skill levels and needs), the terrain (the nature of the path that is being climbed), and the weather (the constantly changing external conditions), so do skilled leadership developers stay in deep listening mode with their clients and the wider, systemic context, sensing what needs to emerge in the learning experience.

Drawing on Scharmer's [Levels of Listening](#), good leadership coaches gather facts about their client's learning needs and business challenges. At a deeper level, they empathise with where each client is at in their learning journey – and start there. But further still, the most skilled leadership developers adopt generative listening to tune into what their client's *collective system* most needs to face into.

I recall a very dramatic learning week once with a client where there was much turbulence in the client's wider system – involving political demonstrations and even a plane crash. To deal with the enormity of this wider context, and what it was raising for the leaders in the room, I and the faculty team had to put our egos to one side and in-the-moment create a new space for the leaders to learn how to hold difficulty in turbulence (a key task of any change leader).

4. Having said that, good Sherpas plan the route carefully, knowing (enough of) the terrain, fixing the ropes in place

It sounds paradoxical, but I and my colleagues can find we spend as much time getting ready for a live, experiential development intervention than we do for one that is more content heavy and pre-scheduled. The latter can be more easily done 'by rote' -memorising content input, rehearsing handover messages for different sessions, getting slides together and flip charts neatly written up.

Preparation for a live open-ended 'group dynamics' task, when all the learning takes place from the emergent interactions, feelings, and behaviour of participants 'in the moment', takes a different kind of preparation.

We will spend careful time on the overall learning frame and design architecture ('what is the *intent* of each day, each activity, and how does this learning form a 'red thread'?'); anticipating likely participant reactions to exercises, and, how as a faculty to respond ('what if the group splits?', 'what if the set task is contested?', 'what if, in the ambiguity, participants ask the faculty for more input and clarity?'); and, as importantly, we do our own preparations as individuals and as a faculty team, to get into the right mental and emotional space to hold the group's learning.

We often do this with a subset of the client system we work with as co-facilitators, so that we can jointly tune into the system's dynamics before we start, noticing how what is in us, may be also present in the system we are about to embark on a journey with.

Have you considered what might be the equivalent of spending quality time in Everest base camp, for you and your faculty colleagues?

5. The deep social custom of the original ethnic Sherpas group was to help imbue each tour with spiritual meaning – climbing the peaks is a sacred act.

Before descending from the Everest summit, Hilary and Norgay stopped long enough to take photographs and to bury some sweets and a small cross in the snow. An act of reverence both for the mountain, and the wider forces that made their climb a success. Helping leaders through powerful developmental experiences is not a task to be taken lightly. Given today's challenging and ever-changing external context, and correspondingly demanding internal contexts, leadership can be a bewildering and stress-y task. To help leaders know how to find their inner place of stillness, that place from which they can lead wise movement, is a delicate act. An act that often requires enabling leaders to become sound, healthy, whole, complete. The nature of this work can be sacred – for example when the stillness beckons people to find a deeper sense of purpose, or the courage to make a difficult call.

Such a learning task demands the utmost compassion and respect from the guide. When we are at our best clients say, it is not *what* we bring about leadership that most impacts their development, but, *how we bring what we bring*: 'you are open about your own learning journey alongside ours'; 'you guys have something else you are passionate about which means you are prepared to do what is needed but don't force fit us into your system'; 'you bring a fresh perspective because not all of who you are is tied up in the work'; 'you can hold and be comfortable with silence, so that we can better hear ourselves'.

So, all you other Sherpas out there! I invite you to connect with these five messages, to develop your craft the Sherpa way, to call and connect if you so wish – as I and my Still Moving colleagues have several training expeditions planned!

Also by Deborah Rowland:

[Change starts with a leader's ability to look inward](#)



Notes:

- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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Deborah Rowland has led change in major global corporations including BBC Worldwide, Gucci Group, PepsiCo and Shell where she has had Vice-President of Organisational Development and Group HR Director roles. She is the author of *Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change* (Wiley 2017) and co-author of *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works* (Wiley, 2008). In addition to speaking, writing and teaching on the subject Deborah now consults to institutional leaders around the world on how to implement change in more effortless ways. She tends to her own inner game via regular yoga, meditation, art gazing, painting and walks in nature, in particular along the spectacular coastal paths of Southern Cornwall.