



LEADERCAST

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SPEAKER Q&A: ALISON LEVINE

Who has influenced you the most in your life? Why? Describe the relationship.

My father has influenced me the most. He taught me to fight hard for the things I believe in and to always, always go down swinging. I have NEVER seen him compromise his values/integrity. He is the most honest man I know.

What has been a defining moment in your role as a leader?

Turning back from the summit of Mt Everest in 2002 with the first American Women's Everest Expedition when we were oh-so-close to tagging the top. That decision haunted me for months -- I was so worried about disappointing people -- our sponsors, our friends/family and also my team. But when you are in the mountains you have to be able to make very tough decisions when the conditions around you are far from perfect. And you always put the safety of the team before anything else. From that experience I learned that as a leader I must be more failure-tolerant of myself and of others, and this changed my approach to taking on challenge. Failing is not always a bad thing. But not learning from failure is inexcusable. Society and corporate America are often not failure-tolerant enough, which is unfortunate because a lack of failure-tolerance stifles innovation and prevents people from taking risks. And a lot of our successes would not have been realized had someone else not taken risks and blazed the trails before us. Previous failure often propels future progress.

What are you most passionate about?

I am most passionate about working with the cadets at West Point (which I wish I did more of). Whenever I have the opportunity to be in the classroom with them, I always learn more from them than they do from me. The service academies attract a very unique type of person, and these students make huge sacrifices for all of us and it begins their first day of college the minute they step foot on post. It is a huge honor to have the opportunity to interact with them. They really do live and breathe the motto "DUTY. HONOR. COUNTRY." Every one of us should do the same.

How did you get to where you are today?

I got where I am today by learning that an expedition isn't about reaching the top of some mountain -- it's about the lessons learned along the way, and what's most important is what you do with those lessons going forward. A summit is meaningless unless it provides perspective, and I am not talking about the view from the top. I know that sometimes I am going to feel pretty beaten-up during an expedition, but as long as my face muscles still work, I can put a smile on my face and get out there and keep climbing. And just because I had a great climb during one expedition doesn't mean I am going to have a great experience on the next one -- so I approach every expedition with humility and a desire to learn from the mountain and from my teammates. Even if I feel like I did my very best on one particular mountain, I know I have to be even better on the next one.

What advice would you give to other leaders who are working towards their goals?

I would advise leaders to be more failure tolerant of themselves and of others. I would also encourage them to always put themselves in the shoes of the people on their team and to understand that they should never ask anyone to take any risk that they themselves would not be willing to take. Leaders

need to always think of themselves as a work-in-progress and should continue to soak up as much information as possible from others-- even others who are less experienced in a given area of practice. Be willing to be in perpetual student-mode. And one of the most important things for a leader to do is to empower people to think and act like leaders regardless of title or tenure. In today's world -- change happens fast and furiously, and people need to be able to act and react to situations that aren't in the playbook. You have to be able to execute well based on the current situation, not on some plan that was previously written out. Forget about the plan and focus on execution.

Define leadership.

Leadership is the act of taking responsibility for guiding or directing people toward reaching a particular objective. Leadership is not only found in business, politics, on sports team and expeditions, but it's also found in places like elementary school playgrounds. Yes, it starts that early. Leadership can work for or against a team or an organization based on whether the leader is competent and is of high moral character. If you have a competent leader who is not of high moral character-- yikes!!! Look out!

What are some ways for Chick-fil-A Leadercast attendees to apply your talk to their professional life?

Whether tackling business challenges, athletic challenges or personal challenges, attendees can definitely apply the lessons I learned in the mountains to those they will face going forward. Parallels include doing more with less, forming the right team, adapting to a changing environments, decision-making under pressure, constantly re-assessing situations, realizing that poor judgment can take out an entire team, etc.

More advice and information can be found at www.alisonlevine.com, or people can follow me on Twitter@Levine_Alison. I would also recommend checking out the Thayer Leader Development Group (TLDG) which is an executive leadership training center I work with that leverages world-recognized educators and the inspirational venue of the United States Military Academy at West Point. West Point has been an evolving laboratory of leader development for over 200 years and is unmatched in its commitment to institutional integrity, professional ethics, and developmental excellence. More information about TLDG: www.thayerleaderdevelopment.com.