

Speaker talks of experiences climbing Mount Everest

By Bill Rea

A high-performing team can accomplish a lot, be it business success or climbing Mount Everest.

Scott Kress, president of Summit Group, addressed the recent Mayor's Business Breakfast, hosted by Mayor Marolyn Morrison, describing his experiences as he climbed the tallest mountain in the world, and discussing how to apply that successful formula to other endeavours, including business.

Kress became the 51st Canadian to reach the top of Everest in May 2008, and he described the experience in his book *Learning in Thin Air*.

The summit of Everest is 8,848 metres above sea level, and Kress said the 8,000-metre level marks 'the dead zone.' He explained that people spending too much time above that level (maximum of about five days) will die. He explained cells in the body regenerate every day, but they die faster at higher altitudes through lack of air. The body can't regenerate them fast enough, and it begins to shut down after a time.

There are many who would like to give climbing Everest a try, provided they have plenty of time and money, and no other pressing obligations.

Offering some sobering statistics, Kress said climbing Everest carries with it about a 10 per cent chance of success, meaning most of those who make it to base camp don't get to the summit. And there are dangers too, as he pointed out there had already been two deaths on the mountain this year. As well, he said about 80 per cent of those who die do so on their way down the mountain.

'Nothing fails like success,' he observed, commenting that people who achieve their goals might not know what to do next. 'What gets you there won't keep you there.'

Trying such a climb takes a toll on the body. Kress said one can burn 1,000 calories per hour the day the summit is reached, meaning the body needs a lot of fuel. He added that above 8,000 metres, one's resting heart rate is about 125 beats per minute, and it goes up to about 180 during the actual climb. And the climber will be in that area for between 48 and 72 hours.

Although the body needs fuel, the lack of oxygen at that height limits its ability to absorb food. The appetite is diminished too.

'There's an easier way to lose weight,' he observed.

Preparation is important, he said, and that includes thinking about what kind of food to take up. Kress said he found the best food was fried spam. In those conditions, the body wants fat and salt, which is basically what spam is. He added it travels well in cans. Kress said that for every 10 people who reach the summit, one dies. Some of them fall, are buried in avalanches, are victims of crevice collapses, etc.

He also pointed out that high-performance teams are more likely to succeed, while low-performance teams are liable to fail.

So Kress said he got together a team he knew and could trust. They included Angus Murray, with whom he had previously climbed Mount Logan, Alan Arnette, Allan Barrett and Ryan Waters, who was the leader.

The complications involved in climbing Everest also included some political issues. The mountain is on the border of Nepal and Tibet, and they decided to approach the summit from the Tibet side, meaning they would need the approval of the Chinese government, as well as have to work with the military.

When the team gathered in Kathmandu (the capital of Nepal), they learned their permit to enter Tibet had been cancelled. Kress pointed out the Beijing Olympics were just a couple of months away, and the summit of Everest was part of the route of the torch run. Since there was disagreement as to whether Beijing should have been hosting the games, Chinese officials were concerned there might be efforts to interfere with the relay.

Kress said they went to the government of Nepal and got permission to approach the mountain from there.

The trip to Base Camp could have been completed in four days, but Kress said they took 10, to give their bodies time to acclimatize. It also gave the team more time to get to know each other.

He said he made a point of walking with different team members every day, getting to know them and building relationships that would be needed for higher performance.

Kress also stressed that in order to succeed, there is need of a vision that can be defined and measured. 'Begin with the end in mind,' he said, adding it's important to define it as a team. There must also be consideration of the actions needed to bring the vision to life, with time for reflecting on whether they are doing what they set out to do.

The mountain had to be climbed in stages, with four other camps along the route from Base Camp to the Summit. They are known as Camp I, Camp II, Camp III and Camp IV.

Kress said they made the trip from Base Camp to Camp I a couple of time, exposing their bodies to the harsh conditions, then going

down so cells that had been killed could be rebuilt.

Once they started making the ascent, the lack of oxygen meant they couldn't move very fast. There are also crevices that need to be crossed; some seemed bottomless, he said, adding they had to tie ladders together to cross them.

"On Everest, you do what you've got to do to get up there," he observed.

As well, there were still concerns that there might be interference with the Olympic torch. The Tibet military was on the mountain, and Kress said all the climbers were searched, and satellite phones and video cameras were confiscated. Pressure and stress levels went up at this point, and Kress observed that the non-performance teams were having troubles.

The teams were told they would not be able to pass from Camp II until a certain date, but he said getting to the summit can't be scheduled that precisely. There's a window of opportunity in the spring of only four to seven days, and there's no way of knowing when that's going to occur.

Since the military was in charge, Kress said the team met and decided to go back to Base Camp and have a party, inviting other teams. Some of them thought that was childish. "What else could we do?" he asked.

As things turned out, the Olympic torch passed the summit a couple of days earlier than had been expected, and the military left, after returning the equipment that had been confiscated.

When they reached Camp III, the team started breathing supplemental oxygen. They each had five bottles and wore the masks all the time. That would have to last them until they got to the summit and back down.

"The higher you go, the harder it becomes," Kress observed.

When they arrived at Camp IV, they realized the aim was to spend as little time there as possible. They left the camp at about 9 p.m., timing their arrival at the summit at about daybreak. The view would be more spectacular then, they figured, and it would allow them more time to get back to the camp.

All five members of the team got their moment at the top. They were there about 30 minutes, then headed back down.

The trip down had some sobering moments. One of the pictures Kress showed was of the body of Scott Fischer, who died in what is known as the 1996 Everest disaster, in which several climbers lost their lives.

He pointed out that while making such an ascent, a climber knows whether the accompanying team is working well or not. He added such an experience provided a lot of opportunity for him to get insight into himself.

"We're all climbers," he said, stating that applies to people who have to scale personal mountains, career mountains, etc. He added the strategies used to successfully climb a mountain can be used in all aspects of life.

He stressed there are no short cuts. "You have to earn every step," he declared, pointing to the need to persevere and stay focused on goals.



Mayor Marolyn Morrison welcomed Scott Kress of Summit Group to her recent business breakfast.