

Book Review:

On the Edge: Leadership Lessons from Mount Everest and Other Extreme Environments by Alison Levine



Donna Celentano and I attended a reception hosted by Orange Bank and Trust Company where Allison Levine was the guest speaker. That evening we decided to invite our other group members to review this book. I enjoyed her presentation, her life lessons learned, and her experiences being part of a team. The book is an easy read and I have recommended it to men and women.

Her leadership lessons from extreme environments (Mount Everest, Wall Street) are applicable to banking, mental health and life struggles.

My favorite 'lessons' from her book are:

1. 'Backing up is not the same as backing down'.
2. 'Fear is ok. Complacency will kill you'.
3. 'Keep climbing'.
4. 'Teamwork... looking out for each other, helping each other and winning together'.
5. Connect with people who 'rally around you, support you and encourage you'.
6. 'Never discount the value of courtesy and compassion when it comes to achieving a goal, especially when the going gets rough. In other words, be nice.'
7. There is a difference between 'performance ego' and (big) ego.
8. 'Three words... what's your mantra?'

I have asked my colleagues at work to share their mantras, two of them created a decorated corkboard and asked clients to add their mantras to it, which has created a wonderful collection of actions. My mantra is 'kindness is everything... collaborate and share'. Alison suggests that 'people can tell what's important to you by your actions'.

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Michele Winchester-Vega, DSW, LCSW-R, ACSW



Mountains make good metaphors, and Alison Levine, author of "On the Edge" uses her experience as an accomplished mountaineer, having climbed the highest peaks on all 7 continents, and led the first women's team on Everest, to distill the life lessons she has learned from these ascents, (as well as descents, which she points out are of equal importance). If you like to read about mountain climbing, Levine gives you a colorful, birds-eye view of what it is like to face the unbelievable, hardships of pushing oneself to the limit, without enough warmth, food, sleep or oxygen, dealing with the vagaries of weather, and the challenges and rewards of working with teams. The reader feels as if she is

climbing the mountain along with her, visceral and thrilling. At the end of each chapter, the “life lesson” is distilled into a paragraph.

Levine also profiles leaders in the fields of business, military, and sports who have overcome adversity. The principles she has learned from them and her own endeavors can be applied to everyday life, whether they are adversities of the mind, or circumstance. Business CEOs talk about the ability to get comfortable being uncomfortable, pushing past normal comfort zones, something therapists often focus on. It’s a necessary coping skill for life. Practicing this gives one flexibility, resilience and self-confidence. Fear of failure, and the dangers of obsessing over perfection, creates a “cult of the unerring”. Taking risks and tolerance of failure is fundamental to growth in everyone.

Though the author focuses on leadership skills, the lessons she learned that enabled her to achieve and succeed despite hardships, can transfer to becoming successful in one’s personal growth. These include proper preparation, both physical and mental, so one is able to endure the suffering and setbacks that are an inevitable part of life (and celebrating the journey); acquiring the necessary tools to succeed; and the importance of developing relationships and resources to support, learn from and encourage - knowing she could not have climbed the tallest peaks in the world without them. – Laura Nathanson, LMHC



Chapter 8 of Alison Levine’s *On The Edge* focuses on building trust and loyalty while being a leader. Levine explains that despite our daily effort of working towards a goal, unforeseen obstacles may arise that are completely out of our control. *How we treat others*, Levine reminds us, is something we can absolutely control. “Never discount the value of courtesy and compassion when it comes to achieving a goal, especially when the going gets rough.” There will be bumps in the road, our patience will be tested, and we may even feel like giving up. Even in those trying moments we need to remain mindful of how we are making others feel. Without respect, kindness, transparency, and empathy, can trust and loyalty really be built?

Collaboration is explored in Chapter 4, *Friends in High Places*. She explains that during a climb, team leaders need to work together to increase efficiency and safety and that the networking should go to an even deeper, more individual level. By doing this, we are able to really access the strengths and weaknesses of the team member. If we think about it from a managerial standpoint, what would be more effective? Teaching by telling a person what to do, or teaching by doing it with them, or showing them? *On the Edge* was a great read that highlighted the unimaginable challenges Alison Levine faced while leading the first American Women’s Everest Expedition. She shares her insight into what works, and what hasn’t worked, for her and other leaders in the climbing world, and also today’s society. – Nicole Serini, LMSW



In the book, *On The Edge*, there are life lessons applicable to not only mountain climbing but in everyday life. In her many experiences of being a renowned mountain climber, Alison Levine, shares some fundamental lessons learned and tools needed in order to move forward and through obstacles. Both physically and figuratively. A popular concept in her writing is being complacent; “Complacency will kill you”. This can come in several different forms; doing what others are doing simply because they are, not making moves to alter ones’ life and staying still

because it feels “safe enough”. She speaks of how this could cause serious injury or death on the side of a mountain. It is also applicable to real life and the work that I do with my clients. It is often scary for people to implement change in their own lives and relationships. While their situations may not be ideal, it is familiar to them so at times it is easier to be complacent than to risk an unknown outcome. This often can lead to people not making any moves; remaining stagnant.

In this book, Alison Levine talks about fear and using it to one’s advantage. She wrote, “real danger often comes from failing to react to shifts in the world around us”. The same is true for daily living; you need to have a “Plan B”. She also speaks of how when climbing, you need to make sure the ground is the most stable it can be and to ensure that the decks are stacked in your favor. This is part of the work in therapy as well. While there are no guarantees, knowing that you’ve done all you can to get closer to the outcomes that you set out to do is important. Trusting that you are prepared for whatever shifts come your way is essential. In therapy, we often use the analogy of having an “emotional toolbox” to navigate through one’s life and to feel prepared when difficulties arise. Skills needed to keep moving forward. Alison Levine spoke of the difficulty in taking even a single step when fatigue and doubt set in while attempting to climb Mount Everest. But in focusing on only small distances at a time, the writer realized she could stay in the moment and she would eventually reach her goal. The same is true for anyone while facing a seemingly overwhelming situation. Moving forward, even if slowly, is progress.

Alison Levine wasn’t always successful in her pursuits. At times, she needed to call off a climb, when the finish line was in sight, to ensure the safety of her group. While some may see this as failure, she points out that it ensured that everyone would make it off of Mount Everest alive. Nothing else mattered at that time. There is still much to be learned and experienced even if the expedition is not exactly how one expected it to be; regardless of how others may judge it. This book spoke a lot about balance. As it is in real life, balance is essential for overall physical and mental health. Knowing when to push forward and knowing when you’ve done enough is crucial. Being able to adapt to the changes is what matters. At the core, she speaks of the need to surround yourself with a solid team that best ensures success in meeting a common goal. In her case, experienced and strong climbers. It was not about leading by power, but by building others up to strengthen the whole. It’s about teamwork versus being out on one’s own. The book points out that it’s not only okay, but necessary to rely on others for help for one’s survival. All too often, people feel that reaching out is a weakness. I enjoyed Alison Levine’s book and her application of physical obstacles to everyday life happenings. Together, people can overcome challenges one step at a time. – Donna Celentano, LCSW



On the Edge written by author Alison Levine is an inspiring novel that touches on leadership and teamwork from her experiences as a mountaineer over the years. In one of the chapters titled “Choosing your team”, Levine challenges the definition of a team, illustrating the key to success with teamwork is when every member of the group cares as much about helping the other members, as they would about helping themselves. Within the reading, Levine also analyzes the different outcomes of her many climbs as a mountaineer. The most challenging climbs, were not due to the lack of people or lack of endurance, but when it became a group of people all working for the same goal, but individually and not a team. This chapter stood out to me as this approach to team work can be beneficial within the workplace, family systems, relationships, etc. I recommend this novel as it offers amazing insight in relation to life’s everyday challenges.
- Julianne Scheck LMSW