

A story about Mountains

Part 1 - What does your mountain look like?

During a conversation, when subjects like the state and condition of companies, services or organisations pop up, I often compare this state and condition with the environment and the circumstances on and around a mountain. There are a lot of parallels that can be drawn between companies or organisations on one side and mountains on the other.

First of all, you can compare companies or organisations with mountains in function of their size. You have small rises, hills and low mountains just as there are small and medium-sized enterprises. Whereas large and very large companies, government organisations and multi-nationals can be compared to higher mountains or even complete mountain ranges.

Secondly, each company or organisation has a specific hierarchical structure. The way this hierarchy can be perceived can be compared to the steepness of a mountain side. The more rigid and formal the hierarchy, the steeper the mountain wall will be. Even in a small family business, you will always find some kind of hierarchy, even if it is very informal. There will always be someone who determines which road to take and who decides what comes next. As such, the hierarchical structure corresponds with the slope of the mountain and we can characterise it as follows.

The top management is positioned at the top of the mountain. For a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME), this can be the manager with a few employees, but at larger organisations there is probably more room at the top where you can find the CEO and his Board of Directors or other strategic management for instance.

The mid-level management can be found around the mountain flank. When you're dealing with an SME this part will be limited. In such instance, the mountain will merely be a hill. These managers are close to the top of the hill, while still in contact with the valley. However, at larger organisations and companies you will be able to distinguish different levels of managers.

Managers at the start of their career are just beginning to climb the mountain and thus still have a good view on the valley. Then there are those that have come halfway and of which some have grown tired of the climb. But you also have those that are close to and are looking towards the top.

On the level just above the valley you have the front line managers. They are located at the bottom of the pyramid of management. The rest of the staff is, in English, quite appropriately named the 'floor workers'. Or should we call them 'valley workers', as they are located at the foot of the mountain and in the valley.

A third (and very important) aspect where you can draw a parallel is communication and how everybody communicates in the organisation. Communication can be compared to the accessibility of the mountain. Is the mountain side straight? Is the wall covered with scrub? Are there any other obstacles that reduce the accessibility? Or do you have access to beautiful paths at all levels, leading all the way to the top? Also, do you have good trails on the various plateaus and terraces to go from one side of the mountain to the other? Or, do people have to climb steep walls with ropes and ladders to get to another level or move from one side to another? These are all possible metaphors for the different ways communication is structured and functional in companies and organisations.

Finally, you also have the weather and climate on the mountain. On and around mountains you often have a microclimate, just as every company has its own business environment. Ideally, the weather is mild, clear and sunny, with a slight cooling breeze to refresh the people that are working hard to make the mountain beautiful. However, everyone knows that clouds often pile up alongside the mountain, covering the mountain in a dense fog. Or the wind can start blowing and with dark clouds comes the rain, creating dangerous gullies when the water evacuates.

On the top of the mountain it can start freezing and everything can get covered under a blanket of thick snow, while in the valley the sun might still be shining. It is also possible that the whole mountain flank is hidden in the fog and only the top rises above the clouds in a beautiful sunshine.

So my question is: What does your mountain or hill look like? How do you make sure that the mountain is accessible and how do you make certain that the sun will shine?

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