

Gaining a Better View

How climbing mountains changed my outlook on public speaking.

BY EMILIE CORTES, ACB, CL

Two things have helped me get over my fear of public speaking: 1) methodically working through the Toastmasters program; and 2) climbing mountains. Both activities came into my life at about the same time.

I joined the Marsh Mellow Toasters club in San Francisco in 2003. At the time, I was comfortable giving presentations in business settings with PowerPoint slides as my crutch, but I would freeze up when giving a more traditional speech in front of an audience looking back at me. I faced my fear and joined a corporate Toastmasters club at Marsh & McLennan—a professional services company where I worked after graduating from business school. When I gave my Ice Breaker, I must have broken the record for the most “ums” ever uttered by a Marsh Mellow member.

While on vacation in Bavaria, Germany, around this time, I climbed my first real mountain: Zugspitze, the highest peak in the country at 9,718 feet (2,962 meters). Halfway up, our group

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donned harnesses clipped in to fixed lines and scrambled our way to the top of the peak. A tremendous sense of accomplishment swelled within me. I had worked through my fear of this daunting challenge, and I was rewarded by reaching the majestic summit.

Once I started acquiring the skills necessary to be a safe and prepared climber (route finding, rope techniques, avalanche awareness and how to rescue a climber from a crevasse in a glacier), the world opened up to me. I have now climbed on six of the seven continents. I have trekked to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania twice; rock-climbed all over the United States and in the heart of northern Mexico; summited four Latin American volcanoes over 15,000 feet (4,572 meters), and even climbed



Emilie Cortes treks in front of Annapurna massif in the Himalayas of North-central Nepal.

Makalu, a Himalayan peak that is the fifth-highest mountain in the world at nearly 28,000 feet (almost 8,500 meters).

Climbing has caused me to look at life differently in many ways. I see now that we are often our own worst enemies, holding ourselves back from success because of a paralyzing fear of failure and a lack of belief in ourselves. Who would have thought that this small woman who had never been very athletic would gain the skill and confidence to even consider attempting an 8,000-meter peak?

As I worked toward bigger and tougher mountains, I also worked through my *Competent Communication* and *Compe-*

tent Leader manuals. Each project forced me to face my fear of the spotlight, and slowly but surely the progression of speeches chipped away at my anxiety. I received positive and constructive feedback from my peers. While honing my mountain-climbing skills, I learned how to speak up and how to lead.

There is real risk in the mountains. Now that I have been in a few survival situations, I have a better sense of what is to truly be feared in life. What is there to fear about daily life in civilized society? Certainly not looking like a fool in front of a supportive group of fellow Toastmasters! If speaking in front of a group feels like real risk to you, take small steps and slowly build the skills to conquer that fear. Start off with participating in Table Topics. Methodically work through your manuals. Give presentations at work or in your community.

As I embraced the Toastmasters program and figured out I would live to speak another day, my fear of public speaking slowly melted away, replaced by the joy of spreading a message about which I am passionate: the many rewards of mountain climbing. After I gave a presentation to a former employer about my Makalu expedition, the owner of the firm said, “No wonder you aren’t afraid of anything!” Indeed ... at least anything that won’t kill me. **T**

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