

## Stephanie Leber on Ed Viesturs

I am neither a climber nor an outdoorswoman. What I am is someone who deeply admires what it takes to integrate the mind, body, and spirit in pursuit of a goal. I spent this past summer in beautiful Seattle, Washington where I had the pleasure of hearing Ed Viesturs speak at an event. I had never heard of him before the event and wrongfully assumed this was just another meaningless attempt to inspire corporate teamwork and leadership. After listening to Viesturs' lecture, I walked away inspired to climb my first Himalayan mountain. Suffice it to say, he made an impact on me.

Ed Viesturs' short-list of accomplishments is astonishing and unparalleled. He has summited Mount Everest 7 times and climbed 14 of the world's highest mountains (>8000 meters) which are located in the Himalayas. If that wasn't impressive enough, he managed to climb all 14 mountains without the use of supplemental oxygen and became the first American to do so in 2005. His mountaineering fame has enabled him to pursue climbing as a full-time career. He accomplished this by applying his skills across a diverse range of services including company sponsorships, public speaking events, and commissioned mountain guiding. He has a loving wife and three children, a Zoology masters and Veterinary doctorate degree, and leads a number of community service activities.

Born to European immigrant parents in 1959 in Illinois' flatlands, Viesturs had little direct exposure to mountains. His first encounter was through Maurice Herzog's book, *Annapurna*, which recounts the author's harrowing experience in attempting to summit the treacherous mountain. Viesturs recalls his first reaction to the book in his comment, "what I liked was that these guys had a goal and they just wouldn't give up. They spent months and months finding the mountain; then they climbed it. So simple, so basic. I'm a very goal-oriented person, and I like things that take a long time to accomplish."<sup>[i]</sup> As a young adult, Viesturs traveled to the Pacific Northwest and landed a job with Rainier Mountaineering Inc. He was also attending Veterinary school and eventually opened up a practice with friends. However, he eventually was forced to commit to one career path as he frequently took long leaves of absence to climb the Himalayas. For Viesturs, mountains were the only option. Following his many mountaineering feats, Viesturs joined the IMAX team to film Everest where he found himself caught in the midst of a disaster. In a single day, a major blizzard killed 8 other Everest climbers and filming was suspended to assist other climbers. If summiting all 14 of the >8000-meter Himalaya peaks wasn't enough, the mountaineer ran the ING NYC marathon in 2006. Today, Viesturs guides teams up challenging mountains and is invited by organizations around the world as a guest speaker and expert on leadership and teamwork.<sup>[ii]</sup>

What makes Viesturs such an inspiration and role model to me is his ability to cut across his domains in both his decisions and actions. First, he chose a career path where he could combine his passion for mountaineering, love for the great outdoors and international travel, and leadership skills. His commitment to aligning his spiritual and physical self is truly unique. He often cites implicit trust as a quality he looks for in his climbing partners and is able to engender strong relationships through the activity of training and climbing. His relationships have matured into lifelong friendships that have catapulted his network and career to unimaginable success. My initial instinct would have been to assume Viesturs strengthens his relationship with his community of climbers through the shared risk and the thrill of the ascent. However, Viesturs surprised me in expressing that he is most fulfilled by collaborating with others in a thoughtful, cautious, and strategic manner. Furthermore, the profession of mountaineering in the Himalayas comes with major risks. He was forced to make life or death decisions such as continuing the ascent when conditions were bleak or rushing to the higher campground despite his body was fighting against him. Viesturs derives the strength to objectively analyze situations and turn back after days of climbing, in part, because of his wife and three kids. His family has an expectation that he return safe and unharmed after his expeditions. This expectation grounds him in making the right decisions for both him and his team, regardless of how unpopular the decisions may seem.

Viesturs is famous for his 1987 Everest climb when he chose to back off the summit when just 300 feet away because conditions were poor.[iii] By sharing his thought process with his family and team, he is able to better communicate his values and save the lives of others who depend on him. Presently, Viesturs is helping to use his learned lessons and brand name to impact his community through charitable expeditions and encourages others to pursue their dreams. While the tendency is to stereotype mountaineers as 'risk it all' people, Viesturs defies this notion with his cautious optimism and balanced approach.

Like Viesturs, I wish to transcend the lessons he has learned in aspects of my own life. One of the biggest takeaways for me is having the strength to overcome failure and fear. Specifically, I hope that as I move forward in my career, I will embrace the idea of considering alternative approaches even if it occasionally forces me to move backwards instead of forwards. This will require me to both believe in the value of my approach and communicate my logic to those who I am leading in a meaningful and relevant way. I also hope to internalize the notion that through commitment and perseverance, any goal can be achieved. Most importantly, I hope to find that niche in my own life where I can combine my passions in my professional pursuits, family life, community commitments, and spiritual and physical self in harmonious ways without trading off one for another. Viesturs was forced to make tough decisions early in life but his commitment to his vision allowed him to easily 'see the forest from the trees'. I hope to amend my leadership vision so that it can serve as a compass in guiding me through tough life choices.

#### References

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[i] <http://www.edviesturs.com/about>

[ii] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ed\\_Viesturs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ed_Viesturs)

[iii] [http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/ed\\_viesturs.html](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/ed_viesturs.html)  
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