



Behaviour in Extreme Situations – What We Can Learn from Mountaineers

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Abstract

Extreme mountaineers often have to cope with risky situations. They are considered experts in mountaineering. But how do they deal with risks? How differ their behavior from “normal” people? What conclusions can be drawn to the human behaviour in everyday work and in learning situations in particular? This article examine these questions and illuminates human behavior in extreme situations.

The fatal accidents of the two Swiss climber Erhard Loretan and Joëlle Brupbacher last spring have raised questions: How is it possible that mountaineers, always considered to be experts in their field, lost their lives in expeditions?

The behaviour of mountaineers is characterized by the *situation* and the *individual* who is in the particular situation. In addition, there are *normative conditions* that may affect the behavior. The perception of risk is individual. Furthermore, the perception is a mental process and has to do with how the information is absorbed through the senses, processed and evaluated [1].

To become an expert, a beginner has to pass three periods [2]: In a first phase, the playful engagement with the subject is in the foreground. After some basic skills have been acquired, targeted and intensive practicing begins. At the end of this second phase the individual has to decide, whether he or she wishes to pursue the subject as a profession. How well a person will be corresponds directly to the effort, *which is used for deliberate practice, which means targeted, focused and intense practice* [3].

Beginners in sports make their first experiences in a safe environment, positive experiences are in the foreground. the emphasis of advanced is on expanding the knowledge and movement experiences. An *expert* can master challenging situations, he or she has a wide repertoire of motions and experiences. An expert may well reflect his movement behavior. But new experiences with his own limits are increasingly difficult to achieve [4].

This means that with increasing level of a mountaineer’s competence:

- the complexity of movement is higher
- the range of experience is wider
- the environment in which he or she likes to be gets more uncertain
- the ability to reflect is improved
- it is more difficult to beat the previous experiences
- the readiness to assume a risk does not decrease
- and hence the remaining risk increase

What conclusions can be drawn to the human behaviour in everyday work and learning situations? It is certainly wrong to derive insights directly. However, some basic considerations can be derived concerning the organisation and management of groups, the working atmosphere and group dynamics and as well as the personality of the relevant people.