Sensemaking the Everest Disaster: Competing Commitments in Groups

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WP 99-3

Recommended for Working Paper Series by Professor David A. Kolb
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JANUARY 13, 1999

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An earlier draft of this paper was submitted as part of the qualifying process. Thanks to Vanessa Druskat, Jaye Goosby, David Kolb and Eric Neilsen for helpful comments on earlier drafts.
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ABSTRACT

The 1996 Mt. Everest climbing disaster is analyzed to illustrate competing commitments in groups. Group committing is reconceptualized as an interdependent series of competing and emerging demands that arise from social circumstances. Five sensemaking processes are posed to fuel dysfunctional commitment: escalating commitment, fantasizing success, limiting alternatives, goal theodicy, and relying on leaders. Analysis is generalized to the literature on groups and sensemaking. A group’s ability to resolve competing commitments is said to arise from four processes: sanctioning multiple commitments, learning from experience, alternating sensemaking, and reciprocally-coupled leadership. Implications for committing, learning, and disaster sensemaking are drawn.

Key words: groups, sensemaking, Everest
In this paper I analyze the 1996 Mt. Everest climbing disaster to illustrate competing commitments in groups. I address two primary questions. First, why would a group continue committing to a goal despite mounting evidence it could not be attained? Second, what processes allow a group to abandon earlier commitments? My response points to a gap in our understanding of the processes that lead to escalated committing in groups (Staw, 1981).

My purpose is to show that the circumstances of Everest represent a more general problem that emerges when social systems commit exclusively to achieving narrowly defined goals. I call this problem Leander’s commitment, after the character in Classic mythology who perished committing to a distance goal. The paper is organized as follows: First, I explore research on goals and committing in groups. Second, I describe my sensemaking methodology. Third, I reconstruct the final hours of the Everest disaster and generalize the discussion to literature on groups and sensemaking. Fourth, I outline the sensemaking processes that lead to unresolved committing and propose processes to resolve complex commitments. Finally, I explore implications for group committing, team learning, and disaster sensemaking. Although we will never fully know what happened on Everest, a clearer sense of what leads groups to commit when consequences are serious might increase understanding of how committing threatens groups under more traditional circumstances (Staw, 1982; Weick, 1995).

Following the disaster, survivor Beck Weathers (Turning Point, 1996) stated “It’s easy to over pursue goals. It’s easy to become obsessed with goals.” Weathers’ analysis of the excesses
of goal setting in mountain climbing points to a current gap in discussions on goal setting in organizations: the dysfunctional consequences of goal commitment. There is substantial support for the positive effects of goals at the group level of analysis. In fact, one of the most consistent and widespread findings in the literature on group effectiveness is that committing to specific and measurable goals is important to achieving effective outcomes (Locke & Latham, 1990; Mento, Steal, & Karren, 1987; Silver & Bufanio, 1996). Clear and specific task goals have been suggested to lead to greater satisfaction and motivational potential while building commitment for both organizational and personal achievement (Hackman, 1986; Locke & Latham, 1990). For example, research shows that teams perform better when given specific and measurable goals (Latham & Yukl, 1975; Silver & Bufanio, 1996). Katzenbach and Smith (1993) even emphatically refer to goal setting as the core ‘discipline’ of teams.

Yet, while theory and research consistently show the positive effects of committing to ambitious goals, there is growing dissatisfaction with this line of reasoning (Beach, 1997; Staw, 1982; Weick, 1995). One suggestion is that research focus not on goals, but on how goals are construed and pursued, i.e., processes of commitment. For example, Weick (1995) encourages research that probes the explanatory and cognitive processes related to commitment, and Staw (1976) suggests researching processes used by groups to justify commitments. In a similar line of research, Beach (1997) points to gaps in current understanding on how commitments are reframed when proven inadequate or unattainable. He asks, “If a problem is framed in a certain way and subsequent events prove that frame to have been inaccurate, how does reframing take place”? (p. 184). More importantly, he asks, “under what conditions do decision-makers resist reframing. . . .”
In summary, once thought to be the panacea of effectiveness, there is increasing realization that ambitious goals can have a dysfunctional effect under certain circumstances (Winters & Latham, 1996). One way to begin research on the dysfunctional aspects of goal commitment is through in depth exploration of occasions where salient actions lead to disastrous consequences (Staw, 1982; Weick, 1995). The May 1996 Everest disaster is just such an occasion.

METHOD

To analyze the events, I collected over 1,000 pages of text, photographs, and charts including internet filings by expedition teams, published first hand accounts, and popular press reports and interviews with survivors. Personal experience is also an important part of sensemaking (Weick, 1993; 1995) and played an important role in the analysis. The author was in the Everest region of Nepal days after the disaster and the impetus for the study was to make sense of the varying accounts of the events that surfaced in the days after the incident. Analysis of the data posed unique challenges because unlike other disaster sensemaking, there were no public inquires or systematic analyses conducted by authoritative bodies, no archival records, and little trace data (Gephart, 1993; Weick, 1993). Thus, the available data represented a unique occasion for sensemaking.

To analyze the data I relied heavily on past disaster sensemaking research (Gephart, 1993; Weick, 1993). I use the term sensemaking in two ways: First, sensemaking represents an analytic strategy which attempts to decipher meanings and create plausible explanations for complex phenomenon. Second, sensemaking describes the processes and explanations by which groups create and sustain meaning.
As an analytic strategy, sensemaking is a general category of inquiry, rooted in social psychology (Weick, 1995) and ethnomethodology (Gephart, 1993), focused on explicating how meaning and coherence are created, especially during times of heightened ambiguity (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is distinguished from case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1993) because of its concern with describing processes rather than with developing testable hypotheses (Weick, 1995: 173) and telling stories rather than developing constructs for measurement (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). In essence, sensemaking is more concerned with how people select, interpret, and create meaning than with statistical properties, normative errors, and the ability to replicate results.

As a description of meaning making processes, sensemaking explicates how social systems select cues from the environment, construe events, create meaning, and justify actions (Isabella, 1990). When groups partake in sensemaking, they create meaningful explanations and take salient actions to find coherence in shared experiences (Weick, 1995). Thus, to decipher sensemaking, I looked within the groups themselves for reoccurring patterns of description, interpretation, and construal of shared experiences.

THE EVENTS

The Final Assault

In his personal account of the events, climber Jon Krakauer (1997) explains that during the final 18 hour push to summit, “survival is to no small degree, a race against the clock” (p.173). After six weeks of acclimatizing and preparation, on May 9th, the New Zealand and the American teams arrived at Camp IV and began this race. Kennedy (1996) provides the details of what they will face.
The South Col, the site of the highest camp on the Nepalese side of the mountain, is at 7,906 meters [25,938 ft.]. The summit is 8,848 meters [29,029]. Climbing 90 meters [295 ft.] per hour you should gain the difference in about 10 hours. Add a couple of rest stops and some time to enjoy the view on top, and you’re looking at 12 hours up. Six hours for the descent makes it 18 hours round trip. Then there’s the oxygen. At an average flow of two liters per minute, a bottle will last six hours. You’ll carry two - with regulator and mask, they’ll total maybe 15 pounds - and your Sherpa support climbers will carry a third for you. That gives you 18 hours of total climbing time (p. 96-97).

If climbers leave at 12:00 a.m. they should reach the summit between 12:00 and 1:00 p.m. and head down soon after. Most climbing groups establish turn around times, or pre-established times when the climbers must give up their ascent and begin to descend. Past Everest expeditions have agreed on turn around times that range from a conservative 12:00 p.m. to a risky 2:00 p.m. There’s no clear evidence that the teams summiting on May 10th established turn around times, although climbers reported discussing possible turn around times at base camp.

On May 9th, 1996 at 11:35 p.m. Nepal time, 15 New Zealand team members, including head guide Rob Hall, and assistants Groom, and Harris, left Camp IV for the summit. Twelve American team members followed at 12:00 a.m. on May 10th, lead by assistant guides Beidleman and Boukreev. American Team leader Scott Fischer left after his team, sometime between 12:00 and 1:00 a.m. Makalu Gau, the remaining Taiwanese team member, left Camp IV soon after with three Sherpa guides, making a total of 32 climbers attempting to summit. By attempting to summit on May 10th, Gau broke an agreement made between expedition teams at Base Camp that only the Fischer and Hall teams would summit that day (Krakauer, 1997: 155).
While some guides carried two way radios, most team members did not, and some suggested (Boukreev & DeWalt, 1997) the radios were inadequate for the task anyway. Nor did the team members tie themselves together with ropes in case of a fall as is customary on difficult climbs. Instead, the teams used fixed ropes which are attached directly to supports on the mountain like rocks and ice. Fixed ropes eliminate the need for climbers to depend on one another for support. Most team members were equipped with individual support technology such as supplementary bottled oxygen and emergency steroid shots.

At about 5:30 a.m. three members of the American team reached the beginning of a long narrow ridge which runs between 27,200 and 28,000 called the Southeast Ridge Balcony (Krakauer, 1997). The teams could not progress up the mountain because fixed safety ropes had not been secured. Soon after, the New Zealand, American, and Taiwanese team became intermingled at the Balcony (Kennedy, 1996), creating the first of several bottlenecks during the climb. The teams worked to fix the ropes and slowly ascend along the Balcony between 8:00 and 10:00 a.m. (Kennedy, 1996; Krakauer, 1997).

Traffic Jam at the Summit

Between 11:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. another bottleneck occurred at the Hillary Step, one of the most difficult sections of the days just below the summit at 28,800 feet, because again, ropes were not fixed as planned. This queue of climbers waiting their turn to ascend the world’s tallest peak has become known as the traffic jam. At about 11:40 a.m., two members of the New Zealand team and two members of the American team began to fix ropes (Krakauer, 1997).

There are conflicting accounts of when various climbers reached the summit; however, somewhere between 1:12 and 1:25 p.m. eight members of the New Zealand and American teams reached the summit, followed shortly by two more American team members. Several more
members of each team arrived at the summit between 2:00 and 2:15 p.m. (Kennedy, 1996: 148) and several more at about 3:00 p.m. (Krakauer, 1997). At about 3:30 p.m. members of both teams continued to summit. American team guide, Fisher, and New Zealand guide, Hall, reached the top with clients at least an hour and a half after 2:00 p.m., the absolute latest turn around time.

The Descent

Somewhere between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. things start to go awry. An impending snow storm, which had been visible for some time, engulfs the mountain and slows the descent to a near halt. Climbers only equipped for 18 hours of climbing run out of bottled oxygen and fatigue quickly without the supplemental support. Some inject the steroids (Kennedy, 1996). Two members of the American team, including guide Fischer, and at least two members of the New Zealand team including guide Hall and client Hanson struggle through the storm near the top of the mountain. The whereabouts of assistant guide Harris are unknown.

Between 5:00 and 5:20 p.m., assistant guide Beidleman assumes leadership for a group of eight climbers from both the New Zealand and American teams. At 27,600 feet, this group meets New Zealand team member Beck Weathers shivering in the cold. Weathers, who aborted his summit bid ten hours earlier when his vision became severely impaired at altitude, had been instructed by guide Hall to stay still until he returned on his descent. Realizing that Hall would not return soon, Weathers joined the group on descent.

The Huddle

Meanwhile, several other members of both teams arrived back at Camp IV between 4:30 and 6:00 p.m. After getting caught in an earlier bottleneck of climbers, they had turned back
about 11:30 a.m. (Kennedy, 1996: 105) and gave up their summit attempt as the destination was still several hours out of reach.

By 8:00 p.m. the group now led by Beidleman reached the South Col, about 350 yards from Camp IV, but became lost in a fierce storm. Unable to locate camp in near blinding snow, group members forced each other to stay awake in double digit subzero wind chill by forming a tight human barrier against the wind and cold in what has become known as the huddle. At about 12:00 a.m. on May 11, a clearing in the clouds allowed Beidleman and Scheoning to return the short distance to Camp IV and send Boukreev, who had been trying to organize a search party, for help. Boukreev, retrieved all but Nambu and Weathers who were both believed to be dead (Kennedy, 1996).

Rescue Attempts

At 8:30 a.m. three teams of Sherpas head out to find the remaining climbers. Hall, trapped near the summit, had been in radio contact through the night, reported that Hansen could not continue down the mountain. At about 10:00 a.m. the Sherpas reached Fischer and Gao, but were unable to rouse Fischer. Pulling Gao behind them, a difficult and dangerous act at high altitude, they return to Camp IV. Weathers, left for dead a second time, amazingly regains consciousness and stumbles into camp completely by his own effort at 4:30 p.m. (Coburn, 1997).

Attempts to rescue Hall are aborted due to weather. At 6:40 p.m., Hall, who is still conscious, is patched through by satellite phone to his wife in New Zealand. He has remained at 28,700 feet for more than 24 hours now but is frostbitten, without oxygen, and unable to move. What happened to Harris has not been clearly established. Krakauer (1997) suggests he may have become trapped near the summit assisting Hall and Hansen.
The three teams would account for eight deaths, including three guides, Hall, Fischer, and Harris, and climbers Hanson and Nambu, as well as a Taiwanese climber who died earlier in the expedition. Two Sherpa guides were killed, one during an earlier accident and one during the rescue attempt. Additionally, five climbers from other expeditions also died that season including a member of a South African team who reached the summit at 5:00 p.m. on May 10th. Gau and Weathers suffered collectively amputated hands, feet, and nose.

ANALYSIS

Viewing the traffic jam near the summit, climber, and soon to be rescue party member, Ed Viesturs asked, “They’ve already been climbing 14 hours, and they still aren’t on the summit. Why haven’t they turned around” (Coburn, 1997: 20)? A more general way to phrase his question might be: Why would a group continue committing to a goal despite mounting evidence it could not be attained (Beach, 1997 Staw, 1982; Weick, 1995)? Before addressing this question, I want to state why the Everest events are representative of sensemaking in groups.

Sensemaking in Groups

First, the events represent instances of horizontal sensemaking because actions and meanings arise from negotiations between parties that interact in “projects, horizontal structuring, and self managed teams” (Weick, 1995: p. 174). Specifically, the events represent micro level sensemaking processes of committing when commitments are marked by shared responsibility for actions, where actions are public and salient, and produce dramatic consequences (Staw, 1982; Weick, 1995). This type of sensemaking is becoming more important as more organizations shift responsibilities for these activities to groups and teams (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993). Second, groups like those on Everest represent the basic unit through
which organizations coordinate work (Thelen, 1954) and constitute the primary level of decision-making, interaction, and communication in social systems (Homans, 1950).

Third, the expedition groups are representative of work teams because they are “interdependent collections of individuals who share responsibility for specific outcomes” (Sundstrom, DeMeuse, & Futrell, 1990: p. 120; see also Cohen & Baily, 1997). Fourth, the collection of nearly 400 climbers, guides and support staff which compromise 30 separate expeditions on Everest in May of 1996 constitute a missionary organization because they organized primarily around the shared commitment of summiting (Mintzberg, 1983).

Leander’s Commitment

The Everest events are important because they illustrate times when highly committed groups directing attention exclusively to achieving a narrowly defined goal (Staw, 1982). I want to focus the current discussion on times when groups concentrate resources, activities, and beliefs in such an exclusive and confined way that goal directed behavior threatens the survival of the group and its members. I call these reoccurring patterns of group behavior Leander’s Commitment, after the story in Classical mythology. In Virgil’s poem, The Georgics, Hero hung a lamp outsider her window each evening to beacon Leander who lived across the Hellsport channel. In return, Leander swam across to visit Hero, guided singularly by the beaconing light across the way. But one night, Leander failed to heed an oncoming storm. The storm blew out the light leaving Leander no means to guide his way. Before progressing across the channel, Leander faced two irresolvable commitments: keeping his pact with Hero or to preserving his own safety. Groups in organizations often face similar circumstances when faced with irresolvable competing commitments. Like Leander, who relied solely on a distant light as guide, thrown into disarray
when the guide vanished, groups may find themselves trapped when committed to a distant goals that suddenly disappears.

Leander’s Commitment in Everest

I want to first show how the Everest events illustrate five processes that lead groups to irresolvable commitments: escalating commitment, confining alternatives, fantasizing success, goal theodicy, and relying on leaders. Second, I show how balancing multiple commitments may allow teams to reverse course.

Escalating commitment. Groups commit to patterns of interaction early on that determine actions throughout the life of the group (Gersick, 1988). Groups continue to confirm their earliest decisions despite exposure to alternative options (Staw, 1976). In fact, Staw (1976) recognized that individuals not only reinforce their earliest decision strategies but that commitment escalates in the face of threats and disconfirming information. This process of escalating commitment also prevails in groups, when groups continue committing in the face of threatening information.

There are three vivid illustrations of escalated commitment in Everest groups. First, the three teams commitment to summit on May 10th despite knowing that at least one other expedition aborted their summit attempt that day due to possibly hazardous weather. Guide Hall, in particular, was committed to a May 10th summit day because he believed it to be the best day to summit based on his prior successful summits on that date. Second, once the summit attempt began on May 9th, the teams continued to push toward the summit even after a reasonable turn around time could not be attained. They continued their push to summit until late in the day, hours after standard turn around time around 12:00 p.m.. Third, the groups held only limited discussions of turn around times and had not established alternatives strategies of action if the summit was not reached on schedule.
Confining alternatives. Groups that escalate commitment confine the range of alternatives available to deal with emerging situations. By limiting sensemaking alternatives, groups confine the variety of alternative actions that seem realistic. Confined sensemaking may be particularly prevalent in groups that have considered only a few possible outcomes, face situations they think they have encountered before, perform clearly defined tasks, or do not require interdependence to accomplishment their goal (Wageman, 1996; Wood & Locke, 1990). For example, Winters & Latham (1996) found that when individuals perform routine activities, they are likely to pursue strategies that have already proven successful in the past and less likely to explore alternative courses of action. When a successful outcome is viewed as likely, people focus less on learning new achievement strategies and more on increased efficiency in reaching the outcome.

There is evidence that the Everest teams established outcome goals to motivate and increase effort from the start of the expedition instead of emphasizing learning and team work. This is especially important because the group was in an early stage of proficiency development and that many group members lacked extensive high altitude climbing experience. Evidence that the groups committed to outcomes rather than outcome strategies can be found in comments made by team members prior to and during the climb. For example, Pittmans’ (1996) internet filings stating “all indications point toward a successful climb” (p. cla412) and “. . . [as far as we know] our team has made the most progress to date of any group climbing the mountain” are representative of statements by her team that emphasized success over strategy development. Secondly, Guide Fischer comments that “We’ve ‘got the big E [Everest] all figured out”, (Outside Staff, 1996) suggests the teams would focus on outcome goals rather than learning goals. Additionally, Fischer dismisses his clients weakness from the effects of altitude by saying,
“It’s attitude, not altitude” (Boukreev & DeWalt, 1997) emphasizing perseverance over attention to processes.

Fantasizing success. Groups often create dysfunctional shared fantasies when common assumptions about themselves and their activity go without challenge (Bion, 1961). Shared fantasy can be seen as a problem of group identity that limits threats to identity from either outside or inside the group (Czarniawska, 1997). There is evidence to support the notion that the Everest teams shared a fantasy based on success outcomes. For example, Guide Hall advertised a “100 percent success rate” in his promotional brochures to emphasize that his teams were successful groups, despite knowing that no one from his group had made the summit the prior season. Secondly, commenting on the successful nature of his group, expedition support person Brent Bishop’s comment that “As long as they have the right window of good weather, they will have success” (Pittman, 1996: ela424).

Goal theodicy. Groups filter information to maintain their fantasy that they are successful (Staw, 1976). Instead of experiencing threats, setbacks, and problems as limiting events, groups may explain them in terms of goal achievement. I use the term goal theodicies to characterize these attempts to rationalize threats. Theodicies are justifications given by philosophers and theologians to explain the problem of evil in a just world (Weber, 1963). Theodicies arise to answer questions like “Why do children suffer” and “Why do Wicked people prosper”, (Green, 1987). Theodicies offer sense when current beliefs about the nature of the world are challenged by senseless events. At their most basic level, theodicies seek to reassure groups that meaning itself exists (Berger, 1967: 58). In a similar fashion, when groups explain situations using goal theodicy, they create explanations that sustain the fantasy of success in the face of continued
threats to these beliefs. These explanations create and sustain commitments despite mounting evidence that these commitments cannot be attained.

Everest teams created goal theodicies to explain the confusing events encountered during the climb and remain secure in their commitment to success. For example, Pittman (1996) and Beidleman (Boukreev & DeWalt, 1997) minimized increasingly painful coughs, stating they were necessary discomforts of high altitude. Weathers, unable to see a few feet in front of him due to the effects of high altitude on eye surgery, believed his vision would improve as he approached the summit and the warmth of the sun (Krakauer, 1997; Coburn, 1997). Weathers, further comments that “Fortunately, I didn’t really need to see the route, because deep steps had been kicked ahead of me” (Coburn, 1997: 178). Lopsand Janbu vomiting near the summit, a sign of altitude sickness, stated that vomiting was his body’s normal reaction to high altitude (Outside Online Staff, 1996).

Relying on leaders. It may be easier for groups to create goal theodicies when highly committed leaders motivate followers to set high goals (De Souza & Klein, 1995; Ewert, 1993; Latham, Erez, & Locke, 1988). This may be because leaders who are committed to narrow goals may already be inclined to justify their own interpretations of events through theodicy, by engaging others in conversations, and building relationships with followers (Rost, 1993). Thus, when groups rely on leaders as interpreters, commitments escalate because interpretations of events become fused with commitments held by the leader (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

There is evidence that the Everest teams relied on leaders to fuse interpretations and meaning with commitment to success. One example is Beck Weathers agreement to wait for guide Hall before descending. Unable to continue his ascent because of impaired vision, Weathers agreed to wait for Hall to return after his summit. Hall directed Weathers not to descent
before he returned. Weathers had at least two opportunities to descend with other climbers but refused to descend because of his pact with the guide. Finally, hours later, out of supplementary oxygen, sick from altitude, shivering in the cold, and nearly blind, Weathers agrees to descend with assistant guide Groom who had a radio to contact Hall. What's chilling about this incident is that it demonstrates the nearly irreversible hold of leaders to sustain meaning for group members. Weathers continued committing to a leader long after it proved a prudent agreement. Only after all options were exhausted and he faced standing alone on the mountain, did Weathers break his pact with Hall and join the group on descent.

Leander’s Commitment in History

If one good test of social theory is its power to explain historical events (Gergen, 1973), than there is support for using Leander’s commitment to explain incidents of consequential commitments like Napoleon’s drive on Moscow. There is support in Tolstoy’s account of events that Napoleon’s French army displayed the five characteristics mentioned above. First, they had committed early in their campaign to a course of action: conquer Russia through Moscow. The commitment escalated as they proceeded in their drive. Second, the French army considered no alternative courses of action. Third, the army continued the campaign despite the onset of a harsh Siberian winter, and fourth, justified setbacks in terms of future success. Finally, they relied on Napoleon’s leadership to interpret events (see Langer, 1989).

The formula for Leander’s commitment goes something like this: commitment early to a narrow goal, create fantastical notions of successes with little consideration of alternatives, use deviation from expectations to justify current meanings rather than as opportunities for reconsidering progress, limit what minimal considerations are sanctioned by the group, then rely on leaders to make sense of the minimal options that are available. Like Leander, committing to a
distant image to direct action, groups that commit to narrow goals may escalate their commitments to a single course of action, becoming lost without a map to find their way.

From Escalating to Resolving

Upon finding his body washed up on shore, the mythical Hero responded by committing to her own death, and thus the consequences of Leander's commitment have reached mythical status. Similarly, when a group finds itself trapped in a storm on the top of the world's highest mountain, an example of the consequences of a contemporary Leander's commitment become exposed. However, not all groups that commit are subject to such severe consequences. Indeed, groups that recognize and resolve a multitude of commitments may have a better chance to succeed than groups that commit to a single narrow goal. In this section, I want to address the second question, what sensemaking processes might allow a group to abandon earlier commitments? I argue that groups which rely more on sensemaking and learning than goals and achievement are more likely to construct mechanisms for weathering difficult situations (Winters & Latham, 1996; Weick, 1993). This section suggests four group processes that assist groups in resolving competing commitments: sanctioning competing commitments, alternating actions, learning, and reciprocally coupled leadership.

Sanctioning competing commitments. Current explanations of group action under uncertainty focus on how groups resolve internal psychological conflicts and contradictions by influencing other members in the group (Asch, 1956; Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1955; Janis, 1972; Stoner, 1961). These theories rest on the assumption that group members pressure the group to develop norms which provide greater psychological comfort and less internal conflict within the group (see McGrath, 1997). I want to pose a different set of assumptions based on social construction and complexity theory (Berger, 1967; McGrath, 1997). When
groups are viewed as dynamic social systems, adapting to changing circumstances, managing a range of complex and often contradictory social commitments, the analytic focus shifts from examining psychological comfort of group members, to examining the interactive processes that lead to the resolution of dialectically opposed commitments (McGrath, 1997; Smith & Berg, 1988; Staw, 1976; Weick, 1995).

With this view in mind, I focus the following analysis on explicating the processes used by Everest groups to resolve competing social commitments (Berger, 1967). Simply stated, I suggest that groups that sanction multiple social commitments by explicating and openly discussing the often competing and contradictory social demands of group life, are more likely to adapt to the range of situations that they face. I call this process of group sensemaking, sanctioning competing commitments.

The multiple commitments of group life are demonstrated in mountain climbing groups when they manage the tensions between their goal, getting to the top of the mountain, and other commitments, like getting back down safely. To help manage this tension, mountain climbers have developed the phrase, “leave the back door open” to remind themselves that getting to the top is only one of their commitments. When climbers leave the back door open, they pay attention to the route of descent by making both physical and mental markers of the terrain. Leaving the back door open reminds climbing groups that goals only account for a small part of the climbing process. The phrase, “leave the back door open” works in concert with another maxim among mountaineers that goes something like “getting to the top is optional, getting down is not”. These phrases remind climbers that by committing only to getting up the mountain, they may neglect another competing demand, getting back down.
This interplay between competing commitments was brought to its dramatic height in Patrick Meyers’ (1983) play “K2” about a climbing team trapped on the world’s second tallest mountain. One climber, Harold, was severely wounded and unable to descend. The uninjured climber, Taylor, was faced with two competing commitments: descend alone and live with the knowledge of abandoning his teammate or stay on the mountain and perish along with him. After lengthy discussions, Taylor and Harold decide Taylor will descend alone to tell the story of their struggle. Of course, the struggle Taylor told was not one of a successful mountain climbing team, but rather of one that “messed up” (p. 36), and the struggle to balance his commitment to a friend trapped on a mountain with his commitment to survive.

The K2 story resembles the circumstances faced independently by guides Fischer and Hall on Everest. Hall was helping client Doug Hansen, who had collapsed near the summit and was unable to descend unaided. The prior year Hall, had turned Hansen around just a few hundred feet shy of the summit because he feared not getting down safely. This year which commitment to respond to was not so clear. Similarly, Fischer was found roped to the body of Tawainese climber Gau which suggests he was helping the climber descend. Although we do not know exactly what these struggles entailed, it seems reasonable to see similarities between the situation dramatized on K2 and that faced by the Everest guides. Both faced competing commitments between getting other climbers down safely and their own survival to tell about it.

In summary, groups that sanction these multiple competing commitments, act to make them explicit, and develop maxims to keep these demands in the forefront of sensemaking, may be more likely to abate committing to only a single demand.

Varying sensemaking. When groups sanction multiple competing commitments, they are more likely to recognize a variety of sensemaking. By recognizing a variety of sensemaking,
teams are more likely to make sense of situations they have not encountered before because the actions and sensemaking make sense, even if the situation does not (Weick, 1993). By varying activities, group committing is focused on sensemaking instead of goals. Stated another way, groups focus on processes instead of goals. Instead of looking for situations and saying, “This situation looks familiar and that makes sense”, groups look for situations and say “This situation looks different and that makes sense”. Varying actions would key groups to notice what looks different and what looks familiar. When groups are more attuned to differences than similarities the commitment to sensemaking is escalated and the commitment to distant goals abated.

One way groups can improve their attention to sensemaking is through scenario planning (van der Heijden, 1996). Scenario planning is a way of briefing a team of a variety of potential situations before events occur. Teams create and discuss as many possible scenarios of what might occur, despite the likely hood of these events occurring. The U. S. Armed Forces used a form of scenario planning to prep for its incursion into Haiti in 1994 (Baird, Henderson, & Watts, 1997). Troops were exposed to 26 likely scenarios prior to the incursion and reported actual encounters with 23 in the invasion. Another way to phrase this is that, the groups actually encountered all 26 scenarios, but only 23 in a combat situation because groups developed 26 possible scenarios with which to make sense. It’s not whether or not the scenarios occurred, but rather how what did occur was construed. When experience is the basis of sensemaking, any experience is better than none (see Weick, 1993, 1995).

Learning from experience. A group committed to narrowly defined sensemaking is likely to develop knowledge that is specific but deep (Kolb, 1984). Thus, a team committed to one narrow goal, like getting to the top of the mountain, is more likely to develop deep understanding of a few demands instead of diverse understanding of multiple demands (Winters & Latham,
1996). A team committed to developing a variety of strategies to deal with multiple demands may be more likely to learn from their collective experience.

When a team learns from experience, it recognizes its collective experiences, exchanges information about those experiences, develops multiple strategies to process the experience, and experiments with different activities to create new experiences (Kolb, 1984). Just as individuals who engages in these processes transform experience into usable knowledge, a team that engages in these processes may learn from its collective experience.

This type of learning was demonstrated by the collective Everest groups in the desperate search for Camp IV on the descent. While recollection of events is blurry, there is evidence that the groups were learning from experience. Recall the events: the group was lost and searched aimlessly for the camp in zero visibility, a huddle was formed, and a clearing in the clouds allowed two climbers to locate camp. I am suggesting that the groups were actually experimenting with three forms of sensemaking: wandering, huddling, and navigating. Wandering was demonstrated when the group searched in the storm with no clear direction, huddling allowed the group to maintain sense when wandering was exhausted, and navigating emerged when the cloud clearing provided new experiences on which to take action. Essentially, the stars provided a new map on which to focus sensemaking. The group experimented with three sensemaking processes by drawing on immediate experiences available and creating sensible interpretations of current events.

Reciprocally-coupled leadership. Groups encounter situations where multiple competing demands may require leadership responsibilities that cannot be handled solely by one leader (Rost, 1993). Multiple leadership demands often require leaders to manage competing obligations to complete multiple task demands. Veteran Everest guide David Breashears
describes multiple leadership demands in Everest teams. “You’re not thinking clearly and not making the best decisions, and I think you just get a little bit confused, but - and you may have lost sight of the fact that your obligation is not, as a guide, to get somebody up a mountain, it’s to make sure they return safely with all their fingers and toes. You know, your only real obligation is to the welfare of your clients” (Charlie Rose, 1997).

Rather that viewing leadership as embedded an individual personality, role, or set of duties, I suggest it lies within the various commitments of the group. I call this back and forth play between leadership responsibilities reciprocally-coupled leadership because leadership responsibility moves back and forth between and among individuals in the group like reciprocally designed tasks (Thompson, 1967). When leadership is designed with reciprocal independence, responsibility for leadership tasks shifts back and forth between individual members in the group. In this manner, leadership becomes a reciprocally dependent task and the burdens of leadership moves from any one individual to the group as a whole (Bion, 1961).

The Everest survivors demonstrated this leadership style when they climbed down the mountain and huddled in the storm. Had they continued to rely on traditional leaders to get down the mountain, they may have become trapped with teams on the mountain. Event though traditional leaders got them up the mountain, it was reciprocal interactions between Beidleman, Schoening, and Boukreev and the other members of the group that got them to Camp IV. Additionally, it was their reciprocal interactions with other climbing teams that lead them down to base camp.

Maslow (1998) noticed this kind of reciprocal leadership when observing Blackfoot Indians chiefs. Instead of relying on general leaders, they relied on specialist leaders to guide them through special situations such as war, raising stock, or coordinating special ceremonies.
He outlined four characteristics of this kind of leadership. First, the group was realistic about its expectation of leadership. This meant that an individual was believed to be the best person suited for the particular job was also recognized for his or her limitations. Second, leadership was not embedded in influence or issuing of orders; rather, leadership was embedded in the cues and signals of leadership used to pattern and organize group actions. Third, all parties consented that the particular leader was the person best suited for a particular job. Fourth, the group shared an assumption of common purpose.

Ultimately, reciprocally-coupled leadership shifts the burden of leadership from a person to a process. When groups rely on leaders, they rely on guides that map actions. In contrast, groups that rely on leadership, create maps that guide action.

**DISCUSSION**

This analysis has implications in three major areas: committing in groups, team learning, and disaster sensemaking.

**Committing in Groups**

This study reconceptualizes committing in groups. A concept like Leander’s commitment provides a starting point to analyze the dysfunctional side of goal commitment in groups. While extensive research has explored the positive aspects of committing, primarily in the literature on group goal setting, the negative consequences of these processes have been overlooked (Winters & Latham, 1996).

Leander’s commitment can be contrasted with other explanations of group action under uncertainty such as groupthink (Janis, 1972), risky shift (Stoner, 1961), and conformity (Asch, 1956; Festinger, et al, 1955), because it emphasizes sensemaking, social cognition, and mental models (Hintz, 1995; Gruenfeld & Hollingshead, 1993). While others describe how groups fall
victim to inescapable dysfunctional processes, Leander’s commitment describes groups as perpetrators of their own dilemmas (Weick, 1995). Instead of focusing on the errors and irrationalities of decision-making, Leander’s commitment draws attention to the meanings underlying decisions, i.e., the internal sensemaking of collective action (Grunenfeld & Hollingshead, 1993; Hintz, 1995; McGrath, 1997; Weick, 1995). Using a term like Leander’s commitment draws attention to the processes groups use to resolve competing and often contradictory social commitments (Smith & Berg, 1984) and how they explain them afterwards. In simple terms, Leander’s commitment describes how groups paint themselves into a corner and then justify the footprints on their way out.

This study fills a gap in the current literature on committing in groups by offering refined distinctions between the kinds of committing processes that are helpful for accomplishing tasks and what processes are detrimental (Weick, 1995: 161). This analysis suggests that during times of vertical sensemaking, when goals are clear but strategies to accomplish them are not, and when groups are organized primarily around a common mission, then sanctioning commitments, alternating actions, learning, and reciprocally-coupled leadership are more likely to lead to completing the task. However, how a task is completed is embedded as much in how the task is construed as it is in the task design or performance characteristics. When a task is construed narrowly, such as getting to the top of a mountain, the processes I outlined might be less helpful than when tasks are defined broadly, such as getting to the top of a mountain and getting back down.

Further, this study challenges Weick’s notion that “weak commitments make it easier for the organization to accommodate to the environment . . .“ (p 161). Instead, I suggest that the strength of the committing is not of primary importance, rather, it is to what the group is
committed that is important. In other words, strong commitments may actually lead to greater accommodation to the environment when the commitment is to attending to multiple demands of learning and sensemaking. In contrast, when groups commit to achieving narrowly defined goals and outcomes, they may be less likely to adapt to the environment. This type of multiple-committing was displayed by the Everest groups when they returned to camp. It was their continual commitment to experimenting with multiple processes that got them out of their jam, not their level of commitment to any one goal.

This analysis has suggest that viewing team processes as a balance of several competing commitments may be more helpful viewing commitments on a continuum. This shifts the focus from measuring the degree of commitment in a group to explicating the dialectical process of how competing commitments are resolved. From this perspective, group process becomes framed as an interdependent series of competing and emerging demands created by the interplay between group processes and environments (Berger, 1967; Hintz, 1995; Gruenfeld & Hollingshead, 1993; Staw, 1981; Weick, 1995). When viewing groups in this way, it becomes important to consider how groups balances various competing demands like a goal that demands commitments to getting up and getting down, the choice between salvaging ones own life or that of a team mate, continuing to wait for a leader to catch up versus progressing with the rest of the group, the interplay between a leader’s ability to keep one eye on a successful outcome and another on the long term well being of his team, a groups complacency with death or its struggle with survival.

These competing challenges are faced by most groups at one time or another, yet not all the decisions are viewed as equally consequential. Only after the decision is made can the consequence be classified as dysfunctional. What becomes important to decipher then, is what
meaning did the decisions carry at the time they were made and how do those meanings stand up within the context of current social debates under similar circumstances. For example, if we suppose that guides Hall and Fischer independently chose to stay with ailing clients at risk to their own survival, what forcers were in play and what meanings did they place on their commitments as guides that they chose to stay with clients over commitments to their own survival? Why did Weathers risk his own survival to wait and keep his pact with Hall, or more importantly why did he reframe his commitment and progress with the group? What were the social processes that lead to such choices? In sum, rather than concentrating on the strength of commitments, emphasis might focus on how groups resolve competing commitments.

This study also extends and supports Staw’s (1976; 1981) theory on escalating commitment to the context of work teams. In particular, the study supports Staw’s (1976) notion that justification of early commitments rest along both internal and external dimensions: internal justification responding to need for emotional consistency and external justification responding to external social demands.

One consequence of this research is to directly challenge assumptions posed by Hackman (1986) and others (Wageman, 1995) that external context drive internal team process and thus, the effectiveness of the team. There is little evidence to support the notion that context was a factor in the success of the Everest teams, since all teams shared the same environmental circumstances. What does seem to be present is a remarkable ability for groups to construe their context in ways that support their earliest commitment. This means that organizations might focus less on developing environments that are conducive to team work and spend more time on developing skills that help working teams. In the former, the emphasis is on structures, reporting, rewards, and task designs, in the latter the emphasis is on skills, sensemaking, and learning.
Future research might look at which skills are most conducive to dealing with which environments, which sensemaking processes are most likely to lead to construing the environment helpfully, and how learning takes place.

Team Learning

This study supports a rethinking about learning in teams because it marks a theoretical shift from psychologically based variance theories to experiential based process theories. Current conceptualizations of team learning pose learning as a factor of team norms (Argyris, 1982; Edmonson, 1996; Janis, 1972). For example, Edmonson’s (1995) research suggests teams are more likely to learn if they develop internal norms that support a “safe” environment for making errors and voicing opinions. Such an environment allows members safety in addressing their own face saving defense mechanisms. This research has been supported at the team level of analysis using variance analysis techniques.

While this line of reasoning is important for understanding antecedents to team learning, it does little to explain how teams actually select, process, and act on information. It says even less about why groups continue to commit when they have experienced disconfirming information. An alternative theory that offers promise in understanding group learning processes is experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Originally conceived as an individual level learning theory, recent work explores social aspects of learning transformation with special emphasis on the role of conversation in the creation of meaning (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 1997). Experiential theory is particularly useful because it conceptualizes learning as a continual process where actors resolve competing information acquisition and transformation demands. Future research might look more specifically at how groups collectively acquire and transform information relative to early commitments.
Disaster Sensemaking

Finally, the study has implications for disaster sensemaking. The Everest events, chronicled in Jon Krakauer’s (1997) best selling book “Into Thin Air” and other sources, brought the challenges and lore of mountain climbing to the attention of a broader audience. Analysis of the tragedy and the unfolding of the events occurred almost simultaneously as satellite technology brought the drama of a collapsing expedition into the homes of a spellbound public. The lapse between the occurrence of events and sensemaking collapsed. Sensemaking of the disaster continued in public forums like the internet, newspapers, and television news reports. This event may mark a new era in disaster sensemaking where an electronically literate public has access to large amounts of information unfiltered through public inquires and unmediated by systematic analyses conducted by authoritative bodies (Gephart, 1993; Weick, 1993). I’m suggesting here that disaster sensemaking faces a new challenge in that it must not only meet methodological rigor, it must also meet the test of experience. Thus, disaster sensemaking may soon face the challenge posed by Weick (1995) in that findings be matched against experience of interested participants rather than past research. Future research on disaster sensemaking, therefore, might be more intentional about including the experiences, descriptions, and justifications of those involved in the disaster.

This paper highlights the often disastrous consequences that occur when groups escalate commitment to narrowly defined goals. The Everest disaster provides a vivid illustration of the processes that lead to such consequences, but also provides insight into how such consequences can be resolved. When groups sanction multiple competing commitments over narrow goal achievement, vary rather than confine action, learn from experience rather than defend prior commitments, and reciprocate leadership responsibilities instead of relying on one leader, they
broaden rather than confine sensemaking. Broader sensemaking may allow groups to resolve commitments when they encounter evidence that prior committing cannot be maintained. This is important for those who research groups because it shifts the research focus from external contextual factors to internal group processes, from testing hypothesis to explicating processes, and analyzing a few commitments to the multiple commitments. The Everest events have ushered in a new era of disaster sensemaking where risk and blame are determined not by institutional inquiry but through unmediated conversations between interested parties. Future research might well focus on the experience of disaster participants and the explanations they give for events. Future climbing groups might commit to climbs where getting to the top is balanced with the commitments to getting back down.
REFERENCES


