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As part of the *Café Insights* series of interviews with inspiring speakers, The Insight Bureau recently caught up with David Lim, a sought-after inspirational speaker who has delivered numerous presentations internationally. David is a keen mountaineer having led the landmark first Singapore Everest Expedition in 1998, which succeeded in placing two members on the peak.



[\[link to the audio\]](#)

AV: Well hello and welcome to another in the series of Café Insights. I'm Andrew Vine, CEO of the Insight Bureau and today I am back at the Fullerton Hotel and this time I am in conversation with David Lim – hello David.

DL: Hello Andrew.

AV: David is well known in Singapore and around the region as a leadership coach and speaker. He runs a business called Everest Motivation Team, and that really does give away his 'claim to fame'. David led Singapore's first successful ascent of Mount Everest in 1998. He is also well known for his three books, "*Mountain to Climb: The Quest for Everest and Beyond*" and "*Against Giants: The Life and Climbs of a Disabled Mountaineer*", and then more recently, "*How Leaders Lead*."

DL: That's correct Andrew, I'm glad to be here.

AV: First of all, I'm going to ask you the 'dumb' question, a question I think everybody's going to ask you; how on earth does a person who lives on a small, flat island near the equator, end up being a mountaineer? And not only that, climb the highest mountain in the world!

DL: Well that's an interesting question, and it's the same question that BBC 5 radio actually asked us when they interviewed us at Everest Base Camp 17 years ago-- and I think they could barely hold back their laughter, basically! Yes, it's true we are not gifted with mountains in Singapore (*laughter*) the highest mountain is about 164m above sea level...

AV: ...and I can run up that, so that's not so much!

DL: Yes there's a road you can drive up that too (*laughter*), so basically we are a bit short on mountains. However you can learn all the kind of technical skills you do need for mountaineering, like rope work, protection, that you can get from rock climbing in Singapore. So the only thing missing are really big mountains and bits of snow and ice and so that's why we have to go abroad for that in Borneo, in New Zealand; these are the closest places, China in the winter.

AV: Well I'm guessing, because you went to Cambridge in the UK, did your friends in the UK that put you up to all this?

DL: No, I did not learn how to climb, nor was I very interested in climbing when I was in Cambridge. In fact, ironically, I was actually in the same college that the famous George Mallory was at college, which was at Magdalen College, so there's an interesting connection to Everest that never really came to fruition until many years later.

AV: So, I made the wrong assumption, what was it Dave, what was the spark that got you interested in it?

DL: I was very heavily involved in competitive sweep oar rowing – the rowing you see at Oxford and Cambridge every year -- and I went to the library hoping to find a book on rowing. Could not find one but found a book on mountaineering instead. So this book called “The Shining Mountain” was written by some British climbers, and I was reading it but I didn’t really understand what this is really all about but it sounds terrifically exciting and I think I want to do some of this. Luckily for me someone at the office in London at the time was a kind of retired mountaineer so he brought me to a climbing wall and showed me some basics. So I really read a book that changed my life, as corny as that sounds.

AV: Obviously the pinnacle, in both sense of the word mountaineering hobby was climbing Mt Everest, what on earth is it like to stand on top of the world?

DL: Well you know this interesting thing, I’ve led two expeditions to Mt Everest, I have put people on my team in Mt Everest but I’ve personally never got to the very top myself. Now I climbed high on Everest on both occasions, but never quite to the top. But that is also an extremely interesting part of the story, and that basically feeds its own back. These days of course when I talk about leadership on the mountains and making very difficult choices in decisions on the mountain; but I can tell you one thing, standing on some of the world’s highest peaks (and I have stood on one of the world’s highest peaks, although it’s not Everest), the first thing that comes to you is not only “Wow, what a fantastic view” because the second thought is often, “now how do I get down?”

AV: Oh! *(laughter)*

DL: Because climbing up is always optional but coming down is definitely mandatory.

AV: What people may not know about your story though is that following that expedition to Everest, you were stricken down with a nerve disorder. It was pretty debilitating. I think you were in hospital for six months, paralysed from the eyes down.

DL: Exactly! It was a very severe version of what they call the Guillain-Barré syndrome, or GBS. What is it? It’s a nerve disorder in which your body’s own immune system attacks the nerves, destroys the nerves and then renders you paralysed, in some cases from waist down, neck down and in my case it was eyes down. I could only move my left eyelid for quite a while and it eventually took me six months to recover as the nerves grew back. During all this time it was just learning how to walk, how to feed yourself, basically learning how to do all the very basic things that you and I normally take for granted

AV: All over again..

DL: ..all over again!

AV: And today this has left you partially unable to use your legs fully

DL: Yes, my right leg below the knee doesn’t really work so I wear a plastic and metal brace just to keep the foot in a neutral position and half of the lower left leg also doesn’t work very well either.

AV: But despite that you have gone on to lead 15 more mountaineering expeditions, which I think is quite a remarkable story.

DL: And I have to emphasise that it did not affect my ability to reason, (*laughs*) although people might think it did because why on earth would a person who is partially disabled want to ever get back to the mountain

AV: But clearly this is the crux of what you do, there are so many wonderful lessons that can be learnt, that can translate into the world of business. And I have an admission to make, when I talk about The Insight Bureau and the kind of speakers that we represent I start rattling off a list of people that I don't work with – no I don't do celebrities and I don't do sport stars and I don't do arctic explorers and mountain climbers... and then I have to stop myself and say well of course there is David Lim! And I see you in a way different from just someone who has achieved something. You have turned this now into a very successful leadership business over the last 15 years.

DL: Yes I have been very blessed by that and I think it's because of my own personal journey in the last 15 years wondering whether all the success I have had in the mountains, bouncing back from disability, can actually be replicated. So I am actually professionally and intellectually interested to know whether there's research out there, whether there are actually some tools and matters in which people can learn to be successful like any other serious achiever but not really have the yearning to climb Mount Everest, win an Olympic gold medal for example. So, there's an underlying neuroscience, there's an underlying way of working with teams, of motivating people and groups of people to do things sometimes they don't necessarily want to do but will bring them ultimately success.

AV: One of the presentations I know that you've given is "Climb Your Own Everest." which is overcoming a number of challenges that you face, so there are parallel messages that you can use and convert into a successful performance.

DL: Yes and I think it is very important in the sense that not everyone wants to climb Mt Everest or be a mountaineer but ultimately as a speaker you can't say you've succeeded until you've been able to impart on your audience something that will help them improve their condition and that means making them be aware of certain methodologies or skills or things they can do to make themselves uniquely successful in their own field or their industry.

AV: You do a lot of different things from coaching to workshops to presentations, give us some idea of some of the challenges you've helped some organisations overcome.

DL: The areas which most commonly have a need for what I do, obviously teams that are not necessarily dysfunctional but also teams that may be good but want to be better. They want to be really good and that's where we come in and take a look at them; maybe we'll measure some of the key team attributes and then we put them through a series of small interventions; sessions in which we actually help them understand what actually drives team success and make them want to express those behaviours sustainably over the longer term to bring that particular group successful. So yes, we have had quantitative and qualitative measurements of some of our clients and we have been successful in most areas.

AV: ...and some teams, of course, are not actually used to being together, they're working virtually across different geographies in different parts of the world

DL: Absolutely, and there's also a challenge because face time is so important to build trust and if they are not getting enough of that, then what else can they do in the meantime. So these are some of the really interesting organisation development areas which I have been fascinated about in helping my clients be more successful.

AV: We've worked together on a number of assignments – presentations and conferences and client events. After a great presentation I guess a lot of companies will say well, so what now? What now do we do?

DL: You know, that's the most interesting question because there are some clients who have wanted me to add value and impact to an event and after it's over, it's over. I can understand it but there are some clients who say how can David actually help my team succeed? And that's where we go into the deep dive. We go in and take a look at what are the contexts, the issues, the near term and medium term challenges and then working closely with them can put them together a series of what you call solutions spread over 3 months, 6 months or 9 months so that at the end of the line they get a team that's better able to do X, better able to do Y for example, and it's all behavioural based.

AV: Sometimes the presentation is perhaps the spark that ignites the fire, but you need the fuel to keep it going – that's the analogy I use sometimes.

DL: Yes or use another analogy rattle cages and things like this but after you go, what's going to keep them going? What's going to keep them a little bit uncomfortable a lot of times so they always feel they can do a little bit better.

AV: Terrific! Well David it's great to catch up with you this afternoon and have a chat. I'm sure that you haven't completely hung up your boots yet. What's next on your agenda?

DL: Well, I'm really hoping to put together a really nice exciting expedition in 2016; and where? I have shortlisted three or four mountains, projects, routes and still not decided. It depends really on the dynamics of the team that comes together and ultimately what they feel excited about. So I'm really looking forward to next year.

AV: Well it's great to see your enthusiasm for that. All the best, and thank you very much for coming to see me today.

DL: Thank you for the time.

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