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# HEAD FOR HEIGHTS

*For solo climber Thomas Bubendorfer, it's not reaching the top that matters – it's how you get there. Could the same approach work in the business world?*

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**T**homas Bubendorfer is a man who knows where he's going and how to get there. Consider how he is able to scale a near-vertical rock face without any ropes 1,000-metres high. I have this in mind as he enters the café where we have arranged to meet. He walks towards me with an upright posture and panther-like strides. His look is elegant but unpretentious: polished bottle-green leather derby shoes, pink socks, faded denim jeans and a dark grey fedora hat in the style of singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen.

One of the foremost solo climbers in the world, the author of seven books, and a philosopher, poet and motivational speaker, it's fair to assume that, at the age of 53, Bubendorfer is at the pinnacle of his career. But he wouldn't like to hear that. He tells me later that the top is a "sad" place and not that interesting – this remarkable insight is typical of his way of thinking.

We meet in Pongau, a 45-minute drive south of Salzburg, set in a picture-postcard Austrian alpine setting. This is where Bubendorfer grew up and started to climb and where he learned to love solitude. He prefers to spend the dark winter months here before diving into the sun-filled summers of Monaco, where he has lived since 1985. We sit bathed in the afternoon sun surrounded by the mighty peaks of Bubendorfer's past. The mountains mean everything to him although, or maybe because they have, more than once, brought him close to death.

Still wearing his hat, Bubendorfer orders a glass of wine and a slice of cheesecake. These indulgences apparently don't interfere with his preparations for a climbing expedition he is undertaking to Patagonia the following week. Nutrition plans are overrated, he says, without a hint of irony.

The man who spends so much time alone in the mountains, who understands the positive aspects of fear, risk and crisis when he is talking in front of hundreds of business executives, must be true to himself. And Thomas Bubendorfer is. He speaks in a low, strong voice. He adds one carefully considered word after another as if he is taking one step at a time on the rock face, climbing the shortest possible route up a mountain. Always precise and always meaningful, he never has any need for extraneous words.

*"The meaning of life is not to stand still. It is to grow and become better"*

**May I start with a warm-up question: what is the meaning of life?**

The meaning of life is not to stand still. It is to grow and become better.

**Growing up in the mountains, was it inevitable you would become a climber?**

No. Many people grow up in the mountains, very few become climbers. It was a calling. When I was 12, I didn't know what to do with myself after school. I looked at this mountain to our left and it posed a question. Life always throws up questions.

**What was the question?**

I wondered how it would be to climb this mountain, then what I'd need to get up there and how I'd get to the foot of the mountain with my bike. Millions of questions. But there were key questions that I didn't ask, like what will the weather be? No surprise, I failed in my attempt to climb the mountain.

**You didn't make it?**

It wasn't until the fourth attempt. Before that I got stuck in a thunderstorm in a T-shirt and shorts. I got lost in fog. I got caught up in hail. This was when I learned one of the most important lessons in my life. I felt the urge to complain about my miserable situation, but the wind blew my self-pity back into my face. I realised then that I had put myself into this situation so I was the only one who could get myself out of it.

**How did you feel when you finally reached the summit?**

The top of a mountain has never been a particularly interesting place for me. In fact, it is not about reaching the summit at all. It is about climbing. When you reach the summit, the climbing is over. You have answered all the questions.

**As a solo climber, do you enjoy the solitude?**

The ability to be alone is essential to life. Only when we are alone are we truly free because then there are no distractions from other humans.

**Is this why you chose to climb by yourself?**  
I chose it out of necessity. No other boys of my age wanted to go climbing.

**What did your schoolmates do?**

I have no idea – I never cared. With solo climbing I soon found I was much better than I could have ever been in a team. Only then could I exploit my talents completely.

**Right at the start of your career, you were setting records.**

When I was 16, I was the youngest solo climber ever. To break a record, you need something comparable, but I did things nobody else had done before. When I climbed the North Face of the Eiger without

**SPLENDID SOLITUDE**

Everyone should learn to be alone and like it, believes Bubendorfer

ropes in 1983, I didn't set a record. I did something new. I have always tried to do something that is incomparable.

**Does being the youngest or the fastest mean anything to you?**

Records never last. Being the first, however, lasts forever.

**You had a turning point when you were 26.**

Yes, it happened in a canyon just behind that little bridge over there. I was doing a photo shoot for an advertising agency, posing on an overhanging cliff, some 20 metres above ground. Just as the photographer finished, my hands slipped and I fell. I bounced on to a ledge. Immediately I could feel the pain in my back. I was looking at my feet to see if I could move them. My first thought was, "Thank god, I am not paralysed". And then I was totally embarrassed because I had made a mistake. For many weeks in hospital after that I felt very embarrassed.

**Did you ever think of giving up?**

Not for a second. My hand was smashed, my heel and ankle were smashed, all my toe tendons were torn, I had broken nine discs in my spinal chord, half my body was in plaster. My left arm was about the only part of my body I could move. So I asked my mother to bring some weights so I could start training with biceps curls.

**In retrospect, would you say the accident was a good thing?**

Absolutely. A crisis happens for a reason. It needs to happen. It is a chance for us to learn and to change something.

**Was this the moment you decided to share your insights with the corporate world?**

No, that happened earlier when IBM asked me to give a talk to their executives in Monaco. They wanted to know what they could learn from a professional risk taker and a pioneer in a completely different field.

**So, how does climbing relate to business?**

Climbing like business is a mental game. It's about self-control, risk management, courage, goal-setting, etc. But, above all, the best climbers and the most successful business people are those with the biggest passion for what they've chosen to do.

**How would you describe your development over the years?**

When I was younger, I trained a lot and very hard – and even harder when I was tired. Today my training is very intelligent and efficient. There is no 'too much' or 'too little'. And I have learned about the importance of rest. I do about two to three hours' training a



#### GRIPPING STORY

Bubendorfer on his first ascent of 'Fahrenheit' in Austria's Weiss See glacier region in January 2015

company's stocks haven't fallen 50 per cent, they might want to do it again the next day.

**How does 'doing nothing' fit into your concept of intelligent peak performance?**

Everything in life comes in pairs of opposites: night-day, hot-cold, love-hate – and performance-rest. You can only peak-perform – mentally or physically – if you're rested. I find business executives are overworked as a matter of principle.

**And they neglect the body, too?**

A healthy mind in a healthy body is the goal. Most business people only take care of their mental achievements. And, if they exercise, they tend to do it much too intensively.

**Some managers proudly claim they need only four hours' sleep...**

Science shows that we need 7½ hours sleep. You shouldn't have any less. If you're not rested you can't fulfil your potential.

**You encourage risk-taking, but doesn't that contradict your views on being in control?**

You need to be challenged. If you always play it safe, you will fail. When nothing is at stake, people perform the worst.

**How does this apply to business?**

The most dangerous times for companies are when they are doing well. Then the tendency to play it safe, to stop implementing new things increases. Only the new and the risk that comes with it sharpens one's senses.

**Success is a double-edged sword?**

Yes, it is certainly a double-edged sword. American philosopher, essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: 'Whilst he sits on the cushions of advantage, he goes to sleep. When he is pushed, tormented, defeated, he has a chance to learn something.'

**Is that what keeps you going?**

I'm old enough not to learn these things the hard way any longer. I try not to rest on the cushions of my advantages. I try new things all the time so I don't fall asleep. Rest assured that I don't do 'easy climbs' but I keep challenging myself with tough stuff.

**Should companies be cautious inviting you to speak? Their managers might leave their jobs after hearing you.**

I know of one who did. He was in the legal department, but then became a writer.

**As the father of a daughter and two sons, are you a 24/7 inspirational drill sergeant?**

No. I'm more the comfort-zone guy. I come home, we cook, watch movies, have fun.

**So do you learn from them?**

Of course, especially from the women in my family.

day, five times a week, for 11½ months per year. It means I'm always in shape.

**And how do you train mentally?**

I force myself to concentrate on the present and on the development of my present potential. Don't look back and don't compare: not with others and not with yourself – when you were younger, for example. All that counts is the now.

**What is still driving you to extremes?**

For me there are no extremes. I do everything within my limits, which I know well. Beyond one's limits there is chaos. When you cross that line, you're not in control any longer. Be in control, but forget you're in control. That's the 'flow'. That's your performance zone.

**What do you mean by 'flow'?**

It's the state you find yourself in when you're neither bored – that's when you're under challenged, obviously – nor over challenged, which is when you lose control.

**Living in the moment, yet being in control, sounds a bit like a paradox.**

This is the state of mind we should try to achieve in everything we do in life. Some wise man once said: 'Teach us to care but not to care'. It's about finding the right balance. It is not ecstasy but maybe some kind of spiritual state. That's what life is about. Those are the perfect moments.

**Probably not for a CEO...**

Yes, for a CEO too. The laws of success are universal. To reach our goals, which clearly always lie in the future, we must set them, and then forget them – and focus on what we can do now. Now is all we have.

**How can a business person achieve that kind of state?**

By learning to be alone. Managers can't simply get away for four weeks on an expedition like I can. But they can try to have solitary moments for 30 minutes twice a week in their office. Ask their assistant to close the door so they can be by themselves for half an hour. Don't think about business. Do whatever they want. Read a book. Sleep. Let their mind wander. Do nothing. And when they open the door and realise their

*“Be in control, but forget you're in control. That's the 'flow'. That's your performance zone”*