

LEADERS, ARE YOU FALLING ENOUGH?

By Marilyn Thiet

I have enjoyed downhill skiing my entire life. For me, nothing beats the feeling of schussing down a mountain on a glorious winter day. But it wasn't until this past week that I became thoughtful of the parallels between skiing and leadership. Perhaps it is due to the fact that even though today is officially the first day of spring, in my area of the country we are still experiencing a relentless winter. In viewing the weather outside of my office my mind wanders to skiing and how it relates to my work with leaders. I see so many parallels between the two. Standing on the top of the mountain, a skier must survey the terrain ahead and plot a strategy that will enable successful maneuvering down the hill, knowing where the obstacles exist and having a plan to overcome them. When skiing in a group, one person typically assumes the lead, plots the course and the others will follow, trusting that the leader understands the abilities of his or her followers, and will take them down a path that will stretch their abilities, but will not push them dangerously over a cliff. In skiing, split second indecision on how to handle a mogul (obstacle) can be as devastating as it is in business.

I think however, the most valuable lessons around leadership that one can draw from the skiing analogy involve falling. At the age of twelve, I can remember bragging to my ski instructor that I had skied all day without falling, thinking that was the epitome of a great skier. But instead the instructor turned to me and said "If you are never falling you are not trying hard enough, pushing yourself enough, exploring your limits enough". How true this is in business today. If as a leader you never fall, you are most likely playing it too safe, not pushing you or your people to reach your full potential.

Last week I had the honor of attending the 2013 Women's Leadership Conference to hear Bonnie St. John speak. Bonnie is an amputee, Olympian, Rhode Scholar, former White House official and author of the book "How Great Women Lead". Despite having her right leg amputated at age five, she became the first African-American ever to win Olympic or Paralympic medals in ski racing, taking home a silver and two bronze medals in downhill events at the 1984 Paralympics in Innsbruck, Austria. Bonnie told us the story of her bronze medal win in the Women's Downhill event that year. After her first run Bonnie was leading the race, in contention for the gold medal. She was one of the first people on the course for the second run of that series. On her second run, with the finish line in sight she fell. After falling she laid in the snow, crushed that her gold medal win was not to be. Eventually she got up and made it across the finish line, feeling defeated. What she could not know at that time was that the icy spot that took her down would also cause almost every skier after her to fall that day. The gold medal winner in that race fell in the exact same spot, but she got up quicker and made it across the finish line with the fastest time. As Bonnie learned, *"Everyone falls, but the winners are the ones that get up the fastest."*

Leaders, are you falling enough? Are you pushing yourself and your team as close as possible to the limits, far enough that it is only natural to occasionally fall? And when you do, how fast are you able to get up? When you fall are you retreating into yourself, or pretending that you didn't fall (i.e. didn't miscalculate the market, didn't lose sight of the strategy, didn't put the wrong people in place) in which case there is no correction to be made? Or are you acknowledging the falls as a part of doing business and in those moments of quick acknowledgement, are you making the decision to get up quickly and proceed to the finish line?

"Our greatest glory is not in never falling but in rising every time we fall."

~ Confucius