



SURVIVAL OF AN INDUSTRY: TESTING FOR THE TRUTH

BY MARK BRESLIN

RECENTLY THERE HAS been much media attention on the risks, rewards and consequences of mountain climbing. Thus I share a personal story and its relationship to labor management risk-taking and initiative in our industry.

Mount Rainier is a 14,401 foot volcano perpetually sheathed in glacier ice. It is magnificent, awe-inspiring and unforgiving. It is the U.S. training ground for Everest. Many climbers have died. It is the toughest endurance climb in the lower 48 states. In a recent rock fall, our guide broke his nose, jaw, cheek, palate and knocked out seven teeth. Our climb started at midnight and I'm feeling the wind chill. It is 25 below zero.

It is easy to talk a good game around necessary change and personal risk. Our industry is full of people who give me their "we might, we should, we thought about it, we ought to" speeches. Labor and management's circular discussion on frustration and obstacles. Decades and markets lost. The sound of great possibilities unrealized. I'd like to shake these people. I'd like to tell them that it's not security, safety, money, power or what others think that opens us to reaching our potential; those are the external measures. Truly it is the self-respect, esteem and fulfillment that builds over time with knowing we are working toward our potential. Most organizations can behave in exactly the same way. But often it is just too easy to pretend, to others and ourselves. Thus, testing for the truth has a price; in our organizations and in the field. The price of truth comes when the talking stops and the action begins.

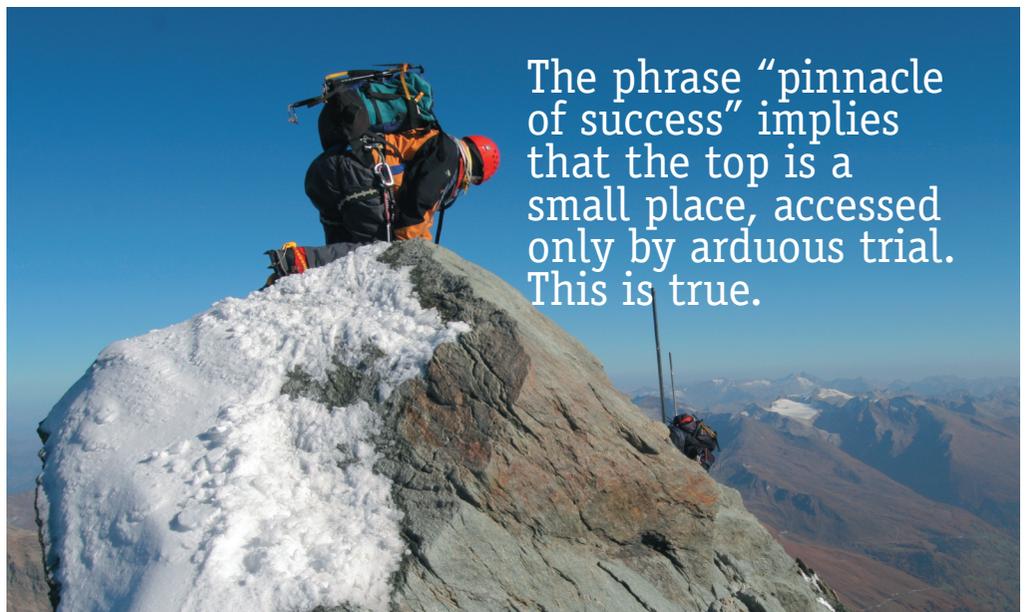
It is a blue-black night. I have a harness, helmet, ice ax, headlamp, and solitude. Nothing but thin air, a rope, and a healthy amount of fear. My world is a 2-foot circle of light and one more step. Six hours pass. A 40-degree ascent. Crampons kicking into the snow and ice with each step. Winds stagger us. Ice crystals sting. At minus 25 the body can only follow the mind.

The three-way partnership of union, contractors and rank and file have their versions of the truth, as well. "We've got full employment, we must be good." "No one's complaining, so why worry?" "We are full up with work, why would we bid that?" This type of ignorance may be short-lived bliss; supported by market conditions rather than sound strategy. None of it serves the end user. Truth be told? Simply put, if we are not absolutely

committed to our personal and professional potential, we are not only missing an essential competitive strategy, we are shorting ourselves and those around us. But how to know, if we all together don't push our perceived limits?

We reach 11,500 feet, the Ingram Glacier headwall. A thousand feet of 50-degree ice. Tiny headlamps of other teams dot the giant glowing glacier far above us. The wind shrieks and we shake with cold and fatigue. The head game of looking up at it hits home. Right there, half of the climbers quit; they simply unclip from their team ropes. Though having traveled from across the country and having spent thousands of dollars, they make a decision of perceived limits. Denying their potential without trying.

How often have we, in labor and management, done this very thing and then worked to justify the inaction?



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On this headwall I am struggling. My glove is off for one minute to secure gear, and three fingers lose all feeling. This scares me. I bang them against my thigh each step for an hour. We stop. The team in front of us is stalled with an altitude-sick member. We cannot stop behind them or we will freeze and fail. We must abandon the established switchback trail and go past them; 300 feet, straight up 60-degree ice and around. I cannot do this, I think. Fear turns to doubt turns to the resolve of “no other option.” I make the top of the headwall, but cannot talk. I do not talk for the next four hours.

The lessons of the mountain apply to the challenges ahead for union construction. I believe that the purity of the challenge is there and that those willing to commit will see the reward. I think it will be the committed few and not the masses that will deliver our future. Change. Risk. Trial and error. Disregard of peer actions or judgment. I believe that there are enough great people in labor and management willing to test themselves for the results that will translate to benefits for the contractors, workers and end-users. I believe that it is the arduous circumstance that bonds people to achieve. Perhaps I am a lone voice, but those with a belief in “good enough” or “status quo” need to think about hanging it up for good.

Another thousand feet. We cross a crevice hundreds of feet deep on a ladder. We jump over another dark, bottomless crack. Our water bottles are frozen. Chapstick breaks off. We do not ask how far. I just know that quitting is no longer an option.

Legitimate achievement earns respect. And that sums up my personal way of life and business. Associate with a group of committed individuals who will not quit on each other. Live for clear and measurable goals that most think unattainable, or would not even think to try. Share credit and acknowledgment of success. And plan enthusiastically for the next



objective. It is a model that presses the capacity of both the individual and the team. We all know that our greatest test, that of survival as a union construction industry, lies just ahead. Yes, survival of an industry, tradition and legacy does hang in the balance. So, as we go forward together, and in reflection of a life lived or job taken on, I'll take exhausted exhilaration or devastating failure over safe complacency every time.

I can see the summit. It seems miles away. One step every 20 seconds. Finally... reaching the top I collapse. No joy, but a sense of self-mastery. For the first time in

hours I turn to look down. I see a golden sun rising above clouds two miles below. The most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Through doubt and beyond perceived limits, the test is complete. We exchange grim smiles and agree that the climb was the hardest mental and physical challenge of our lives. Together we found that testing for the truth had a price; but by paying it, the rewards will be with us forever. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mark Breslin is a strategist and author specializing in labor-management challenges. He is the author of the *Survival of the Fittest and Organize or Die*. He addresses more than 50,000 labor and business leaders each year in North America. More on his work and his profile are available at www.breslin.biz.

FOR DETAILS...

Mark Breslin will be hosting one of the breakout sessions during the **TAUC Inaugural Leadership Conference** in Arizona, April 17-21.