Patrick Hollingworth

The Light and Fast Organisation

A New Way of Dealing with **Uncertainty**

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The Light and Fast Organisation

About the author

Patrick Hollingworth works with people, teams and organisations to help them deal with a world which is becoming more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous by the day.

After studying anthropology, geography and psychology at university, he spent a decade with a large international consultancy, working on some of the largest and most complex infrastructure projects ever built in Australia. He's seen the very best of what large organisations can create, and also the very worst.

At the same time he began exploring the uncertainty and complexity which go hand in hand with mountaineering, learning the art of alpine style in the mountains of New Zealand, Canada and France, and then the science of expedition style in the mountains of Alaska, Argentina, Nepal, Pakistan and Tibet.

It's taken him to great heights—literally. He's summited multiple 8000 metre peaks, including Mount Everest, and over the past 15 years has been a member of small *light* and *fast* alpine-style teams and has led rather large *heavy* and *slow* expedition-style teams. He's seen the very best of what alpine style can offer, and also the very worst of what expedition style can deliver.

Patrick *lives* and *breathes* this stuff.

He is based in Australia and travels internationally to deliver keynote presentations, workshops, mentoring and consulting to a range of organisations. These include multinational companies such as British retailer Marks and Spencer, American energy giant Chevron and British-Australian mining company Rio Tinto, through to mid-sized, Australian, Asian and European banks, medical and technology companies, and government departments and educational institutions.

Find out more at **www.patrickhollingworth.com**

Introduction

There is a mountain face in Switzerland that from 1933 to 1938 held the attention of the world. Not just the attention of the mountaineering world, but the *entire* world. A mountain face so steep and imposing that it had become legend: one that, at last count, has killed at least 64 people who have attempted to climb it.

Extending in an unbroken upward thrust for nearly 2 kilometres, this vertical and overhanging face comprised of mixed rock and ice has variously been described as 'ferociously steep', 'inaccessible', 'unclimbable' and 'murderous'. Known as the Nordwand, German for 'North Face', it belongs to the 3970-metre-high mountain called the Eiger.

Located in the Bernese Oberland in the northernmost portion of the Alps, the Eiger acts as a weather beacon and attracts the earliest of bad weather moving down from the northern plains of Europe. Not only is the Eiger's North Face incredibly high and steep, it is also somewhat concave, giving it a tendency to collect and amplify storms as they hit. Sunny days and warm temperatures can turn to maelstrom and freezing conditions within minutes, creating blizzards, deadly rockfalls and avalanches. The normal rules for mountain weather just don't seem to apply here.

The Nordwand is a powerful metaphor for the world we are living in today.

At this critical juncture in our history, we too are experiencing unpredictable and violent storms. Fuelled by never before seen and ever more complex interactions between people, places and technology, the sunny days and warm weather of the past are gone and we are now seemingly inundated with maelstrom, freezing conditions, blizzards, rockfalls and avalanches. For most people and most organisations—those that don't have the mindset and skills required to deal with this volatility and uncertainty—it's a terrifying and stressful place to be. It is inherently uncomfortable.

But for the few people and organisations that do have the right mindset and skills, it's actually an incredibly exciting time. There is immeasurable opportunity, unlike any other period in the history of mankind. The purpose of this book is to arm you, the reader, with the right mindset and skills to ensure that you, and the organisation you work for, can experience the excitement and take advantage of the opportunities ahead.

To understand more about the right mindset and skills needed to take advantage of these opportunities, in this book we are going to delve into the world of the mountaineer, a place not commonly associated with meaningful learning beyond superficial colloquialisms about 'dreaming big', 'never giving up' and 'anything is possible if you try hard enough'.

More specifically, we are going into the world of a subset of mountaineers who climb *light* and *fast*, an approach known as *alpine style*. (We call this type of mountaineer the *alpinist*.)

There is arguably no type of person on earth who has a better understanding of the skills, knowledge and mindset needed to deal with the type of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity that the world is enshrouded in today. And so, throughout this book, we are going to learn from the alpinist.

But just for a moment, we must go back to Switzerland in 1935.

Standing above the beautiful alpine meadows of the tourist resorts of Kleine Scheidegg and Grindelwald, in the 1930s the North Face of the Eiger became a global stage against which a group of young German and Austrian men pitted their lives in a tragic fashion. Although the mountain had previously been climbed via comparatively easier routes such as the south and the Mittellegi ridges, no-one had ever climbed directly up the North Face.

For the young men involved, each seemingly oblivious to their soon-to-be starring roles on the world stage, their motivation to climb the North Face was the intrinsic joy and challenge that mountaineering provides. But Hitler's Third Reich seized upon their feats as an opportunity to showcase the talent and supposed superiority of their citizens to the world. (It was even reported that following the Munich Olympics Adolf Hitler offered gold medals to any German or Austrian climbers who could successfully scale the face). And so during the mid 1930s, as Europe slowly lumbered towards another world war, the global spotlight was centred very much on the Eiger's main stage, the North Face.

The first serious attempt occurred in the summer of 1935, when two young Bavarians named Max Sedlmayr and Karl Mehringer

set up camp in the meadows below the face. With youthful exuberance on their side and the best equipment available at the time, they were as ready as could be for the challenge above them. Regarded as quiet but very experienced and hardened climbers, the pair spent a number of weeks reconnoitring the lower part of the route before launching their final upward assault on the face under clear blue skies very early in the morning of Wednesday 21 August.

As crowds gathered throughout the day to watch via telescopes the pair's progress from Kleine Scheidegg and Grindelwald, Sedlmayr and Mehringer made rapid upwards progress. By the time the last of the summer twilight was fading in the west, they had climbed the easier lower third of the face and were looking likely to succeed: perhaps two more days on the face and they would have it in the bag. Thursday morning dawned clear and the pair recommenced their upward push.

However, the increasingly difficult terrain of mixed rock and ice slowed their progress considerably. Whereas on the first day they had climbed 900 vertical metres, by the end of the second day they had only covered a further 300 vertical metres. Although the gallery of spectators in Kleine Scheidegg and Grindelwald had been initially confident of the pair's success, by the end of the second day many were questioning whether they had any chance before the next storm arrived. And rightly so. The Friday morning brought with it thick mist and fog, an eerie calm before the storm, and by the end of that day neither Sedlmayr nor Mehringer had been sighted on the face for some hours.

On Friday night, the calm weather finally broke and all of Saturday and Sunday a fierce storm lashed the mountain with

thunder and lightning, strong winds and snow. The night-time temperatures in Kleine Scheidegg dropped to –8 degrees Celsius—how cold must it have been up on the face? During a short period of respite on Sunday afternoon the storm backed off and afforded the spectators in the valley the briefest of views of the face, where they momentarily saw Sedlmayr and Mehringer bravely battling onwards and upwards. This was quite remarkable, especially after five bitterly cold days and four nights on the face. But the reality was that Sedlmayr and Mehringer had climbed themselves into a trap: the icy conditions had frozen both the rock and their ropes, making descent impossible. Soon enough the clouds closed in again, and the pair were never seen alive again.

Numerous searches were conducted in the days and weeks following their disappearance, but no trace of the men could be found. It was only on 19 September, nearly a month after they had been last seen, that a search plane piloted by a famous German flying ace passing extremely close to the face spotted the body of one of the men, knee-deep in the snow and frozen standing upright, still a long way beneath the summit. The North Face had claimed its first human lives.

The following summer saw a second serious attempt on the face, made this time by a young but skilled four-man party comprising two Germans and two Austrians, seemingly unperturbed by the previous year's events. If the expedition of 1935 was a tragedy, the events of 1936 were truly macabre.

After four days the team had made excellent progress up the first two-thirds of the face, but they were forced into a sudden retreat when a rockfall caused a head injury to one of the team members.

Over the ensuing 24 hours, and in a worsening storm, the four climbers progressively succumbed to the elements, with the last climber literally freezing to death and whispering his infamous final words, *I'm finished*, within an arm's reach of the rescue party. These events are to this day considered to be among the greatest mountaineering tragedies ever documented.

It was in the summer of 1938 that success on the North Face of the Eiger was finally achieved. Again, a team of four young men comprising two Germans and two Austrians tackled the face, and after four days of considerable hard work and suffering, accompanied by the requisite storms, rockfalls and avalanches and stories of near death, the party stood atop the narrow summit. The celebrations were, however, all too brief, as before long the fog of World War II descended on Europe and feats of daring on the great mountain were relegated to history.

Over the ensuing decades, more attempts were made on the face, some successful and many unsuccessful. Many more climbers lost their lives. But the world had moved on. No longer did an ascent of the world's most dangerous mountain face garner the attention of the global spotlight. Not, that is, until 2008.

Switzerland, February 2008

Early on the morning of Wednesday 13 February, leading Swiss alpinist Ueli Steck took the short train ride from his lakeside home town of Interlaken up to the small ski resort at Kleine Scheidegg at the foot of the Eiger. Most of the people on the train would have been dressed in thick, warm clothing, ready for a day of skiing: some light-hearted recreation, and nothing

more. Indeed, Steck probably looked inconspicuous: rather than thick clothing and skis, he wore only lightweight attire and carried with him a tiny backpack, a thin climbing rope and a pair of short technical ice axes. Few, if any, people on the train that morning were aware of what Steck was about to do.

Less than three hours later Steck was standing on the summit of the Eiger, having completely rewritten the mountaineering record books and in doing so creating a new genre of mountaineering known as *extreme alpinism*. Steck made history that morning by climbing the North Face in record time, dramatically changing perceptions around what is possible when a commitment to climbing *light* and *fast* is made. What had taken the first ascensionists in 1938 four days—or 96 hours—to complete, Steck had finished in a staggering time of only 2 hours, 47 minutes and 33 seconds.

The sport of mountaineering would never be the same again.

How did he do it?

How did Steck achieve such an incredible feat?

On the surface, Steck's approach was staggeringly simple: he climbed light and he climbed fast.

Steck chose to solo the route *fast*, meaning he climbed without a climbing partner or team members. This enabled him to climb the entire face unroped (although he did carry a lightweight rope just in case), meaning he did not have to spend time belaying other climbers up each pitch. The benefits of this approach then greatly amplified his ability to travel *light*: the time he

saved meant he was able to climb the entire face in one day, removing the need for heavy overnight bivvy equipment such as a sleeping bag, mattress and gas stove. As a result, Steck's pack was incredibly light. Steck was himself also extremely light. In preparation for this attempt he had trained particularly hard, with his aim being to strip all unnecessary fat and muscle from his body to improve his power-to-weight ratio. Renowned as a highly disciplined trainer, he shed nearly 10 kilograms in preparation for the climb, which was approximately 15 per cent of his body weight.

Steck also flipped the wider climbing community's prevailing beliefs about the best time of year to climb the Eiger. Most parties attempted the route in summer, when the face is relatively free of snow and ice. Steck on the other hand had chosen to climb the face during winter, when it was completely iced up. The benefit to this approach was that by using ice axes and crampons for the entire duration of the climb, he could skirt across the frozen winter ice much more quickly than he could if the rock were dry. In addition, the risk of rockfalls was significantly reduced as the rocks freeze in place during winter.

Describing his speed climb of the North Face, he said (with a rich Swiss accent):

> You reach the point where you are into it... As fast as possible to the summit... your hands, your ice axe and your crampons, and they have to just move... You're progressing... that's what it's all about. You want to keep moving, having progress in your life.

Belying the apparent simplicity of his approach, underneath the surface was a very complex web of prior experience from which Steck was able to draw in order to achieve his record time. Steck was no one-hit wonder: he had begun climbing at an early age and by the time he was 18 he had already climbed the North Face of the Eiger as part of a team of four, an incredible feat in itself. By the mid 2000s Steck had built up an extensive résumé of difficult climbs in the European Alps, the Alaska Range and the Himalaya.

Starting out as a rock climber, he progressed towards technical mountaineering and then high-altitude mountaineering, before starting to further refine his specialty to fast solo ascents, initially on the relatively lower mountains of the Alps (such as the Eiger), before taking this approach to the ultimate mountaineering testing ground of the Himalaya. (In 2011 he soloed the south face of Shishapangma, an 8000-metre mountain in Tibet, in a record time of 10.5 hours, and in 2013 he soloed the south face of 8091-metre Annapurna, the world's tenth highest mountain, in a record time of 28 hours; it takes most parties at least one week to reach the summit after *months* of acclimatising).

In his book *Outliers* journalist Malcolm Gladwell popularised the work of Dr Anders Ericsson, a Swedish psychologist whose research revealed that natural ability requires ten years, or 10000 hours of practice, to be made manifest. Steck is the perfect example of the '10000 hours rule', his lifetime spent in the mountains in preparation for the day that he could turn the sport of mountaineering on its head.

And that's what he did on that clear blue day in February 2008.

What can we learn?

So what does all of this mean? It's an inspiring story, yes, but what else can we make of this? What relevance does this story have for us all?

As described earlier, the North Face of the Eiger can be a metaphor for the world in which we are living today, complete with storms, rockfalls and avalanches, and we have no choice but to climb it.

The concave nature of the North Face serves to amplify the magnitude of the storms that strike her. Similarly, the interconnectedness of our world today serves to amplify the storms that strike us, and, as you will read in the following pages, there is a perfect storm of a magnitude never before seen that is just starting to reach us.

The purpose of this book is to provide a manifesto for improving the way in which you and the organisation you work for can adapt to the changes and challenges facing us all. This has been tested and proved in the alpine world, and now you can use it as the storm descends around us.

Regardless of the forthcoming storm, we have a choice as to how we tackle the climb ahead.

We can choose to continue to do things like we have always done, and climb the face in a traditional manner (it's called *expedition style*, it's *heavy* and *slow*, and we'll learn more about it later). We *may* still get to the top, but it will take us a long time, and we probably won't survive the storm.

Or, we can choose to flip conventional thinking on its head and, following Steck's lead, take a new approach and climb *light* and *fast* to help us get through the maelstrom. If we do choose to take this approach (and to be honest, we don't have any other option), there will be difficult times ahead, complete with much discomfort and doubt. We will have to face our fears.

So let us get to work. Onward and upward we must go!