

From the summit of Everest

By Saray Khumalo

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Aren't you tired of hearing the words, "difficult", "unpredictable", "unprecedented", or any other negative and dispirited adjectives used to describe our current context? We are bombarded with these same words day after day as they reverberate through every advert, announcement, address, and social media post under the sun. It's time to reframe our perspective, press the reset button on 2020 and tackle these times like we would any other challenge.



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It has now been a year since I set foot on the top of the world. On 16 May 2019, I became the first black African women to reach the summit of Mount Everest. This was one of my life's greatest challenges and achievements.

A year down the line and I can see that this pandemic is proving to be its own Everest to climb for so many people. As a person who has literally climbed Everest, I figured that I could share some lessons that I learned on my journey to the summit.

You can't do it alone

As I made my way up the mountain, the first lesson I learned is that I am human. As a compulsive overachiever, this was news to me. We tend to face our struggles alone and believe that if we don't make it on our own, then we haven't made it. Well, you don't get to the top of Everest without acknowledging the people who helped you get there. Without the cooks, sherpas, guides, and 20 other people who supported me in some way, I would never have made it to the top.

As you face the lockdown head-on, remember the people in your life. Knowing what support you need and reaching out for it is the first step on your journey to success. Whoever that partner is, be it your spouse, your colleagues, your children, or your financial advisor, you'll quickly realise that it is better to struggle through the journey together than tough it out on your own.

There's always a lesson to learn

Although I made it to the Everest summit last year, that wasn't my first attempt. In 2014, I thought I was prepared to make the arduous climb to the top of the world. Once I got to base camp, tragedy struck. I just so happened to be there on the day an avalanche in the Khumbu Ice fall ended the lives of 16 sherpas.

As I watched body after body being pulled from the ice fall on the 18 April 2014, I came to a realisation that it wasn't my time to check out or reach the summit. People far more experienced than me were dead trying to get to the top or at least prepare the way. A thought crossed my mind; that could have been me. I had to ask myself what I was doing there and how important the journey to the top really was to me. How prepared was I really? So I turned around, went home and took a year to use my learnings and attempt in 2015, 2017 and 2019 when I finally made history.

As we all stare lockdown in the face, the reality is that not everything will go your way. If something doesn't work out, and the unexpected takes place, you need to stop, think and figure what you learned and move forward. Any challenge that comes your way has lessons for the next attempt and can only be a failure if you do not learn from it. We often don't realise that the other side of success, is the failures we had to learn from before we could achieve success.

Accept your reality and visualise all scenarios

That avalanche in 2014 was my biggest lesson. While it taught me to look for life's lessons, it also taught me to start visualising all scenarios. Sure, I could visualise myself on the summit – my ultimate goal. But, what about the obstacles that may come my way? After the avalanche, I started to visualise all the possible scenarios good and bad, so I could equip my mind with tools to respond accordingly and with a level of precision.

In 2017, I lost consciousness in the death zone and got frostbit as I was left for dead for more than 12 hours in a make-shift tent at Camp 4. That was not something I had planned for and yet, with all the scenarios I had planned in my head, I was able to react accordingly and found my way back to Camp 2. It may have been physical fitness that got me that far, but mental preparation kept me alive. The same is true as we navigate our way to success in these times. Preparation is 90% of the effort.

Stay focused and stay on track

When challenges get thrown our way, it's too easy to get distracted and lose focus. But sometimes, you simply can't afford to let yourself slip into chaos. Training for Everest and even the climb itself was rooted in routine. If you don't have a schedule and stick to it, you won't feel like any progress is being made.

In our current situation, a schedule will keep you sane and keep you moving. It takes commitment, but you need to be firm. Identify what is important to you and set boundaries. Even if your schedule calls for family time and work wants to get in the way, don't let that disrupt your flow. It may be uncomfortable to prioritise one over the other at times but you must strike a balance in these times and keep to your schedule. Success is achieved by consistently getting the little things right; over time, every successful step builds a greater journey.

Seek out advice

It is important to realise that you don't know what you don't know. If I was going to climb Everest, I needed to know what I was getting into. I needed advice and guidance from those that had gone before me and experts. So I found climbers,

mountaineers, and experts in their fields to give me the right advice so I could ready myself to summit the world's highest mountain.

As you find yourself facing the greatest challenge this world has faced in over a century, don't go into it blindly. Our economy is hanging on a precarious edge and you may be facing financial challenges of your own. Don't be afraid to contact a financial advisor to help you figure out where you're at, what you have, so you can figure out how you can get what you need. I talk to my adviser once a month.

As I have partnered with Momentum and Momentum Multiply, I have seen how the right financial advice from the right financial partner can change lives and build futures despite unfortunate circumstances. These are the partnerships that pave the road to success, especially when so much is unknown.

Wait for the weather window

This lockdown feels a lot like waiting for the right weather window. When climbing Everest, you sit at base camp sometimes for weeks waiting for the right opportunity. If you leave any time before that, guess what, you're not going to summit. If you're patient enough, the right weather window will come and you will be blessed with success.

Lockdown is like base camp. We are simply waiting for the right time to get out there and summit the various 'Everests' that life presents. But there is a lot we can do while we wait. We can keep ourselves sharp, hone our skills, and prepare for the coming climb.

Just keep stepping

As I made my way up the mountain, I had a mantra. Just keep stepping. One foot in front of the other. Sometimes life can feel insurmountable. That's when you have to go back to basics. What is the one basic thing you need to do to move forward, even if it's just an inch? Just keep stepping.

As a collective, and as a community, we need to do the same. We will make it through this, but we have to keep stepping. Once we do, there is enough sunshine on the summit for everybody to bask in.

Winston Churchill was quoted saying, "Never let a good crisis go to waste" which tells us that life will always give you challenges, what's important is how you choose to rewrite your story and restart your momentum.

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