

>> Levine in Mount Tamalpais State Park, near her home in San Francisco. She often trains there when she's not on the road.



## Fear couldn't stop her

### A record-setting mountaineer, Alison Levine now teaches business leaders the hard lessons she learned in beautiful and dangerous places

---

BY PAULA DERROW

---

→ **Alison Levine** has been onstage for 20 minutes. Her Atlanta audience is packed with busy women execs usually loath to put down their iPhones, but everyone is looking up now. "I never thought I would try to climb Mount Everest twice, but I did it for my friend Meg," Levine says softly, flashing a photo of a woman with a wide smile on the screen behind her. "She

was an all-American soccer player. She had to stop playing after she got cancer; the chemo damaged her lungs. So she started cycling. Nothing could stop her."

The crowd is quiet, waiting for the happy ending. But Levine reveals that Meg died of complications from the flu because of her bad lungs. "I wanted to do something to honor Meg, and the thing I'm most passionate about is climbing mountains," she says. "I engraved her name on my ice ax to make sure she would be coming with me on my second summit attempt. And that time, I made it." The room bursts into applause. »

Levine, 48, who radiates chic in a color-blocked sheath and patent leather wedges, is one of the most booked women on the famously lucrative professional speakers' circuit. When she's not on the road, she lives in San Francisco with her boyfriend of five years and her dog. But it's rare that she's home. After Atlanta, she's off to Los Angeles, then Denver, set to gross seven figures as she crisscrosses the country, dispensing funny, outrageous or poignant anecdotes and unconventional business advice gleaned from her experience in extreme environments. ("Practice sleep deprivation." "Fear is healthy.") Her way with a roomful of suits has made her a favorite with IBM, Microsoft and other corporations, places that don't typically hire women speakers. "Women's subject matter tends to be viewed as 'too soft,'" Levine says. "My subject somehow feels testosterone infused."

» **Levine is** one of the few people on the planet, man or woman, who have scaled the highest peak on every continent. In 2007 she was part of a five-person team of international explorers who skied the 600-mile Messner route across Antarctica to the South Pole (and the first American to do so), lugging a loaded 150-pound sled behind her. To train, Levine tethered first one, then two, then three tires behind her with a rope, dragging them through the sand on a San Francisco beach. Still, the physical pain on the actual trip was stunning; the winds were sometimes so strong, Levine had to fight to stay on her feet, and after the first week of struggling through the knee-deep snow, she was bruised nearly everywhere on her body.

The emotional stress was worse. Because of her height—Levine was nearly a foot shorter and at least 50 pounds lighter than some of her teammates—she couldn't pull her sled as fast and felt terrible about holding the team back. One morning, a few of the guys lifted everyone's sleds to feel the weight, and when they got to hers, they pronounced it much heavier than the others (although it wasn't) and transferred some of the load to their own

sleds. Knowing that they were bluffing to preserve her dignity, Levine was deeply affected. "My outlook changed," she says. "I realized they *wanted* me to succeed. They taught me something about authentic leadership: Great leaders do not expect people to simply overcome weakness but instead help people find a way to compensate for that weakness."

Levine is expert at taking anecdotes like that and spinning them into life lessons. She taught cadets at West Point and runs executive-level workshops for the Thayer Leader Development Group. In January 2014 she published her first book, *On the Edge: The Art of High-Impact Leadership*, which hit the best-seller list.

But her achievements didn't come easily. Levine spent the first decade of her career in the medical-equipment industry, always excelling but with no clear goals. She was intrigued by stories of mountaineers like Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, who were the first people to summit Everest. But a heart condition—Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome—that brought on episodes of dangerous arrhythmia made even normal activity risky. At 30, Levine had cardiac surgery that fixed the problem, and she celebrated by climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. The experience was transformative. "I wanted to do more," she says.

» **She began** climbing in earnest while getting her MBA at Duke University. "Every time I had a break, I'd head to the mountains," she says. As her mountaineering skills got better, she noticed that much of what she learned—for instance, the importance of relationships—was helpful in other areas of life. "When I'm at base camp, I walk around and get to know people," Levine says. "If, God forbid, something happens to me or one of my teammates, I want other climbers to feel obligated to help us. But they won't always stop—unless they know you. You have to have relationships in place. It's up to each person to make that happen."

Between climbing jaunts, Levine finished grad school and began applying

## Running the numbers

➔ **\$20,001 to \$30,000**

Cost of hiring Levine to speak to a group

➔ **100**

Approximate number of speeches she gives in a year

➔ **40 to 50**

Approximate number of engagements for most people on the speakers' circuit

➔ **6,000**

Number of calories Levine needed to consume daily to survive her Antarctic skiing expedition

➔ **6,496**

Number of emails Levine sent to secure sponsorship for her first Mount Everest climb

for jobs on Wall Street. "I was \$70,000 in debt from tuition and credit cards," she says. "I had to *earn*." After snagging a much-coveted summer internship at Goldman Sachs, she landed an associate position in the investment management division. While her heart pulled her toward the mountains, she remained behind a desk, struggling to bring in new business and "trying to not get fired," she says with a laugh.

Which is why she declined an offer to serve as team captain for the first American Women's Everest Expedition in 2001. "I'd done six peaks by then," she says. "This felt like more challenge than I wanted to take on." Then 9/11 happened. "I didn't want fear to stop me from doing what I wanted to do," she says. She agreed to lead the trek.

To make that happen, Levine had to put together a team of women climbers and raise at least \$150,000. After multiple rejections from potential corporate

sponsors, she began sending out proposals along with one well-used hiking boot in a cardboard box. “Whether or not you choose to fund us,” she wrote in her cover letter, “please return my boot so I can keep training.” Suddenly, people were writing back to wish her luck (and return her boot). None of them offered money, but at least she’d gotten their attention.

During this time, Levine came upon a display featuring a massive Ford SUV called the Himalayan Expedition. She sent her Everest proposal to a business-school friend who worked at Ford; he helped funnel it to top managers. Finally, two months before the climb, Ford agreed to sponsor the group.

Levine took eight weeks of unpaid leave from Goldman. Her team had made it to within 300 feet of the 29,035-foot summit when a sudden storm forced the climbers to turn back. “It was heartbreaking,” she says. But she absorbed another hard lesson about leadership that day. “Everest is just a pile of rocks and ice,” she says. “You can always return, but if you do something dumb, you may not have that opportunity.”

After Levine’s Everest publicity blitz, her bosses at Goldman asked her to recruit new employees at business schools around the country. The students, who weren’t expecting a mountain-climbing dynamo in high heels, loved her presentations. For the first time, Levine realized that her knack for public speaking might give her entry into another kind of career, one in which she could earn and leave her desk at will. Over the next two years, Levine continued to hone her presentations. She left Goldman officially but became a consultant at the firm, speaking to everyone from new hires to managing directors about how the leadership skills required to survive in a grueling physical environment applied to the business world.

» **But Levine** was only barely covering her expenses. She began calling around to speakers’ bureaus, trying to get on the circuit. “Most of them ignored me,” she says. “Their clients were looking for big names.” Only one agent, from

Keppler Speakers, agreed to meet her. Six months later, in January 2006, the agent called. “Can you get yourself to Vegas before 7 AM tomorrow?” he asked. A keynote speaker had canceled at the last minute, leaving 6,000 conference attendees in the lurch. Levine stayed up until dawn to put together her presentation. “Back home,” she says, “I’ll go to Mount Shasta at 11 PM to train. I climb to the top and back down through the night, with no sleep. You can be sleep deprived and either stressed or OK with it.”

She got a standing ovation in Las Vegas, and the performance launched her career. But she had one more challenge to meet. “My entire life, I felt I should serve in the military, that I should give back,” she says. The maximum age for enlisting at the time was 42—Levine’s age when she returned from her Antarctic expedition in 2008. “You’re too old,” the recruiting officer told her. “You have to enlist *before* your 42nd birthday.” Never one to give up, she wrote to then colonel (now general) Thomas Kolditz, a leadership expert she’d met at a conference, and asked him to help her enlist. Instead, Kolditz offered her the chance to teach at West Point, which later led to her work with CEOs at the Thayer group.

In 2010, Levine tackled Everest’s peak again, this time making it to the top and achieving “the adventure grand slam”—climbing the highest mountain on each continent and skiing to both the North and South Poles. Yet Levine cares more about the inspiring people she’s met along the way than about setting records. On her trip to the Antarctic, after skiing as long as 15 hours, the members had to anchor their tents at night with ice bricks they formed by shoveling snow. Wanting to show her gratitude to the guys who’d helped her, Levine pretended that she loved shoveling snow and insisted on doing it for them. “They thought I was crazy,” she says. “I would have fought off polar bears for them, except there aren’t any at the South Pole!” ❄

PAULA DERROW’s most recent essay for *More* appeared in the June issue.