Escalating commitment in the death zone
New insights from the 1996 Mount Everest disaster
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Received 28 July 2010; received in revised form 11 January 2011; accepted 27 January 2011

Abstract

The procession of people and organisations that pour resources into evidently failing causes is surprising and seemingly never-ending. This phenomenon, which is called “escalating commitment” (Staw, 1976), refers to situations in which people are incapable of turning future disasters into sound current decisions. The purpose of this paper is to use the, in project management literature (Kloppenborg and Opfer, 2002), non-traditional case of the 1996 Mt Everest disaster to explain and analyse escalating commitment determinants and processes. Not only does the paper identify and add a determinant to escalation but it also treats determinants and processes in a novel and intertwined fashion. The conceptual developments and findings suggest that escalating commitment strives on conditions that are inherent to any project, which consequently project managers should be aware of. Based on the results project failures could be better explained and understood by examining several explanatory levels simultaneously.

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Keywords: Escalating commitment; Temporary organizations; Mount Everest; Processes

1. Introduction

The procession of people and organisations that pour resources into evidently failing causes is surprising and seemingly never-ending. This phenomenon, which is called “escalating commitment” (Staw, 1976), refers to situations in which people are incapable of turning future disasters into sound current decisions. Commitment is not a stable rational phenomenon, which suggests some degree of dynamics in the phenomenon. To date, however, the theory has focused mostly on the determinants of commitment rather than the process (Mähring et al., 2004). Escalating commitment has received a certain degree of attention in IT industry projects (Keil, 1995; Mähring and Keil, 2008), where it has been found to account for a high proportion of failed projects in terms of the inability to meet requirements in time, cost and scope. These are referred to as “runaway projects” (Sabherwal et al., 2003).

The runaway tendencies found in IT can be assumed to apply to other industries as well. Outside IT, however, neither traditional nor non-traditional project industries have paid a great deal of attention to escalating commitment. Most of the attention that escalation has received has focused on the determinants (Staw, 1976; Staw and Ross, 1987a) and phases of escalation processes (Mähring and Keil, 2008). Although these two streams have made important contributions to understanding the phenomenon, there is a tendency to allocate blame to a single point of failure, which is not necessarily the case (Mähring et al., 2004). This paper contrasts the traditional entity-based narrative process view with the neglected organising-based narrative process view (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005). In doing so, the paper helps re-orient the focus of project management studies towards embracing process studies “more openly and consistently” (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002:567). By emphasising the changing nature of the entire set of processes, from beginning to end, the approach does not allocate blame which allows for a novel and integrated analysis (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005:1384) and in practical terms suggesting that escalation is the outcome of continuous change rather than a predefined path (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

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The climbing expedition industry on Mount Everest is not typically investigated (Kloppenborg and Opfer, 2002:21). It has been shown, however, that less traditional industries can offer new perspectives on common phenomenon (Kayes, 2004; Elmes and Barry, 1999; Elmes and Frame, 2008; Aubry et al., 2010), which is one reason for choosing a particular case (Siggelkow, 2007:21). Escalating commitment was originally developed for policy-making decisions (Staw, 1976) and is not associated with a specific industry. Therefore, broadening the industrial application contributes to the understanding of escalation, per se. The purpose of this paper is to use a, in project management literature, non-traditional case to explain and analyse escalating commitment determinants and processes. Through the widely publicised and researched 1996 climbing disaster on Mt Everest, this paper contributes to the understanding of escalating commitment by broadening the empirical context, by paying attention to both determinants and the entire set of processes in an integrated detailed fashion which do not allocate blame, suggesting that there is a certain element of manageability in escalating processes.

2. Expeditions as temporary organisations

The concept of “temporary systems” has been further developed through the introduction of the “temporary organisations” literature (Bennis, 1965, 1966; Bennis and Slater, 1968; Goodman and Goodman, 1972, 1976). Temporary organisations are defined as “a set of diversely skilled people working jointly at a task of some complexity over a limited time period” (Goodman and Goodman, 1976:494). It is necessary to consider the concepts of time, task, team and transition in the demarcation of a temporary organisation (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995:439). The time aspect is especially important for distinguishing temporary organisations from other organisations (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). The assumption that an organisation ends at a certain point in time places the focus on the present rather than the past or the future. The focus shifts away from utilising resources and towards the assigned problem (Goodman, 1981). The focus on the presence and problem-solving has led to “action” rather than “decision” becoming the heart of the temporary organisation (unlike a permanent organisation) (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). This differentiation follows a behavioural approach of decision-making. The action approach suggests that temporary organisations focus on particular tasks rather than long-term survival (as permanent organisations do). Goodman (1981) claimed that temporary organisations are characterised by tasks that are (1) complex, in terms of the interdependence of detailed task accomplishment, (2) infrequent, unique or unfamiliar, (3) critical and (4) definable in terms of a specific goal. A temporary organisation, therefore, has the characteristics of a project, as they are both exposed to the constraint of time and resources. In fact, Turner and Müller (2003) drew an equal sign between the two.

The traditional industries – construction, IT, utilities, R&D, manufacturing, education and telecommunications – account for 63% of all researched project industries (Kloppenborg and Opfer, 2002:21). Projects in these industries, however, are only one type of temporary organisation. The use of temporary organisations/projects by less traditional industries was recognised in a recently published special issue of Project Management Journal, 2010 (Vol. 41, No. 3) and in a special issue of International Journal of Managing Projects in Business, 2010 (Vol. 3, No. 1). The former focused mostly on polar expeditions, while the latter included an overview of the applicability of project management to non-traditional industries such as mergers and acquisitions (Nogeste, 2010) and, more importantly for this paper, climbing expeditions (Hällgren, 2010). In climbing expeditions – the focus of this paper – planning is crucial, just as it is in traditional projects. Although it is unusual for mountain climbing to be considered for this purpose, such expeditions are known to have the constraints and characteristics of temporary organisations (time, task, team and transition) (Hällgren, 2007:774–775). Indeed, a mountain climbing expedition is a temporary organisation (Kayes, 2004:1281) and the features of the expedition are the same as in any other temporary organisation, except that they are present in a different setting. Planning is an important feature of project management (Dvir and Lechler, 2004) and expeditions (Choo, 2002), as is risk calculation and assessment (Hällgren, 2007). In terms of time, task, team and transition, not only are climbing expeditions limited in duration (acclimatisation for climbing Mt Everest takes about four weeks and the ascent and descent take about six days) but they are also limited in terms of when they can take place during the year — namely spring and autumn (http://www.alpineascents.com). The time limit is also implied by the fact that a task must be accomplished within a certain time and weather window. Furthermore, the task to be achieved is specified: to reach the top and then come back. Paid expeditions, which involve a team of climbers, share the team feature with other temporary organisations. In terms of transition, reaching the goal represents a change in the climbers’ lives and in the business of the expedition companies. See Hällgren (2007:775) and Table 1 for comparison.

3. Escalating commitment

Since the 1960s, research on projects and project management has focused mainly on the nine knowledge areas of the PMBOK

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Expeditions</th>
<th>Traditional projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>From start of expedition planning to demolishing base camp</td>
<td>From starting to build finished facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task</td>
<td>Make it to the top and back</td>
<td>Build a facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team</td>
<td>The expedition team (guides, clients etc.)</td>
<td>The project team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>From non-achieved climber to achieved climber</td>
<td>From unprepared ground to finished facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Detailing the climb</td>
<td>Detailing construction activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk management</td>
<td>Technical climbing risks, e.g. durability in path</td>
<td>Technical construction risks, e.g. durability in structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Escalation commitment studies involve why and how organisations commit to failing courses of action based on an iterative decision-making process over a period of time, in spite of receiving recurrent negative feedback with respect to the attainability of the goal (Staw and Ross, 1987b; Whyte, 1986; Brockner, 1992). The principal phenomenon of concern in escalating commitment is the propensity of individuals and organisations to become excessively committed and continue to inject resources into failing courses of action (Staw, 1976; Staw and Ross, 1987b). To make sense of this tendency, it is necessary to consider a range of economic and behavioural forces (Brockner, 1992). In the real world, escalating commitment may be driven by those forces, which the escalation literature refers to as determinants of commitment. These forces may differ in intensity in relation to the specific circumstances in which they apply (Ross and Staw, 1986). Staw and Ross (1986, 1987a, 1987b, 1989) summarised the findings on escalating commitment situations in a framework that encompassed the determinants of commitment into four main types of determinants: project, psychological, social and organisational determinants.

3.1. Escalating commitment determinants

Project determinants are the objective features of the project and how management understands them (Ross and Staw, 1993). These include the economic benefits of persistence or withdrawal (Staw and Ross, 1987a, 1987b); that is, how a project is economically configured may resolve how an individual will continue to pursue or abandon the situation (Ross and Staw, 1986). Other aspects that contribute to the same end include closing costs and/or salvage value (Northcraft and Wolf, 1984), the temporary nature of the setback (Leatherwood and Conlon, 1985 in Staw and Ross, 1987a, 1987b), the effectiveness of added resources (Staw and Fox, 1977), the project’s payoff (Rubin and Brockner, 1975), future expenses (Brockner et al., 1981), return on investment (Staw and Ross, 1987a) and earlier negative results (McCain, 1986).

It is not only structures and visible goals that determine escalating commitment. Some of the other determinants include forces that may cause miscalculations in gains and losses of project standings, while others relate to forces that can immediately attach subjects to a course of action (Staw and Ross, 1987a, 1987b). These psychological determinants include “reinforcement traps” such as complications in retiring from an activity when previous reinforcement from gains has been received (Staw and Ross, 1987a) and individual incentives, such as the need for self-justification and self-inference.

Project managers who are being evaluated based on how well they keep to the plan (Christensen and Kreiner, 1991) are prone to make additional investments in order to turn a project around, rather than admitting that prior decisions were mistaken (Keil, 1995). This self-justification can prompt project managers to “bias facts in the direction of previously accepted beliefs and preferences”, which can lead to project escalation (Ross and Staw, 1993:716). Self-inference contrasts with self-justification in that it does not convey any motive to appear rational or competent (Staw and Ross, 1987a; Ross and Staw, 1986). For example, as Ross and Staw (1986:276) stated, “Individuals may examine their own behaviour in its social context so as to infer personal values and preferences from prior actions”. Furthermore, projects are more liable to escalation when there is a preceding history of success and when the individual responsibility level is prominent (Keil, 1995).

Attempts to recover resources invested in a project, particularly decisions regarding sunk costs, can also lead to escalation (Ross and Staw, 1993; Garland, 1990), as can mismanaged information (Nisbett and Ross, 1980 in Staw and Ross, 1986, 1987a).

Escalation is a complex social phenomenon (Staw and Ross, 1987a). Social determinants of commitment may compel a project manager to continue, not only because of self-justification but because they are reluctant to reveal their errors to others (Staw and Ross, 1986, 1987a, 1989; Ross and Staw, 1993). Social factors that promote escalation include the desire to avoid losing reliability and reputation (face-saving behaviour), calls for external justification (Fox and Staw, 1979; Brockner et al., 1981) and modelling of others’ behaviour in comparable conditions (Brockner et al., 1984). Social norms therefore favour consistent behaviour or strong management in escalation situations (Staw, 1981). Accordingly, projects tend to escalate when there is competition between the decision-making group and other social groups (Rubin et al., 1980 in Staw and Ross, 1987a). The external dependency of an individual’s behaviour may cause them to increasingly escalate their decisions (Staw and Ross, 1987a, 1989).

Human behaviour is multifaceted and determined on several levels (Kayes, 2004). Besides project, psychological and social determinants, organisational determinants have been found to contribute to escalation (Staw and Ross, 1989). Organisational determinants are typically cumulative (institutionalised) on economic, technical and political levels (Staw and Ross, 1987a). According to Keil (1995), projects are inclined to escalate when there is intense political support at senior management level and when the project is closely tied to the organisation’s goals.

3.2. The process of escalation

Projects differ depending on their position in the life cycle (PMI, 2008). A review of the project literature between 1960
and 1999 by Kloppenborg and Opfer (2002) suggested that the planning phase is the most researched phase (29%), followed by paying less attention to control (23%), leading/directing (17%), improving (14%) and executing (1%). Accordingly, there is a heavy research bias towards the front end of projects and the theoretical development of how things should be, rather than how they actually are.

Escalation is not a one-phase phenomena; it cuts through all the phases, as recognised by PMI (2008) and Kloppenborg and Opfer (2002). However, this understanding has received less attention. Van de Ven and Poole (2005) argued for four approaches to processes. On the vertical axis is the variance method (mostly quantitative positivist methods) and process narratives (mostly qualitative hermeneutic methods). On the horizontal axis is the ontological difference between viewing the focal organisation either as a noun and social actor (an entity) or as a verb, in emergent flux (a process of organising). “PMI-processes” [1] typically fall within a variance method, entity-based investigation, and traditional project studies (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995) within a variance method, organising-based view [2]. In terms of escalation, the process phases and how they develop has received some attention. Mähring and Keil (2008) suggested that the escalation process consists of three cumulative phases, with triggers in between. This would correspond to the view of the organisation as an entity – a static noun – with a process narrative [3]. This approach typically brings out the phases and triggers (Van de Van and Poole, 2005:1389–1390). Mähring et al. (2004) on the other hand, contrasted their findings of an organising-based process narrative with the traditional positivist, entity-based process narrative analysis of a project. Mähring et al. (2004) argued that the former, traditional methods tend to be rational and that an organising view opens up the opportunity for alternative understandings (Mähring et al., 2004:216). The main difference between the two readings is that the traditional escalation theory sees the situation as being dependent on a series of decisions made by decision makers, while the conditions in an organising-based process view are present from the very beginning and the decisions continuously shape and are shaped by the situation. Consequently, the situation may develop into (Trojan) actors that hold each other in place and hinder the possibility of dropping out on a failing course of actions. Hence, an escalating process is not dominated by one single actor with full control over the developments (Mähring et al., 2004:228). Following the second reading, an organising-based narrative process view (strong process view) [4] may contribute to an understanding that goes beyond mere determinants and phases and refrains from a “single point of failure” perspective, while still including several critical events and turning points (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005:1384) given that the organisation is the outcome of continuous change (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Few authors have provided any results to this end, whereas most studies so far have been conceptual (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005:1390–1391). The downside is that an organising perspective tends to be restricted to process-oriented methods with a clear timeline and narrative and tends to view processes as all that an organisation is comprised of. The irony is that this constant flux must be

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process narratives</th>
<th>Ontology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional escalation process studies (e.g. Mähring &amp; Keil, 2008)</td>
<td>A noun, a social actor, a real entity (“thing”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong escalation process study (e.g. Mähring et al, 2004)</td>
<td>A verb, a process of organizing, emergent flux</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Process typology.
Adapted from Van de Ven and Poole, 2005:1387.

1 Number within brackets corresponds to the number in Fig. 1.
represented through static descriptions (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005:1391). Accordingly, a well-crafted narrative is essential in order to make the argument (Siggelkow, 2007). All in all, a strong process approach contributes to the theory of escalating commitment by investigating the phenomena without allocating blame. Moreover, this approach offers a way to understand escalating commitment in a more detailed fashion, which gets closer to events and behaviours. A strong process approach is therefore well-suited for understanding fine-grained processes and mechanisms of escalating commitment.

4. Methodology

The 1996 Mt Everest disaster has great illustrative power to explain and analyse escalating determinants and dynamic processes (Siggelkow, 2007:20,22). Although extreme in its environment the case carries similar strengths and explanatory power as other illustrative case studies. Although hard to generalise from, one case may in depth explain occurrences in detail which provide deeper understanding of any organised phenomena. (Yin, 1994) Following the disaster, the survivors published various accounts of the events (Krakauer, 1996, 1997; Groom, 1997; Boukreev and DeWalt, 1998; Breashears, 1998, 1999, 2009; Gammelgaard, 1999; Weathers, 2000; Kropp & Lagerkrantz, 2002). These publications, along with the events on Mt Everest in 1996 in general, have been a target of analysis from the media and academia (Elmes and Barry, 1999; Useem, 2001; Kayes, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006; Roberto, 2002; Hägglren, 2007, 2010; Rosen, 2007; Tempest et al., 2007; Elmes and Frame, 2008). This, combined with these publications’ illustrative power in terms of decision making and group processes, has led them to be used as case studies in many classrooms, such as a Harvard case study.

The present paper is partly based on a master thesis (Pustina & Aegerter Alvarez, 2009) and similar to other research (e.g., Kayes, 2004; Elmes and Barry, 1999) in that it relies on a case study of the published first-hand biographical accounts of survivors and observers on the mountain in 1996 (see above). The comprehensive array of a published text by survivors and close observers contributes to a rigorous and reliable cross-account analysis of the events (Hägglren, 2010). Besides the Mt Everest case, second-hand material, biographical material and commercially published autobiographical sources have been utilised as the main sources of data-critical organisational problems for investigating events such as the Challenger launch decision (Vaughan, 1996) and the Mann Gulch fire disaster (Weick, 1993). A detailed and integrated narrative was developed based on the case study, which is the preferred method for strong process studies (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005:1385).

The analysis was performed by grouping data chronologically, focusing on details that influenced escalation according to the framework suggested by Staw and Ross (1987a, 1987b) and Mähring et al. (2004). In keeping with Mähring and Keil (2008), the events were divided into the phases that represent the division of stages of an escalation situation (Staw and Ross, 1987b, Ross and Staw 1993). Following Van de Ven and Poole (2005), a detailed timeline was developed (see Table 1) and the present paper argues that the attribution to the developments is slightly simplistic at this point as it views stages (processes) as entities rather than something people do. Although predispositioned phases were given values in terms of providing understanding of notable occurrences, this does not provide an understanding of more interlinked phenomena in which the role of activities changes depending on its situatedness (e.g., Suchman, 1987). Consequently, the phases suggested by Staw and Ross (1987b, and Ross and Staw 1993) were coded (see Table 2) and complemented with an organising-based view of processes (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005:1390–1391) in order to identify determinants that fitted each phase, rather than a single point of failure (Mähring et al., 2004). This allows for a complementary view of processes (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005:1393–1396). Because some events can be seen from different perspectives (Krakauer, 1997; Boukreev and Dewalt, 1998; Weathers, 2000), this paper focuses on the context surrounding the decision-making of the leaders and the outcome of these decisions, as opposed to the disaster itself.

5. Findings

The 1996 Mt Everest disaster has been categorised as “the most widely publicised mountain-climbing disaster in history” (Kayes, 2004:1267). Several explanations have been found to have contributed to the disaster, in which eight people eventually died. These explanations range from a case of bad leadership to a consequence of the organisational structure. Kayes (2004) found that both behavioural and structural explanations hindered learning among the teams, which contributed to the disaster. Hägglren (2010) concurred, finding that the way in which the expeditions were structured caused them to have features that corresponded to groupthink. Elmes and Barry (2008) focused on the broader picture, suggesting that it was mainly a case of greed and general development within the climbing community, in which unprepared people were allowed to climb Mt Everest (see also Rosen, 2007). The decision-making, however, seems to be the key to an understanding of what happened. The disaster involved three teams of climbers attempting to reach the summit. On the final summit push day, May 10th, a fierce storm attacked the mountain late in the afternoon, leaving a total of eight casualties. One of the victims was Doug Hansen. As the day progressed, Hansen could have turned back in time and saved his life but, as Krakauer (1997:89) recounted, “he was absolutely determined to bag the top”.

5.1. Commercialisation of climbing

The attitude to climbing changed drastically after American businessman Dick Bass decided to climb the highest summits on each of the seven continents, which included his ascent of Mt Everest in 1985. This achievement opened doors to a variety of people who had the desire and the opportunity to do the same. The mountain has remained as challenging as ever and people have fallen to their death, died from cold or suffered from cerebral or pneumonic oedema due to thin air. The commercialisation of climbing has been found to have contributed to many
Table 2
Timeline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Point in time</th>
<th>Climbers involved a</th>
<th>Team b</th>
<th>Elevation (feet)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-expedition</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Expeditions are the main line of business of the companies.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Scott Fischer (EL), Rob Hall (EL)</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Confidence of team leaders about reaching the summit: “We have a</td>
<td>(Krakauer, 1997)</td>
<td>Scott Fischer (EL)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Discounted fees for one climber so that he can make another attempt</td>
<td>(Krakauer, 1997)</td>
<td>Rob Hall (EL), Doug Hansen (C)</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fischer competing with Hall to have journalist Krakauer on his</td>
<td>(Krakauer, 1997)</td>
<td>Scott Fischer (EL), Rob Hall (EL), Jon Krakauer (JC)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Teams secure media coverage for their expeditions.</td>
<td>(Krakauer, 1997)</td>
<td>Scott Fischer (EL), Rob Hall (EL)</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Fisher and Gammelgaard had conversations about expanding the</td>
<td>(Gammelgaard, 1999)</td>
<td>Scott Fischer (EL), Lene Gammelgaard (C)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ascent to the summit begins.</td>
<td>9 May, 11:35 p.m.</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>25,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Team members begin to reach Southeast ridge balcony. First</td>
<td>10 May, 05:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>RBT,</td>
<td>27,000–28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Teams make their way up to the South Summit. Wind picks up.</td>
<td>10 May, 8:00–10:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Second bottleneck at the Hillary Step.</td>
<td>10 May, 11:00–12:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>RBT,</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: Receipt</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Three climbers abandon the summit attempt.</td>
<td>10 May, 11:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Lou Kasischke (C), John Taske (C), Stuart Hutchinson (C)</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>28,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of questionable</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Standard turnaround time</td>
<td>1:00–2:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Beidlemann (G), Boukreev (G), Krakauer (JC), Adams (C), Harris (C), Schoening (C), Groom (G)</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>29,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outcomes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Eight climbers reach the summit.</td>
<td>10 May, 1:00–1:25 p.m.</td>
<td>Sandy Hill (JC), Fox (C), Gammelgaard (C), Namba (C)</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>29,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>More climbers reach the summit.</td>
<td>10 May, 2:00–2:15 p.m.</td>
<td>Makalu Gau (EL)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
<td>29,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3: Receipt</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Team leader Gau reaches the summit. DESCENT BEGINS</td>
<td>10 May, 3:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>29,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of negative</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Other climbers reach the summit.</td>
<td>10 May, 3:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>29,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outcomes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Team leader Fischer reaches the summit.</td>
<td>10 May, 3:40 p.m.</td>
<td>Scott Fischer (EL)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
<td>29,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Team leader Hall reaches the top of the Hillary step with Hansen.</td>
<td>10 May, 4:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Rob Hall (EL), Doug Hansen (C)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
<td>29,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Teams merge, guides assume leadership.</td>
<td>10 May, 5:00–5:20 p.m.</td>
<td>Beidlemann (G), Groom (G), Namba (C), Weathers (C), Hill (JC), Fox (C), Adams (C), Gammelgaard (C), Schoening (C)</td>
<td>SFT,</td>
<td>27,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>The three climbers who returned early find tents in Camp IV.</td>
<td>10 May, 4:40–6:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Kasischke (C), Taske (C), Hutchinson (C)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
<td>25,900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

deaths throughout the years, including the events of 1996 (Kayes, 2004; Rosen, 2007; Elmes and Frame, 2008).

5.2. The companies, the leaders and the teams

Three expedition teams from different countries were involved in the tragedy: the Adventure Consultants team from New Zealand, the Mountain Madness team from the United States and a non-commercial Taiwanese expedition. Rob Hall, the owner and co-founder of Adventure Consultants, led that company’s guided expedition team. Two guides, Mike Groom and Andy Harris, assisted the team, which was formed by eight climbing clients: Beck Weathers, Yasuko Namba, Lou Kasischke, Jon Krakauer (a journalist who was planning to write an article for Outside magazine), Doug Hansen (who failed to reach the summit the year before), Stuart Hutchinson, Frank Fishbeck and John Taske. The team was also composed of a base camp manager, a doctor and a number of Sherpas. The head Sherpa in Hall’s team was Ang Dorje.

Rob Hall was a capable climber who had reached the top of Mt Everest in four previous expeditions. He and his company, Adventure Consultants, were aware of his conservative and systematic procedures for guiding clients. By 1990, Hall was a full-time professional climber who reached the summit of Mt Everest for the first time as an expedition leader and then proceeded to climb the highest summits in each of the seven continents in seven months with his climbing partner Gary Ball. Hall gained corporate sponsorship to cover the expenses of his expeditions. When this corporate sponsorship became harder to obtain throughout their seven-month achievement, Hall and Ball came up with the idea of launching their own business to guide clients on top of the Seven Summits. That is how Adventure Consultants was born (Krakauer, 1997).

Over the next five years, Adventure Consultants achieved a high success rate. This led Hall to market his company as “the world leader in Everest Climbing”. On the basis of this success, Adventure Consultants’ fee for Everest expeditions was about US$65,000, the highest on the market (Krakauer, 1997). Nearly 15 years on from the disaster, the fees are about the same (Hällgren, 2010).

Scott Fischer, the American climber who was also the owner of the Mountain Madness adventure-guiding company, led the second guided expedition team. The Mountain Madness team was made up of eight climbing clients: Sandy Hill Pittman (a journalist reporting for NBC Interactive Media), Tim Madsen, Charlotte Fox, Klev Schoening, Pete Schoening, Lene Gammelgaard (Fischer’s close friend who was attempting to be the first Danish woman to summit Mt Everest), Martin Adams and

### Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Point in time</th>
<th>Climbers involved</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Elevation (feet)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4: Receipt of highly negative outcomes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>First radio call from Hall requesting help. Storm rolls in</td>
<td>10 May, 5:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Rob Hall (EL), Guy Cotter (BC)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
<td>27,000</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10 May, around 6:00 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Group led by Beidleman becomes lost at South Col, just 300 yards from Camp IV.</td>
<td>10 May, 8:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Beidleman (G), Groom (G), Namba (C), Weathers (C), Hill (JC), Fox (C), Adams (C), Gammelgaard (C), Schoening (C), Boukreev (C), Beidleman (G), Groom (G), (C), Hill (JC), Fox (C), Adams (C), Gammelgaard (C), Schoening (C)</td>
<td>SFT, RBT</td>
<td>26,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Group led by Beidleman finds its way back to Camp IV and Boukreev retrieves remaining climbers.</td>
<td>10 May, 12:00 p.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td>SFT, RBT</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Rescue party finds Fischer and Gau but is only able to retrieve Gau.</td>
<td>11 May, 10:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Scott Fischer (EL), Makalu Gau (EL), Sya Kya (S), Tashi Tseri (S), plus 1 (S)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
<td>27,000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Weathers returns to Camp IV unaided.</td>
<td>11 May, 4:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Beck Weathers (C)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Hall talks to his wife for the last time.</td>
<td>11 May, 6:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Rob Hall (EL), Guy Cotter (BC)</td>
<td>RBT</td>
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</table>

a (C) = client, (CJ) = client and journalist, (S) = Sherpa, (G) = guide, (EL) = expedition leader, and (BC) = base camp member.
b (SFT) = Scott Fisher’s team, (RBT) = Rob Hall’s team, (MGT) = Makalu Gau’s team, and (OT) = other team.
Dale Kurse. There were also two guides assisting the leader, Neil Beidleman and Anatoli Boukreev (regarded as one of the strongest high-altitude climbers in the world). The expedition crew also included a base camp manager who acted as a doctor, several Sherpas and Fischer’s climbing sirdar, Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa. Jane Bromet, Fischer’s friend and climbing partner, remained at base camp as a reporter for Outside Online (not to be confused with Outside magazine, for which Krakauer was writing), providing daily reports of the expedition’s progress.

Forty-year-old Fischer founded Mountain Madness in 1984 with help from his wife’s earnings. Fischer was a prominent high-altitude climber and business rival of Rob Hall, whom he knew from past experiences in elite high-altitude climbing. This was Fischer’s first time leading an expedition to Mt Everest, although he had reached the summit once in 1994 without supplemental oxygen. Thanks to that and some other climbs, he had received his share of media attention and his career was advancing. Although Mountain Madness was not making large profits, Fischer expected things to turn around now that he was advancing. Although Mountain Madness was not making large profits, Fischer expected things to turn around now that he was advancing.

5.3. The expedition

The teams arrived in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, and underwent a preparation period of about six weeks before they reached Camp IV and readied themselves for their summit bid on May 10th. From Kathmandu, the teams took a helicopter flight that left them in the village of Lukla. Each team had their own logistical arrangements and acted independently of each other. From Lukla, the teams started to trek toward Everest Base Camp located at 17,600 ft above sea level. The plan was to get the climbers acclimatised to the altitude. Once the teams reached Everest Base Camp, the plan was to make acclimatising ascents to Camps I, II and III before climbing toward Camp IV and an attempt for the summit. The purpose of the acclimatising process is to adapt the body to the shortage of oxygen at high altitude.

5.4. Preparations for the summit

The teams arrived at the base camp in late April, 1996 and attempted to try for the summit in early May. After the acclimatising period, the teams were set for the final ascent to the summit of Everest. The plan was to leave Camp IV at 25,938 ft at midnight, reach the summit between 12:00 and 1:00 p.m. and then start their descent immediately. If the plan fails behind schedule, it is a ‘golden rule’ among climbers (known as the ‘two o’clock rule’) that the climbers will turn around and head back. The latest a climbing expedition can turn around is 2:00 p.m. (Kayes, 2006). However, this rule was not properly communicated and the turnaround had to be decided by the expedition leaders.

On the 9th of May, 1996, at 11:35 p.m., under the leadership of Rob Hall and his two assistants, members of Adventure Consultants left from Camp IV to reach the summit. Following them, the team of Mountain Madness left at 00:00 a.m. on May 10th, 1996, led by team assistant leaders Anatoli Boukreev and Neil Biedleman. Fischer left after his team, sometime between midnight and 1:00 a.m.

At 5:30 a.m., three members of the Mountain Madness team reached the beginning of a long narrow ridge that is known as “the Balcony”. Although it had been agreed that ropes would be set up, this had not been done and the climbers had to wait for others to fix the ropes. “The plan originally, as I understood it, was that both Ang Dorjee and Lopsang, the two climbing leaders of the Sherpa, would leave camp at 10:00 p.m. and they would work together, making sure that the trail was broken and the ropes were in place” (Neil Beidleman in Breashears, 2009). This created the first bottleneck, after which the teams started ascending slowly from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. (Kayes, 2006).

5.5. Crowd at the summit

The second bottleneck was created at the 40-foot stretch of rock known as “The Hillary Step”. The teams were becoming backed up in their attempts to climb this steep and difficult part, 250 ft below the summit. The teams had again failed to fix the ropes. At about 11:40 a.m., two members of the Mountain Madness and two members from Adventure Consultants began to fix the ropes (Krakauer, 1997). The exact time at which the summit was reached cannot be clearly determined. However, between 1:12 p.m. and 1:25 p.m., eight members of Adventure Consultants and Mountain Madness reached the summit. Climbers were still reaching the summit between 2:00 and 2:15 p.m. and even at 3:00 p.m. The photographs taken at the time show very few signs of snow or bad weather. “When I arrived at the South Summit, it was still, in my estimation, a beautiful day. There was a little bit of a condensation cloud off the ridge; there was some wind, but nothing that was out of the ordinary” (Neil Beidleman in Breashears, 2009). Fischer communicated by radio that his clients had summited and were heading down. He made this communication at 3:40 p.m., which is well past the permitted time to descend (Kayes, 2006).

5.6. The descent

After 4:00 p.m., things started to go wrong. A picture taken by Fischer shows climbers descending through grey clouds (Kayes, 2006). A storm took over the mountain and slowed the descent totally. Climbers who were trapped with visibility of less than a few centimetres were horrified by what was happening. “We got to the Hillary Step and there was still an enormous bottleneck of people trying to come over from the South Summit and up the Hillary Step. And we had to wait there for a while to pick our number to go down and through that area. And after that, we were running really late and here came the storm as we got lower on the mountain” (Charlotte Fox in Breashears, 2009).

Climbers also had limited oxygen because they had exceeded the planned time. They began to feel extremely tired and some of them injected steroids (Kennedy, 1996 in Kayes, 2006). The leaders were still at the top of the mountain and were struggling with the weather. At this point, the queue at the Hillary Step was...
progressing very slowly. At 5:00 and 5:20 p.m., left with few alternatives, Biedleman assumed the role of leader for the group of eight people that were descending together. At the same time, Hall reported from the summit that he was in desperate need of help and was having difficulties getting Doug Hansen down the mountain (Kayes, 2006).

5.7. Clusters created

Some of the team members who made some early independent decisions based on the two o’clock rule arrived back at Camp IV between 4:30 and 6:00 p.m. This meant that they had abandoned their summit attempt. Upon arrival at Camp IV, the team under the leadership of Biedleman was caught in the storm. Lost in a cold wind with temperatures below digit subzero”, people grouped together to create a human shelter that would protect them from the cold; this was known as the “huddle” (Kayes, 2006). Sometime after midnight, Biedleman, Schoening and Groom were able to locate Camp IV, where they collapsed after telling Boukreev the approximate location of the remaining members.

Boukreev made a rescue operation by himself and managed to the climbers that needed help to Camp IV. He then collapsed and was unable to go and look for Fischer. Beck Weathers and Namba were found by Dr. Stuart Hutchinson, who confirmed that both were breathing but were too sick to be saved. The base camp informed Weathers’ wife that he was dead. Miraculously, Beck Weathers regained consciousness and returned to the camp on his own at 4:30 p.m.

5.8. Rescue efforts

Boukreev organised a search attempt for Fischer but had to return when the storm became too strong. Hall, who was trapped high on the mountain, contacted the base camp by radio to report that Hansen could not move and was unable to descend. Hall stayed with his client. At about 10:00 a.m. a team of Sherpas, under Boukreev’s leadership, reached Fischer and Gau but were unable to rescue Fischer. Hall’s fate was sealed, however, and he was connected by satellite with his pregnant wife at 6:40 p.m. Table 2 summarises these events.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to use a non-traditional case to explain and analyse escalating commitment determinants and processes. Bowen (1987) contested the concept of escalation of commitment as it is known in most literature, suggesting instead that it may be the result of decision dilemmas – which is associated with equivocal information – or decision errors, which are related to irrational decision making. This explanation is overly instrumentalist and rational, however. Decisions that seem correct when they are made are warranted escalation, as opposed to unwarranted escalation, which results from decision errors. Regardless, escalating commitment occurs in both situations (Keil and Flatto, 1999:124). Escalation as a process suggests that escalation follows from interlinked activities, events and circumstances, which would explain some of the problems encountered when trying to replicate the original experiment (Armstrong et al., 1993; Bateman, 1986).

As an interlinked phenomenon, not all variables can be controlled, which may lead to other results (Keil and Flatto, 1999). This does not refute the theory but it does re-emphasise the importance of further investigating the phenomena of integrated escalating commitment. The current paper looks at the entire set of processes, from beginning to end, and also where, how and why determinants are present in different situations. While escalation has previously been addressed in relation to Mt Everest (Roberto, 2002), that study has focused on escalation in terms of how sunk costs partly contributed to the events, rather than scrutinising the determinants and processes in detail. Roberto (2002) and Kayes (2004) argued that the explanation for the Everest disaster lies at the individual, group and organisational levels. These levels are all present in escalating commitment, in that the determinants are divided into (1) project determinants, (2) psychological determinants, (3) social determinants and (4) organisational determinants (Staw and Ross, 1987a), which were also identified (see Table 3). On one hand, this would refute the idea that escalating commitment does not exist (Armstrong et al., 1993; Bateman, 1986; Bowen, 1987) and, on the other hand, highlight the fact that escalation is harder to understand than previously assumed and requires further integrated study.

6.1. Determinants

6.1.1. Project determinants

According to Staw and Ross (1987a), the course of action is influenced by the objective size of the project’s goal. In other words, the larger the possible prize, the greater the risk that actors are willing to take. On Mt Everest, the leaders, Fischer and Hall, had a clear understanding of the economic position and the quest for the profitability of their enterprises (62), and therefore the perceived utility of the present (Staw and Ross, 1987a). This indicates that the temporary organisation’s ability to articulate a goal (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995), especially an ambitious one, contributes to escalation as it becomes evident that an unsuccessful project (climb) will have future consequences. Furthermore, by linking the project to the context, future business expansions would be delayed in the case of an unsuccessful climb (12–16). This indicates a low salvage value, as whatever is invested would be lost (Norcraft and Wolf, 1984).

6.1.2. Psychological determinants

The theory that escalation is partly a state of mind, may contribute to “reinforcement traps” (Staw and Ross, 1986, 1987) and self-justification (Staw and Ross, 1987a) in order to avoid the realisation of sunk costs (Keil, 1995), which is the consequence of the money, time and effort invested before and during the expedition (10, 11). Furthermore, Fischer and Hall, who were both accomplished and recognised climbers, were the team leaders and owners. They were therefore responsible for the

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2 Numbers in parenthesis represent the numbers in Tables 2 and 3.
Table 3
Determinants and processes of and in escalating commitment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Determinant type</th>
<th>Determinant</th>
<th>Empirical evidence</th>
<th>Promoting escalating commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Organisational determinants</td>
<td>Institutionalisation (Staw and Ross, 1987a)</td>
<td>The leaders of temporary organisations like the 1996 Mt Everest expeditions by Adventure Consultants and Mountain Madness, did not consider terminating them because they were so closely identified with the enterprise. In fact, the expeditions were the main reasons why these two enterprises existed. Escalation is more likely when the existence of a project and the necessity of its deliverables are taken for granted and become embedded in the organisation. This put demands on a steady flow of clients, leading to guiding less experienced clients</td>
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<tr>
<td>1, 4, 6</td>
<td>Pursuit of enterprise growth</td>
<td>Temporary organisation seeking company growth may engage in escalation in order to achieve their goals. There are a number of internal and external features of the organisations subject of this study that have interacted among one another. Structural features of an organisation and how these features interact with each other influence escalation by putting demands on success which pushes the leaders harder.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Social determinants</td>
<td>Competitive rivalry (Rubin et al., 1980 in Staw and Ross, 1987a)</td>
<td>“Fischer was trying very hard to eat Hall’s lunch, and Rob knew it” (Krakauer, 1997:273). Krakauer further suggests that the idea of turning Adventure Consultants’ clients around down the mountain while his competitor’s clients were still climbing towards the summit may have been displeasing enough to muddle Hall’s ability to think carefully before making a decision. Motivation for persistence in a course of action involves the desire of participants to defeat the competition to avoid less business, bankruptcy and loss of enterprises.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Revelation of errors and failure (Fox and Staw, 1979; Brockner et al., 1981)</td>
<td>The presence of journalists (Bromet, Krakauer, and Pittman Hill), who were writing articles and reports about the expedition for media that targeted large audiences (Outside Online, Outside, NBC Interactive Media) (Krakauer, 1997). The social aspect of responsibility pertains to the need to save face within the expedition and the climbing society in large.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Psychological determinants</td>
<td>Prior history of success (Keil, 1995)</td>
<td>Rob Hall’s success rate in the last five years was so remarkable he did not even consider the option of re-assessing the expedition status and the feasibility of attaining the goal once the turnaround time was exceeded. History of prior success reinforces belief in the possibility of success and increases the need to maintain face.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10, 11</td>
<td>Reinforcement traps (Ross and Staw, 1986)</td>
<td>“The risks were escalating for me. I’m prepared to take some risks but they were getting beyond what was acceptable to me… the desire to get to the summit is enormous. I’d spent six years training and huge amounts of money. Six weeks of slog to get to where I was and to miss out by 200 vertical meters were more than I could bear” (John Taske). Withdrawing from a losing situation where they have already invested time and money proves very difficult.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mismanaged information (Ross and Staw, 1993)</td>
<td>Misunderstanding increased Hall’s perception of continuing to climb the mountain once the turn-around time had been exceeded. Based on the accounts of the climbers, it is believed that Hall created a positive frame of the situation that inhibited him from sensing any danger in ignoring the turn-around time. Escalation is more likely to occur when managers make errors in processing information.</td>
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<td>3, 18</td>
<td>Personal responsibility (Keil, 1995)</td>
<td>Scott Fischer and Rob Hall were the team leaders and owners of the Mountain Madness and Adventure Consultants expeditions, respectively. This is a strong indicator of their high level of responsibility regarding the outcome of the expedition. High perceived personal responsibility for failure increases visibility and social pressure within the climbing community.</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Ego implications (Ross and Staw, 1986)</td>
<td>Fischer’s ego craved recognition in the elite level climbing circles. Having summited Mt Everest in 1994 without supplemental oxygen, the only way to enhance his reputation was to have a successful expedition in 1996 with as many clients reaching the summit that year as possible. He would push himself to achieve the expedition’s goal in order to boost his self-esteem and achieve the recognition he felt he deserved. Concern with personal reputation and ego increase the perceived costs of withdrawal.</td>
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</table>
| 6 | Project determinants | Expedition goal had a large payoff (Rubin and Brockner, 1975) | Expedition success was crucial to establish Mountain Madness as an Everest expedition. Large projected payoff makes decision-makers more inclined toward escalation behaviour to
consequences of Fischer’s push for the summit despite being sick and exhausted and for Hall taking responsibility for Hansen’s summit attempt. Projects with a dedicated project manager tied to a specific and clearly visible project promoted escalation on the basis of prior success (2), personal responsibility (3, 18) (Keil, 1995) and ego implications (17) (Staw and Ross, 1986). The visibility and responsibility of the project manager closely associate the project manager with the project, which may contribute to escalating behaviour (Christensen and Kreiner, 1991).

6.1.3. Social determinants

While Hall and Fischer were preparing for the expeditions, they were vying to win the participation of journalist Jon Krakauer as a client on their teams (Boukreev and DeWalt, 1999). Their success in this regard would influence their ability to secure future benefits. In 1995, Adventure Consultants’ summit attempt was tainted by two collapsing clients. Failure to reach the summit again in 1996 would have been detrimental to Hall’s business, particularly if the Mountain Madness expedition succeeded. The big pay-off (in economic terms) that reaching the summit would give to Mountain Madness could have helped Fischer’s enterprise gain a solid position and steal some of Hall’s market share. This can be expected to have fostered a competitive rivalry between the two team leaders (4). In addition, any failure would be highly visible, with the presence of individuals (Krakauer, Bromet and Pittman Hill) covering the expeditions for three different media outlets. Fischer and Hall may have been reluctant to admit the failure of their expeditions to journalists, so they kept pushing up the mountain (5). The temporary organisation, as a clearly defined organisational unit (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995), created a setting in which social forces influence activities. No one wanted to be the weak link or the loser (competitive rivalry (Rubin et al., 1980 in Staw and Ross, 1987a) and error revelation (Fox and Staw, 1979; Brockner et al., 1981)).

6.1.4. Organisational determinants

The companies structured (Kayes, 2004:1281) and continue to structure (Adventureconsultants.co.nz) expeditions as projects. Mountain Madness assembled the project in a direct way in order to accomplish the company’s mission to “climb mountains and have a hell of a time doing it” (Boukreev and DeWalt, 1999:7). In Fischer’s case, the organisation’s success was at stake, which made the project and the company objectives well aligned. From an organisational point of view, the actions of the leaders were taken for granted (illustrated by their self-confidence), as their actions reflected the embeddedness in the culture of the company. However, it has not accounted for the desire to make profits. The difference is that, while the desire to make a profit is organisationally driven, it is not associated with the structure, per se. Therefore, the determinant is not a matter of institutionalising economic, political or technical issues (Staw and Ross, 1987a). The determinants are further specified below.

6.2. Pursuit of enterprise growth

The framework posits that the management of escalating commitment situations can be influenced by the structural features of an organisation and how these features interact with each other (Staw and Ross, 1986, 1987a). The interaction among these organisational features (internal and external), however, does not explain how possible future growth contributes to present decisions. The literature assumes that escalation occurs due to a future achievable goal. In a project, for example, this could correspond to the completion of a building or, in the case of an expedition, once the summit has been reached and all of the climbers have descended safely. The
pursuit of enterprise growth, however, goes beyond the specific task and into an unknown undetermined future. It ties the project goal to a more general strategy and contextual dependency, in the sense that it is not the visible goal that is the final goal but rather a future development. The elements of the pursuit of enterprise growth pertain to features that surround and interact with and within any temporary organisation.

Internal features include:

- Entrepreneurial leaders with plans for expansion (founders and managers of their companies) who also act as project managers seeking profitability and increased market share to reach the company’s objectives.
- Temporary organisations acting as the vehicle for achieving a particular objective or milestone in the business plan (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995).
- Demands of success from internal stakeholders. The clients/climbers as members had high expectations of reaching the “roof of the world”, as did the project managers, who counted on a successful project in order to secure a promising future for their enterprises.
- Direct competitive rivalry in a small and profitable market segment.
- Demands of success from external stakeholders, such as sponsors, media and elite climbing circles.

The internal and external organisational features interacting around temporary organisations have a relationship with all four types of escalation determinants (see Table 3). The pursuit of enterprise growth therefore contributes to the explanation of why temporary organisations are kept on a failing course of action. As evidenced by the Everest case, the course is maintained particularly if there is a strong manager in combination with a visible goal. This would concur with the findings of Häggren (2010), who argued that temporary organisations have an organisational structure that contributes to groupthink. Given the nature of temporary organisations, which are dissolved after the task is completed, the destiny of the project manager (in this case the expedition team leader) could be tied to the project differently than it is in an ordinary organisation (c.f. Christensen and Kreiner, 1991).

6.3. The process of escalation

The contributions of traditional, entity-based, determinant-centred research are important because they offer insights into isolated situations and triggering effects. For example, escalating commitment could be explained by how determinants differ in various phases of the project (Mähring and Keil, 2008). From this perspective, the determinants were scattered throughout the entire event and cut through the stages identified by Staw and Ross (1987a,b, 1993) (see Table 3). This shows that implicit long-term organisational (1, 4, 6) and social (4, 5) determinants are relatively common to start with, followed by explicit short-term psychological determinants (2, 3, 10–12, 17, 18) and, finally, project determinants (6, 12–16). Long-term considerations initiate escalation while short-term considerations add to escalation later on. This suggests that the conditions for escalation start before the situation in which they are identified and that short-term results lock the actor into a dangerous behaviour (cf. Mähring and Keil, 2008) when the goal becomes clear. More importantly, the conditions for escalation are hidden within structural and behavioural conditions that are hard to identify beforehand. This entity-based analysis, however, does not indicate how escalation emerges (Mähring et al., 2004), how participants’ decision-making influences and is influenced by previous and future activities, both physically and mentally. It also fails to consider that the triggering situation may not exist because it is an organising process that locks actors into an escalating situation (Mähring et al., 2004). Investigating the determinants, therefore, provides only a partial explanation of escalation.

Complementary, escalating commitment could be further understood as interlinked and inseparable activities (Mähring et al., 2004) and a process of becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). This strong process view of escalation lacks investigation and understanding (cf. Van de Ven and Poole, 2005:1390–1391). The detailed narrative, the timeline (Table 2) and determinant timing (Table 3) indicate that there is no “single point of failure” (see Kayes, 2004). Evidently, the developments started before the climbers approached the mountain with a changing industry and increased competition (Rosen, 2007; Elmes and Frame, 2008). Commercialisation (1, 6) pushed the expedition leaders to take increased risks in the form of allowing inexperienced climbers to climb, convincing climbers to try again (3), and fighting over media coverage (4) because their company wanted the money and publicity. In turn, the clients’ sacrifices, which included monetary (at least US $65,000), physical (years of training) and mental (forsaking friends and family) (see, e.g., Weathers, 2000) locked the climbers into pursuing their goals (10, 11). Acclimatising the climbers had brought the top closer (10th of April to 10th of May), which provided short-term boosts to their egos and indicated the end of the project (10, 11). During the final push to the top, the weather was beautiful (7–18), although, as is often the case on Mt Everest, this proved to be a short weather window before a storm began (19–26). These long- and short-term conditions contributed to the climbers finding that they only had one chance to make it (an exception was Göran Kropp, who made two attempts, succeeding on the second (Kropp and Lagerkrantz, 2002)). Most climbers, including the expedition leaders and guides, then became fixated on summiting and failed to consider the 1 p.m. safe turnaround time (13–17) and, consequently, did not properly consider the descent (for an exception, see 11). Moreover, many survivors wrote detailed biographies upon their return (e.g., Krakauer, 1996) and made
movies (Breashears, 1998, 2009) of the events (27). This, along with similar attention, has arguably contributed to a certain romanticism of climbing that, both before and since the events, has attracted experienced and inexperienced climbers (cf. Rosen, 2007) (28).

These activities represent sub-processes that, either separately or together, have influenced or are influenced from and by other sub-processes (see Table 3, promoting escalating commitment). Sub-processes are both sequential (romanticism follows commercialisation) and parallel (closing in on the top and a probable short weather window). Furthermore, some sub-processes are loosely associated, such as years of preparation and a one-time opportunity following the short weather window, but still highly influential upon one another as preparations are often seen to have been wasted if one turns around. Accordingly, escalation cannot be explained simply by examining single activities, nor can sub-processes be identified and understood before the results are known. Examining single activities (or determinants) provides a partial understanding of the features that the determinant considers, such as previous success (2), but it does not explain how the success rate of previous expeditions influences present decisions and the effects upon decisions which, for example, clients have to accept (3) and their future business roles (6). An organising perspective simply suggests that the past has converged with the present and future hopes that caused the climbers to be overly self-assured.

These sub-processes are all governed by the all-embracing will to reach a specific goal. The pursuit of the goal gives the sub-processes a direction towards which the activities are focused, which hinders the actors’ ability to critically examine their actions and future consequences. Without a goal, the sub-processes become isolated and the activities may move in any direction. The clearer the goal is, the easier it becomes to identify appropriate actions with which to achieve it. This, in turn, creates the conditions for escalating commitment. This escalation may be better understood as an emergent situation in which a combination of long-term and short-term sub-processes reinforce each other and lock the actor into a certain path (cf. Van de Ven and Poole, 2005). Escalating commitment is not, therefore, the traditional phenomenon of the present and attention to single activities, but is multiple processes of the past and the future situated in the present. Situatedness reflects the fact that any activity is an interpretation of the past, present and future (cf. Suchman, 1987). This situatedness extends beyond the traditional orientation towards the present in escalating commitment in its consideration of physical, social and mental spaces and contributes to escalation as a consideration of multiple loosely associated parallel and sequential processes. While this recognition was facilitated by the complementary approaches to process studies that have contributed to the literature of escalating commitment, it also has important implications for projects, typically defined by their goal.

At Mt Everest, the goal bedevilled the climbers. They had a clear goal (to climb Everest), the achievement of which would help them build future businesses or be measured as capable climbers. Without the goal, there would have been no peer pressure, no success and no failure. The advantage of projects in general is that the goal is typically clear, which makes the organisation action-orientated. These features facilitate the division of responsibility and rational follow-up methods (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995) and it is the success or failure upon which the project manager is assessed (Christensen and Kreiner, 1991). Escalating commitment, as demonstrated above, strives on these conditions (Staw and Ross, 1987a, 1987b; Whyte, 1986; Brockner, 1992), which makes the goal both a curse and a blessing. This holds for any project. Therefore, the promotion of escalating commitment by existent sub-processes is further fuelled by a project’s inherent features.

6.4. Implications

Although caution should be taken when generalising on the basis of one case, however extraordinary it may be in its illustrative power, a correctly chosen case can provide important insights for both academics and practitioners. Although the case may be from a non-traditional setting, decision making and processes of escalating commitment are not restricted to a particular environment. The insights offered may be useful in any setting on the basis of the case’s conceptual development (Siggelkow, 2007). Following the analysis and Table 3, practitioners should be careful that their goal does not overshadow other considerations. This may be manifested in the actions of the team in general and the project manager in particular, especially when there is strong pressure to either create or uphold a reputation. Moreover, escalating commitment does not necessarily start within the project, per se, so anyone who is cautious with regard to escalation should first consider the situatedness of the project and the motivation of the individuals. Finally, escalating commitment is a consequence of multiple cumulative sub-processes rather than an abrupt situation. Accordingly, practitioners should be cautious about seemingly minor details, including information dissemination and face-saving behaviour. For the academic, escalating commitment is better understood as coming with sequential, parallel loosely coupled sub-processes. This recognition results in demands to investigate the phenomena in situ, which can have inherent problems as it can be difficult to identify escalating commitment beforehand.

6.5. Future research

There are three key points regarding future research in this context. Firstly, this study has relied on one case and it is not possible to make generalisations about the timing and consequence of the determinants and sub-processes. Therefore, it would be interesting to study the timing and consequences of determinants and sub-processes and compare them with the present findings. Secondly, escalation can be reversed (this is referred to as de-escalation) and this process should be compared with the present analysis. Moreover, returning to the climbers who did turn back and identifying their motivation for doing so could reveal some interesting findings. The
decision to turn back is the most important consideration in climbing, and this could be investigated in other climbing situations and compared with the present analysis. Thirdly, escalating commitment is too rational and focused on individual traits and the situatedness of the activities is not sufficiently understood and considered; this warrants further investigation.

7. Conclusions

This paper has described a case from the non-traditional climbing industry in which certain activities unfolded according to escalating commitment behaviour (Staw, 1976). Although Mt Everest is an exceptional environment, it offers important insights for everyday projects given that the conceptual developments of this paper apply to any temporary organisation. Most of the determinants that contributed to the escalation have already been identified but, as evidenced and discovered, they also include the pursuit of enterprise growth. The pursuit of enterprise growth provides a link between the situatedness of present decisions to future strategies and goals. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that escalating commitment can be understood as sequential, parallel and loosely coupled sub-processes, the convergence of which is facilitated by a clear goal. The clear goal carries important implications for project management as it makes projects prone to negative escalating commitment. The paper suggest that escalating commitment carries some manageability by minding conditions that contribute to escalating commitment and by paying attention to the internal dynamics of the processes.

References


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