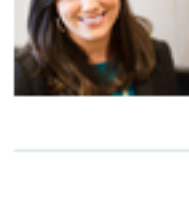
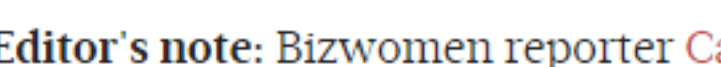


PROFILES/STRATEGIES

A demotion, then an Everest climb cut short: How one woman tackled two different kinds of failure



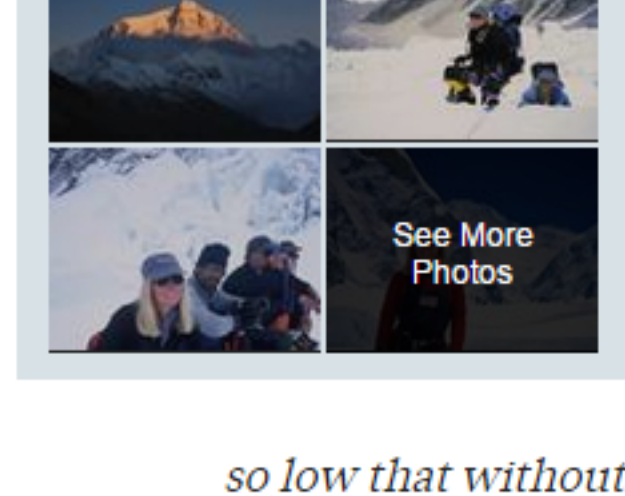
Caroline McMillan Portillo, Bizwomen reporter
Feb 26, 2015, 12:01pm EST Updated: Feb 26, 2015, 12:49pm EST



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Editor's note: Bizwomen reporter [Caroline McMillan Portillo](#) recently interviewed [Sue Ershler](#). Over a 23-year career in corporate America, Ershler, now 58, led a number of sales teams at Fortune 500 companies, such as [Verizon](#), [CenturyLink](#) (where she was responsible for \$600 million in revenue) and FedEx Office. Based in Seattle, she has also written two books: "[Conquering the Seven Summits of Sales](#)" and "Together on Top of the World." The two of them talked failure – two very different kinds of failure – and about Ershler's strategies for overcoming even the most dramatic setbacks.

It's known as the Death Zone. Elevation: 26,000 feet. Mere hours from the summit of Mount Everest, the highest point on Earth.



And as the hikers set out a few minutes before midnight, on the eve of their 63rd day of the climb, the storm gathered strength.

The human body wasn't made to operate at that altitude. Sleeping is difficult. Digesting food is nearly impossible. And oxygen levels are

so low that without a supplementary supply, bodily functions are known to deteriorate to the point of unconsciousness. And then, death.

It was supposed to be the record-breaking trek in 45-year-old [Sue Ershler's](#) worldwide adventure with her husband, Phil, a professional mountain guide. The couple [planned to reach the peaks of all seven summits](#), the highest points on each of the continents.

Everest, the most difficult of the seven, was their final destination.

So when Sue couldn't feel her toes, she pushed on. When her oxygen mask's vent – which allowed her exhaled breath to escape so she wouldn't suffocate – froze, she stopped to break the ice, and continued.

But when they were only 1,400 feet from the top, the storm worsened to whiteout conditions. Lightning struck the surrounding mountains. And Phil was having trouble seeing.

"It's too dangerous for us to go any farther," Phil told her. Recalling the 250 people who had lost their lives climbing that mountain, she agreed. And after 63 grueling days spent scaling Mount Everest, the pair turned around and began their descent.

Two hours later, as Phil began to stumble, Sue looked through the icicles hanging from his eyelashes to see that the skin under his eyes was white and frozen. His corneas had frozen over. His normally brown irises were purple.

Failure. She'd seen it before, years earlier, when she was 30 years old. At the time, she had been plucked from her role overseeing a team of product technicians at Verizon and moved into a sales job, a higher-profile position.

Her boss and mentor, Walt, gave her a \$1 million objective.

Sue loved the transition from product to sales. She enjoyed meeting with her customers in Seattle. She loved visiting their offices, chatting over lunch, building relationships. She had enthusiasm and drive.

What she lacked was the skill to close the deals.

Another problem: Sue wasn't all that concerned about that \$1 million objective. She thought of it as an "it'd-be-nice," "give-it-your-best-shot" kind of goal.

It wasn't until one of the firm's top salespeople asked her how close she was to meeting her goal that Sue realized she hadn't a clue.

You better find out where you stand, the other salesman said. The end of the year was approaching fast.

A few days later, Walt took Sue out for coffee. It was strained. He told her a major reorganization was in the works and the leadership team felt it would be better for the company if she moved to a department selling less expensive systems, a job that required less technical knowledge and – most of all – less sales experience.

Sue was stunned. Hurt. Disappointed. It was a demotion, plain and simple. And she wanted to quit.

After returning to camp on Everest, Phil's eyes thawed and his sight returned. Had they not turned around immediately, the damage would have been irreparable.

And yet, leaving the summit behind and returning to Seattle, Sue felt like a failure.

Her friends tried to encourage her with "Hey, be proud that you conquered six of the seven summits" and "Think about how high you did climb." But where they saw silver linings, she saw a dream unrealized. And she mulled it for months.

"For so many years, to make myself be able to do this, I had to see (a mental image of) him and me, standing on the summit of Everest," Sue said. "I had that burned into my mind for years. So once I didn't do it – whoa – how can you live with that?"

Part of her really did think that leaving Verizon – quitting – was the best option.

Maybe she just wasn't cut out for sales. Maybe finding that out at age 30 was a good thing. She had time to give another career a try.

But there was another voice, telling her she could do it.

She didn't sleep much the night after she got the news. But in the morning, Sue had her answer: She would take the demotion and she would fight to show her value to the company.

It hurt her pride, sure. But she wasn't a quitter. And she remembered a piece of advice Walt had given her once: "Focus. Become an expert in one industry."

She returned to the office with a plan: She would become an expert in selling to one of the company's growing verticals: law firms.

Two months after they returned from Everest, Sue and Phil began talking about another climb. Then, while on a business trip, Sue decided to visit the U.S. Olympic training center in Denver. Young athletes were everywhere. Inspirational quotes were in bold on the walls. "If you can see it, you can perform it," one said.

With renewed resolve, Sue began hiking every Saturday and Sunday. She and Phil began planning a return trip.

Sue's brother Jerry tried to dissuade her: "Sue, we're worried that you're not going to make it, not going to survive," he told her.

Sue hadn't considered that perspective. While she was spending more than two months climbing the most dangerous mountain in the world, with no cell phone service, her parents were in knots, waiting for news.

So Sue wrote her parents a letter: "I couldn't have lived the life of an average person, a boring life," it said. "I love this. I love climbing. I wouldn't be happy if I wasn't here. If something happens, don't be sad. Be happy that I got to do what I love doing."

She put it in a safe. She hoped her parents would never have to see it.

Law firms became Sue's sole strategic focus at Verizon. She learned to speak their language and understand their needs and competitors. She planned extensively for every call.

She targeted the top 10 law firms in Seattle. She started with the city's top firm. The others followed soon after.

In a year, she'd closed one of the largest contracts in Verizon's history – and 190 percent of her revenue objective. The leadership team that had demoted her months earlier was stunned. She was no longer invisible in the office.

Management began asking for Sue's opinion on products and marketplace challenges.

And soon, she was once again climbing the corporate ladder.

She made it. One year later, at age 46, she was back on Everest and close to the top.

But she wasn't there yet.

She had been up for 16 hours. She could barely drink water. And her stomach couldn't handle but 100 calories of food. Everything in her pack was frozen.

As she got closer, each step was laborious. One step. Pause. Three breaths. One step. Pause. Three breaths.

Sue couldn't stop thinking about another woman she met who'd climbed Everest. She kept repeating to herself: If she can do it, I can do it.

In the end, she did – and then some. Not only had she summited Everest, but she and Phil became the first married couple to climb all seven summits.

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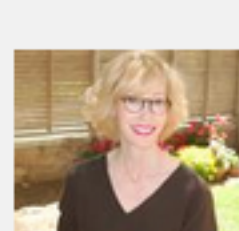
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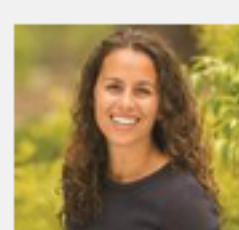


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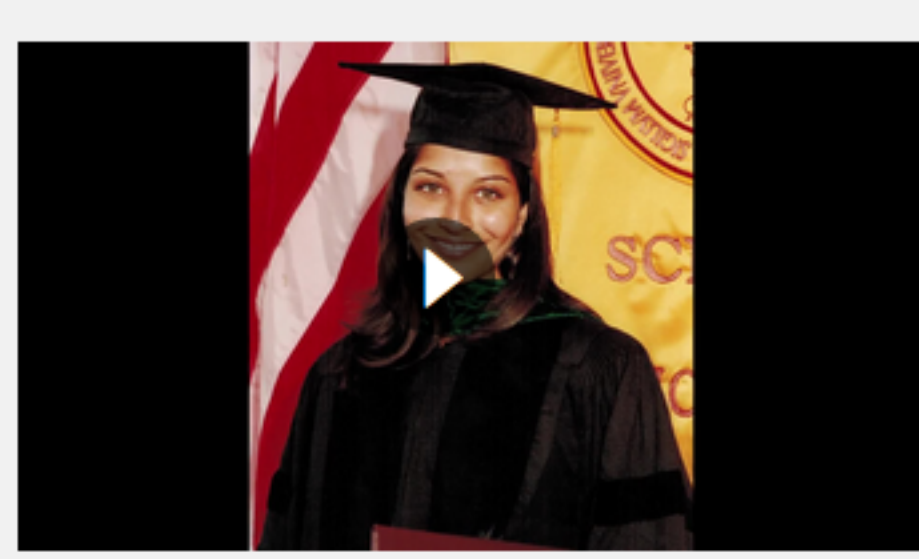


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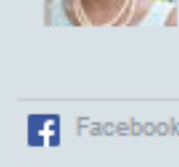
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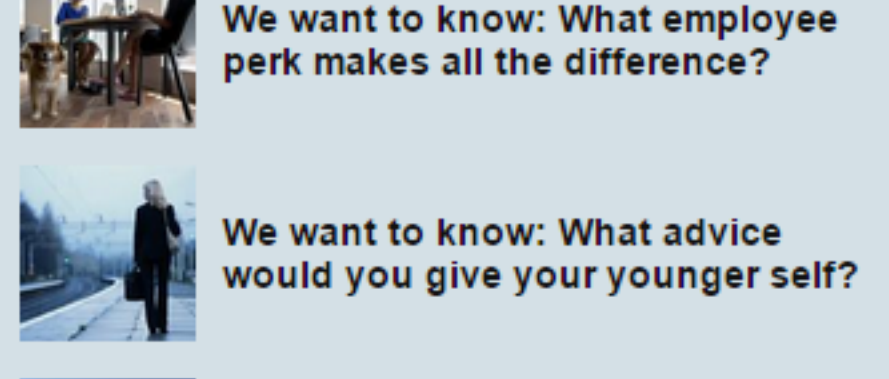
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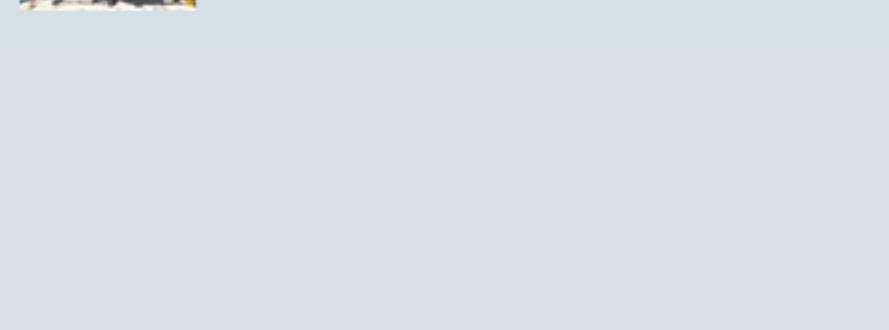
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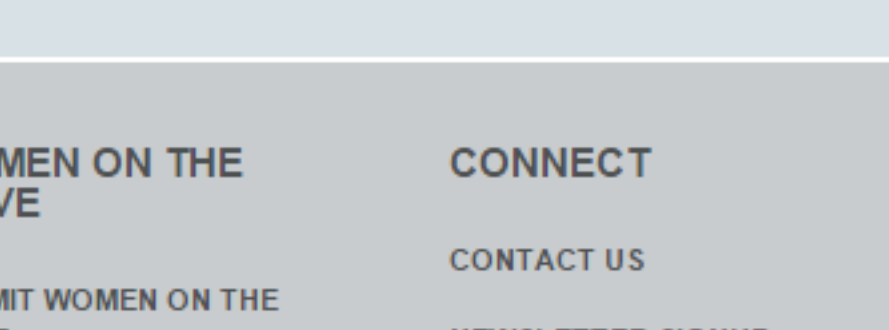
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