

BY EMILIE C. HARTING

Guiding students and colleagues into the upper reaches of their potential.

Evening has crept over Loftus, Norway, where Mike Useem sits with 20 friends, colleagues, and extended family in the dining room of the Hotel Ullensvang. The group has gathered for a week of hiking in the western fjords, and I've been invited to join them. The mellow buzz of conversation surrounds us as we sit down with platefuls of local salmon, fresh berries, and homemade breads.

Leading UP Michael Useem



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Michael Useem and associates peddle through bamboo forests in Indonesia; a view of rice paddies in Indonesia; Useem (left) and Arthur Sulzberger (right) share a moment of triumph after constructing Camp I in Antarctica; side trips to Asian temples often complement rigorous treks to the First Base of Mt. Everest; Useem's associates check out conditions by helicopter in the Andes Mountains of Chile. OPPOSITE: laden with equipment and supplies, MBA students begin the crossing of King George Island, Antarctica.

FOCUSING ON THOSE CLOSEST TO HIM, Useem asks for personal highlights of the day. That morning, he had led us on a rocky trail that rises up from Hardanger Fjord along a set of waterfalls. Lithe and energetic, he gracefully wove in and out of the line of hikers while the rest of us concentrated on placing our poles at the proper angle on the rock. As we eat, we talk about everything we experienced that day, from awe-inspiring views of glaciers and fields of wildflowers, to dips in the fjord and strolls a few hundred feet into the village of Loftus, where there is a post office and general store.

Mike is professor of management and the director of the Center for Leadership and Change at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He also initiated Wharton Leadership Ventures, which includes outdoor experiences ranging from the Leadership Reaction Course of the U.S. Marine Corps to treks in Ecuador, Antarctica, the Himalayas, Kilimanjaro, and Patagonia.

"So Mike, where've you been traveling lately?" asks an old friend, breaking the thread. Mike's smile turns a bit impish. He hesitates, and, not mentioning his innumerable hops around the globe to give workshops, attend conferences, or work as a consultant to governments and international corporations, he begins to tell stories about outdoor experiences with his students.

The first was about taking a group of 12 MBA students, at times tethered together with ropes, on a trek to the 19,347-foot summit of Cotopaxi, Ecuador's most well-known volcano

and one of its most active. Near the summit, one of the climbers became ill with altitude sickness, but not wanting to make the others turn around, pushed on another 700 feet. Mike told how the student deliberated his options, and then, as much as he wanted to reach the summit, decided to find a plateau where he could unhook and wait for his teammates to return. Shortly thereafter, the rest of the group made it to the top and picked him up a half-hour later.

Mike senses that his audience wants more, and after a sip or two of wine, he continues, "Ted Sulzberger of the *The New York Times* and I took a group of Wharton students to Antarctica . . ." His words come faster and are more clipped to match the action and vivid details. His eyes gleam. He explains that 18 students in three teams of six landed on King George Island, trekked several hours, and built Camp I at the edge of a massive glacial dome. The next day, after erecting a wall of ice blocks around their tents to protect them against the violent winds, they began a trek to Camp II, 2,200 feet higher, with packed sleds and intentions of spending the night there. Less than an hour later a storm blew in, causing a whiteout on the glacier. The group lost all landmarks. Drawing different conclusions from their GPS readings, the three teams took three different paths. When they finally reunited, they decided that the wisest course was to return to Camp I together for the night. That evening, as they analyzed the decisions of the day, they realized that they had not created an overarching leadership strategy for the three groups.

Mike first became entranced by mountain climbing at age 15 when he was traveling in India with his parents. About 10 years ago, when employers began to ask for graduates who could apply analytical concepts to real world situations, he started combining leadership principles and outdoor trips. Today the Wharton program is a model for university outdoor leadership programs.

"It is one thing to debate concepts like 'lead from the middle' in a class at Wharton, and quite another to live with the consequences of that decision on a five-mile glacial traverse in Antarctica with 50 yards of visibility, failing GPS technology, and several members of an expedition team who are soaked to their waists after having fallen through ice bridges earlier in the day," says Nirad Jain, now a consultant with Bain and Company. Jain adds, "The seven-day overland expedition in Antarctica was a fundamental component of my business school learning experience because it was experiential learning with real consequences, and with the unique opportunity to debate and challenge your decisions at the end of each day. To watch Mike seamlessly transition between mentor, colleague, and friend is a testament to his leadership abilities, and his true passion for teaching."

Anne Titterington, a senior manager with Microsoft, and a veteran adventure traveler who went on Wharton Leadership Venture's first Antarctica trip, says, "Mike's a good leader because he's genuine, and therefore people trust him. Since he doesn't think in terms of hierarchy, he engenders loyalty. You

have to do that to survive in the business world. On the trips he helped us learn to survive outside our comfort zone by learning to deal with the unfamiliar, and enjoying it as we became more confident."

"You can tell in three seconds that he's a good storyteller, he has a sense of humor, and he cares deeply for teaching and the individual," says Evan Wittenberg, who until recently ran Wharton Leadership Ventures, and has taken many trips with Useem.

Students and faculty alike praise Mike for his impeccable communication skills. "Mike exudes decency," says Katherine Klein, a Wharton management professor who was on an Antarctica trip. "In groups, Mike is a fabulous listener and facilitator. He listens carefully to all views, gets information and ideas, and then feeds it back in summary. And he keeps things moving so people feel involved. However, there's no question he's also moving forward to a decision." Campbell Bethwaite, now an investment banker with Citicorp in Moscow adds, "In Antarctica, Mike was always in us and among us, constantly discussing all sorts of alternatives, but letting the student leaders make the decisions."

Mike's passion for combining adventure travel and leadership training is also transparent in his writing. In articles for *Harvard Business Review*, *International Journal of Leadership Education*, and *Knowledge Wharton*, he explains how principles such as transcending self interest, determining direction, living by one's principles, and acting decisively play out on his trips to Antarctica, Cotopaxi, Ecuador, and the Himalayas.

His books are likewise filled with gripping stories of historical and contemporary figures who succeeded or failed because they did or did not follow important leadership principles and/or let their hubris get the better of them. *Leading Up: How to Lead Your Boss So You Both Win* is about making the boss aware of dangers. In the chapter he contributed to *The Leadership Moment: Nine True Stories of Triumph and Disaster and Their Lessons for Us All*, Useem writes about the need for managers to think about their roles and decisions much as the head of an expedition leads people to a common objective with the best interests of the group in mind. *Upward Bound:*



Nine Original Accounts of How Business Leaders Reached Their Summit, which he co-edited with his son Jerry Useem, a senior writer at *Fortune*, and Paul Asel, a venture capitalist, is a collection of stories by executives who have made parallels between the challenges of mountain climbing and business.

Trekking, Mike maintains, is an excellent way to analyze management and leadership skills. "Mountains become met-

aphors to help find new and creative ways of dealing with the increasingly unpredictable business world." In his latest book, *The Go Point: When It's Time to Decide—Knowing What to Do and When to Do It*, he uses his gift for dramatic storytelling to examine momentous decisions of firefighters, Civil War generals, and heads of corporations. At what point did they make the right call, the wrong call, or something in between?

Keeping hubris in check—what Mike calls "that line between well thought out risks and going overboard"—comes up often in his books and conversations. "You can't have too much hubris or you step off a cliff like Al Dunlap, the cost-

cutting CEO at Scott Paper, or Dennis Kozlowski at Tyco." Without being judgmental or didactic, Mike often tells of the stark and tragic lessons in Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, and Arlene Blum's *Annapurna: A Woman's Place*.

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article he relates a story of being the boss torn between commitment to the group and his own needs. While on a Himalayan trip to the first base camp of Mt. Everest, he had a strong urge to walk two mountain climbers, coincidentally children of colleagues, who had become weak with altitude sickness, down to lower ground. However, it was the end of the day, he was exhausted, he needed to be on hand for the evening's meetings, and get rest for the next day. He was glad when one of his "subordinates," an emergency room physician, suggested that the ill hikers be treated on site. They recovered and were able to walk to safety in the morning. This story, Mike says, is about upward leadership. "Everything is becoming more of a '360.' You need to obtain feedback and input from all points of the compass. Success depends not just on rallying the troops below but

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THIS PAGE: MBA students undergo the combat course for officer candidates at the U.S. Marine Corps Base in Quantico, Virginia. OPPOSITE: Michael Useem, director of the Center for Leadership and Change at the Wharton School of Business, UPenn.

mobilizing those above, and that requires teaching and learning from others, both above and below.”

For a guy who’s so calm and reflective, his travel schedule for the last 18 months has been grueling. He’s run leadership, governance, and management programs for bankers in Mumbai, India; a large British law firm in Malaga, Spain; bankers and executives in Shanghai, China; a host of company managers from Southeast Asia in Cha Am, Thailand; bankers and entrepreneurs in Goa, India; and business leaders in Auckland, New Zealand. At the 2006 and 2007 annual meetings of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, he served as a contributor or moderator at sessions on executive succession, family-owned businesses, leadership lessons from modern explorers, and “The First 100 Days.” He’s also held one-day workshops in Houston, New York, San Francisco, and other cities.

Closer to home, he’s taken Wharton MBA students on many trips to the Civil War battlefield at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; the U.S. Marine Corps Base at Quantico, Virginia; the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York; and the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland to observe how the military makes decisions. Mike stresses

that they are studying the military as an organization without considering government policy.

In 2006, Useem was one of 43 citizens with widely varying views on the Iraq war who were invited to Tampa, Florida, to witness the management and leadership of the Pentagon’s Central Command, which is responsible for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The group also flew to the Middle East for a front line view of troops and operations in Kuwait, Bahrain, and the Arabian Sea.

It’s a rainy summer night at a hikers’ hut near the top of a mountain in Norway. Mike sits with the friends he has led up the mountain that day. They share oxtail soup and bread, and as the evening wears on, Mike talks excitedly about an alternate trail, higher up, that he and two others found during an “extra hike” before dinner. He suggests we take it tomorrow, and then descend on the other side of the roaring river outside.

“No, I overrule,” says our guide, the official boss. She argues that the bridge is too flimsy to support 18 hikers, and it will be safer to retrace our steps since the heavy rain clattering against the windowpanes will mean slippery rocks. Mike smiles graciously, his hubris in check. ET