

# The Mountain Within

## Leadership Lessons and Inspiration for Your Climb to the Top

Herta von Stiegel with Gina Smith

McGraw-Hill, 2011, hardback, 229pp, £15.99; ISBN: 978-0-07-177306-5

This is a business leadership book written by a Christian, not a Christian book about business leadership. This is an important distinction. I read this book in expectation of the latter and got the former. At least I now know in which section of my bookshelf the book should find its home.

My expectation was set having enjoyed immensely Herta von Stiegel's Hugh Kay lecture a few weeks before at CAFE's annual event. Her lecture was stuffed full of explicit Christian content.

It took me some time to realise that there was not going to be much explicit Christian content in this book. In any event, the book contains much that is good in sharing business leadership experiences and lessons. And Herta's Christian faith clearly & implicitly (and occasionally explicitly) underpins her values, attitudes and perspectives.

Herta is the founder and CEO of Ariya Capital Group, a fund management firm focusing on sustainable investments in Africa. This follows a career as a US tax lawyer, subsequently holding senior executive positions with Citibank, JP Morgan and AIG Financial Products.

Her book, written with Gina Smith, draws substantially from her career. Each chapter, woven around a single leadership 'lesson', brings together conclusions drawn from her business career, from two Mount Kilimanjaro expeditions and from one of her many conversations with other international business and political leaders. Amongst the 16 leadership 'lessons' addressed are resilience, preparation, reaction to failure, team selection, quality, decision making, overcoming obstacles & managing ego.

This structure holds up reasonably well. Indeed, I found that the very real and hard-won lessons from her Mount Kilimanjaro expeditions were the most practical and map well to many business situations that I have encountered. The second expedition, in which she led a group of 28 multinational climbers, including seven disabled folk, to

the top of Mount Kilimanjaro for charity, is a riveting read in itself. It has also been recorded and released as a documentary film. By contrast, some of the insights drawn from conversations with other leaders in the early chapters of the book appeared somewhat contorted in order to fit the chapter's leadership 'lesson'. And Herta's own business leadership experiences are often described in general terms, sometimes lacking adequate specific examples.

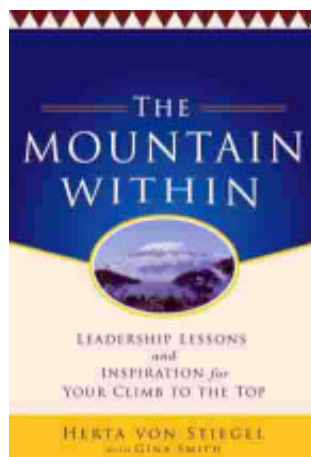
The early chapters limp along a bit, partly because the three-part structure takes time to warm up. Also, I found myself getting quite frustrated that Herta didn't elaborate on the background of her Christian faith, growing up in Transylvania (communist Romania).

She makes references to 'my religious parents' (p16), to her being expelled from school '...because my religious beliefs did not allow me to go to school on Saturdays..' (p17) and to her mother and grandmother being court-martialled '...for their religious beliefs....' (p21) But

nowhere does she tell us what any of these religious beliefs are. (I later discovered that Herta's family religious background is Seventh Day Adventist.)

The book improves after this slow, sticky start and by the middle chapters is positively zipping along.

On the way, one bright spot in the book's early chapters comes with the conversation with Sung-Joo Kim in chapter 2 ('The Calling'). Sung-Joo is the founder of a South Korean retail group, the Sung-Joo Group. This runs franchise retail stores including Gucci, Yves Saint Laurent and Marks & Spencer. She is also CEO and Chair of MCM group, a German luxury products company. The conversation tells the story of how she has turned her business vision into reality, driven by a strong faith in God and the assurance that she is following her calling. In one of the most powerful testimonies in the book, she says "My mission also included fighting against corruption. Corruption comes in very easily. At the





Kilimanjaro

beginning, I faced enormous resistance for not accepting bribes or giving kickbacks to buyers. But I wanted to prove that with a clean hand, without corruption, you could win.” (pp24-25). She adds “Transparency and clean policy is true competitiveness – and we’ve proven so. Transparency gives you strength.” (p25)


Herta sets great store by sharing things with her husband and others – she appears to become more open, consultative and vulnerable as the book develops. Indeed, her husband Hans von Stiegel, with a similarly strong business background as Herta’s, seems to be her muse, mentor and sage.

As the book develops, there is also more indirect reference to her Christian faith. For example, although James 3:1-12 is not referenced explicitly, Herta draws strongly on its teaching in the chapter on criticism, noting that ‘Words are incredibly powerful, and they should be filtered carefully. One sage said: ‘your words should pass through three gates: (1) truth, (2) necessity and (3) kindness.’ (p138). Later, when writing about the ego, she quotes 1 Peter 2:11 (from the Message) ‘Don’t indulge your ego at the expense of your soul’ (p152). And again, when encountering tough times on her Kilimanjaro climb, she writes ‘I thanked God that we had made it this far.’ (p192) and quotes Isaiah 40:31 in writing ‘I tried repeating one of my favourite Old Testament verses: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they

shall mount up on wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint”’. (p197).

For me, the book drew its increasing strength and momentum primarily from the story of the second Mount Kilimanjaro expedition. By the end of it, I had quite forgiven what I see as a few weaknesses in the early chapters. Overall, this book is very worthwhile reading. It addresses the subject of leadership from a novel perspective. This results in some fresh insights and practical applications.

Herta clearly links leadership with reaching the top in business. Indeed, the sub-title of the book refers to ‘...inspiration for your climb to the top’. There are several references throughout the book to this, for example ‘...as you climb the ranks to ultimate success.’ (p85). It is perhaps not surprising that Herta makes this link, given her own career and achievements in reaching some very senior positions. However, the leadership lessons in this book have a much wider application than simply to those in the most senior executive roles. We all have leadership roles to play, whether in business, in the church, in charitable organisations, in other public service or in our families. Many of the leadership lessons in this book play out well into a wide range of situations.

It is a worthy & practical addition to the extensive range of publications covering the complex subject of leadership. 



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