

Beyond The Meeting Room - Gold Medal Lessons in Leadership

 digital.alhi.com/beyondthemeetingroom/library/item/spring_2024/4184049

Story by Mark Ray

October 16, 2025

Chemmy Alcott is synonymous with British skiing. A seven-time British National Overall Champion, she competed in four Winter Olympics and won 44 gold medals over the course of her international career.

Ten years after retiring, she has reinvented herself as a coach, public speaker, lead presenter of the BBC's "Ski Sunday" program and the face of the BBC's Winter Olympic coverage.

Along the way, she's learned plenty about leading others—and herself.

GO FOR BROKE

Looking back on her career, Alcott says she spent years choosing not to be the best she could be.

"I chose to be 80%, keeping 20% of my potential in my back pocket to validate why I wasn't winning," she said. "I had this huge fear that if I went 100%, if I was as good as I could be and still didn't win, then I'd have to admit to everyone I wasn't good enough."

Alcott was good enough, as her race results show. She retired as the eighth-best ski racer on the planet. But she knows she could have achieved more with 100% effort.

Whether in skiing or business, she believes it's important to give 100% and to test your limits, even if that means breaking things.

"The only way to find your limit is to occasionally step over it," she said. "In a sport like skiing, when you're going 80 miles an hour, when you step over it, it tends to be a massive injury. In business, you're not on a (medical) helicopter, you're not out of the game for two years. Just sometimes your ego is bruised, and you have to admit to others that you pushed it too far."

KNOW WHEN TO FOLLOW

You've probably heard the old saying, credited to Aristotle, that you can't be a good leader unless you're a good follower. Alcott agrees, but she points out that those roles can shift frequently, even on the same day.

"When I push out the start gate, I'm leading my team, and the success of the team completely depends on my performance," she said. "And yet, in the evenings, when my technician is doing my skis, he's the leader."

Letting others lead requires you to tame your ego, something that's hard for many leaders to do. But Alcott believes the results are worth the sacrifice.

ASK FOR HELP

Leaders who are successful doing one thing often think they'll automatically be just as successful doing something else. Alcott knows better.

"I'm good at a very niche thing of throwing myself down a mountain," she said. "If I want to get better at life, I need to get coached."

When she first got into public speaking, her nerves debilitated her, so she sought—and listened to—a mentor. And as she got into television work, she welcomed detailed critiques of every onscreen performance.

ACKNOWLEDGE MISTAKES

There are no perfect leaders, only leaders who pretend to be. Count Alcott among those leaders who refuse to pretend. A couple of years ago, she learned to skateboard with her kids so they could see her getting frustrated and pushing past failure. As she likes to say, there is no win or lose; there's only win or learn.

"We think we've got to be perfect, that we'll only be inspirational if we're incredible at everything," she said. "Actually, you're far more inspirational when you talk about your vulnerabilities and your failures and how you've overcome them. That is the strength in life."

EMBRACE YOUR FEAR

Another fallacy Alcott likes to puncture is that good leaders are fearless. She believes the best leaders embrace their fear, which leads to growth.

"We only feel fear when we're getting out of our comfort zone," she said. "I think vulnerability and honesty and the confidence to talk about fear is imperative as a leader."

Alcott is so passionate about normalizing fear that she's written a book for children called "How to Turn Belly Butterflies into Dragon Wings." It's due out this fall. Each chapter addresses a specific fear—fear of change, fear of judgment, etc.—and concludes with a guide parents can use to discuss the topic.

STAY IN YOUR LANE BUT PUSH THE LIMITS

"Stay in your lane" can seem limiting, especially to women in male-dominated organizations. To Alcott, however, staying in your lane means focusing on what you can control.

As a ski racer, she had no control over the athletes she was competing against. And really, she wasn't competing against them so much as she was competing against herself and the mountain.

Given her success with "Ski Sunday" on the BBC, many people have suggested she move into other areas of broadcasting. She has chosen to stay in her lane. But, she says, "I'm pushing my lane. It was a single-track lane, and now it's a five-lane motorway. And there's so much more potential for other people to come up."

And that describes Alcott's approach to leadership: Embrace your fear, get better at what you do and prepare the way for those who will follow you.