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Anaphylaxis on a Snow Slope: What One Summer Camp is doing to Accelerate Leadership Development

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Abstract

Developing leaders in short periods of time is difficult, especially when the pool of candidates to draw from is fresh and inexperienced. Rather than settling for subpar, what if we enhanced our approach to training and actually expect top performance results? This article explores the possibility of using an accelerated training method to achieve real time results by looking at a technique Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp utilizes to train their wilderness trip leaders.

Most of us have been there. Your employment requires a First Aid course and you have been signed up for a weekend class. Or, maybe a job posting lists a prerequisite course such as CPR or WHMIS. You reluctantly register for the course and hope it advances your eligibility. Why do we seem to detest these experiences? Is there nothing in the course curriculum that is new or interesting? If medical industry

professionals such as doctors need to take First Aid courses to keep up with current industry practices, why do lay people seem to drag them? Fotini Teneketzi commented that “teaching a doctor first aid is comparable with teaching an athlete to run.”¹ With changing industry practices and constant curriculum revisions, even the best of professionals will learn from elementary courses. If people with varying levels of competence can learn from the same curriculum, why are those with limited knowledge still reluctant?

Instead of sitting in a classroom trying to remember what step comes after calling 911, imagine being asked to explain your thought process when you decided to disregard spinal mobility restriction in order to move a casualty 30 meters off a slope while you are in charge of a group of 9 hikers late on a sleeting evening? Now, imagine the difference in your evaluative response, being on that very sleeting mountain slope while you are asked about your decision since that is the setting of what just took place. Perhaps this style of learning intrigues us more because it stimulates our desire to problem solve, weigh our decisions, and learn to fail in order to learn. This method of instruction is a training-type simulation we employ at Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp (CLBC).² This article will look at the use of practice scenarios (or as CLBC calls them, “simulations”) to bring leaders into a *bona fide* experience to test their leadership style and hone their practical skills. Then I will explore how supervisors of this experience can work to fortify the resulting leadership growth by forming a culture that allows students to fail boldly and explore for growth.

Background

CLBC does not charge for any of its programs. It is entirely free and has provided the summer camping experience to tens of thousands of children since 1957. Given our unique location nestled in the heart of the Canadian Rockies, we bring each of the campers on overnight hiking trips lasting 2-10 days in the wilderness to connect them with nature. As a free camp, many of the campers have never or rarely experienced the wilderness in such a way, so we provide that opportunity. The ramifications of organizing trips into this terrain are big enough to warrant the need for experienced and competent wilderness trip leaders. So we developed Crowsnest Outdoor Leadership Training School (COLTS).³ This program is an intensive four month leadership training program that seeks to develop leaders that are capable of handling any situation when caring for children in the back country. Participants in COLTS train for two months under a leadership team to become in-house guides before the summer commences. Then that training is culminated with two months of practical learning by guiding multiple wilderness trips. Under the leadership of the COLTS participants, CLBC is safely able to take hundreds of campers annually into wilderness experiences.

Experiential Leadership Development via Simulations

I have never seen a textbook that explains what to do when experiencing anaphylaxis (a severe allergic reaction) on a snow slope. It may exist, but I have never seen it, an article, or anything of the like. I have, however, practiced such a scenario when I was a student in the COLTS program, a program that I now lead. CLBC routinely puts their COLTS participants into simulated situations in order to purposefully accomplish their training goals and objectives to develop people. We do this because we need to equip capable leaders in a short amount of time. As a camp with wilderness programming and short training seasons, we have decided to train our own people in a fast-tracked program to develop our staff and limit the need to hire outside companies or personnel. We implement quality training to perform our values as an organization.

In order to depend on and trust those who lead hiking and backpacking trips into the wilderness, CLBC must train people to lead and manage groups independently and without direct supervision. The COLTS participants will lead groups of campers into the wilderness in the summertime, and are one to eight hours away from civilization at any given time. These leaders must be able to make safe and effective decisions on their own as there is no other leader or outside resources to rely on. When we place leaders into realistic training situations in order to intentionally observe their decision-making processes in unfamiliar, high-stress situations, we are able to tailor our feedback and encouragement to their personal leadership development. Therefore, a continuous cycle of learning and implementation of what they learned will often follow, fast-tracking real-time leadership experience through these simulations.

To develop people's leadership skills by means of a simulation, we give each one of our students a leadership role during sections of a multiple day hiking trip. During this segment, they are in all actuality the leader for the trip. They make decisions and influence the group as they see fit. They are also aware that at any time an instructor or delegate may cause a situation to happen indicated further by another instructor stating, "This is a simulation". For example, the instructor might simulate a diabetic emergency late at night. Or the instructor may "sprain" their ankle on a ridgetop. At this point, taking into account all new information, the appointed student-leader must proceed as if the situation is entirely real, until it is called off by the instructor. This simulation could and has lasted up to 12 hours. At the same time, the instructors purposefully observe the actions of the designated leader and the interactions of the group in order to record those observations for later debrief.

The designated leader will need to step away from the situation to see the bigger picture of what is happening around them. This is exactly what we are looking for. They must note the surrounding terrain, group morale and dynamics, oncoming weather, and backcountry satellite coverage, among other factors. The student-leader is directly experiencing pragmatic events that affect their response thereby demanding the need for group leadership and delegation. This experience that the student-leader is going through displays the leader's strengths, weaknesses and other trending leadership qualities.

The benefit to placing leaders into contrived experiential situations such as a wilderness first aid simulation, is that instructors get to see their actions and effects of their thought processes displayed brightly in a longer and more authentic setting. Since leadership style should be authentic and should reflect who you are, with all the pluses and minuses that may entail,⁴ we are able to accomplish our objective to train leaders individually according to their personal style. In a conventional classroom where there is a limited amount of time and no exposure to uncontrollable circumstances, we limit our ability to learn. Whereas, in a more realistic setting where uncontrollable circumstances and unforeseeable issues may in fact arise amidst our influence as a leader, we can create situations that teach us about our own personal approaches and reactions. Leadership theory taught in class before such events is significant, but the personalized execution of experiential leadership in these situations is what intrinsically produces the desired development.

Training is best when distinctly catered to the individual in these experiential settings. For example, Elizabeth, one of our recent students had just finished a simulation and knew that she did poorly as a leader. That is, until her instructors were able to point out that her natural tendency to communicate with those she was leading is to take a coaching style where one on one interactions are used to achieve the group's desired response. For Elizabeth, her perception of a good leader was someone who could talk in front of a large group and retain influence in that regard, however the simulation purposefully never provided such an opportunity. She had to deal with a distressed camper having breathing difficulties while the group was elsewhere and her first aid supplies were in her tent, which was a five minute walk away.

Given the communication problem at hand, it allowed her to see that she had a perceived idea on leadership and it was not going to work well. This simulation was uniquely catered to allow her to experience being a leader in her own preferred way. She thrived as a communicator, and needed to experience this situation directly in order to understand that her own personalized approach to certain situations is in fact, an effective way to lead. She learned more from this experience than any amount of classroom training could have ever given her.

Fail Boldly

Leaders make mistakes, so the training space is the best place for them to start. Blackaby and Blackaby stated that “most mistakes are not terminal in nature...they can actually provide the greatest moments of personal growth that leader’s experience.”⁵ If we oversee those who are developing their leadership by constantly correcting them, we may never see results since the student has not gone through the full process of seeing the outcome of their decisions. If we can, however, carefully balance a learning environment free of judgment that permits students to fail, without pushing them over the edge emotionally or mentally, then we bring them through a process of thoughtful and tailored learning.

CLBC employs this method in its training. In fact, a commonly used expression within our training programs is to “fail boldly.” As part of setting expectations prior to our training trips, we will tell our students that they are permitted and encouraged to fail while in a leadership position. We recognize that the very process of forming a decision is where a lot of learning happens, and not by effect the result. If we can carefully bring people through these processes, and not care as much about the end result as long as it is within reason and safety guidelines, then we are on the right track of encouraging the learning process. The interesting factor in establishing this precedent is that it all takes place within a contrived environment, thereby providing the learning outcome of a real situation but with low-stakes consequences should it not go as intended.

When it comes to developing leaders, a decision that brings about a correct result may in fact be a wrong decision if not processed well. Conversely, a decision that was wrong but made with careful consideration could have more instructional benefit to the learner when carefully examined and debriefed afterwards. For example, Carl, who is a student-leader, recently decided to walk out a casualty with a lacerated hand to a main road during a training simulation. He never took adequate equipment and food, or a partner with him to get help. Furthermore, he left the group leaderless with him gone. As instructors, we allowed the student to go through with this decision. During debrief afterwards, we discussed the decisions he made and how he got to them, and it was apparent that during the discussion, he was making connections of what he should have done with what he actually did. Carl stated in debrief afterwards “I have now learned to slow down my decision-making process to rationally make better ones as a leader.” Allowing him to go through with his poorly thought plans was in turn a success for his own leadership development.

When we are teaching people to make wise decisions in the context of leadership development, it is actually not that important as to whether they made the right decision in the end, but instead how they got there. When we allow those who are developing their leadership to fail, we permit increased competence to result when handled properly. Thus, failing boldly, when practicing leadership may not even be a failure at all. Or, as John Powell says, “*The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.*”⁶

Explore for Growth

One of the goals of the COLTS program is to develop leaders. We believe that micro-correcting decisions made by those in training will not in effect help them develop, since the decision-making process is an inherent part of leadership. For someone learning, it is best for them to explore their own personal methods and strategies on how they lead, and learn why they may or may not work well. This ‘exploring’ necessitates the need for space and wide parameters to discover their actions and means of going about decisions. If instructors get in the way of this process by handing over the answers and solutions to problems while student-leaders are discovering this, then the very goals of the program are likely not met. We may start to deplete the reason for this style of training in the first place. Furthermore, if instructors allow them to go through this process but do not follow through in dissecting it afterwards, then the student-leaders are left wondering what went well and how to improve thereby not contributing to their developmental needs once again. It is in the instructors’ keen observation during the training that gives the student leaders tools to grow as a leader, and these observations are the key to fostering discussion and growth in the leader’s right after the event or at the final debrief.

John Grinder said it best when he wrote “Wisdom comes from experience, but *experience is not enough*. *Experience anticipated* and experience revisited is the true source of wisdom” (emphasis added).⁷ People need no narration or micro-correcting while the experience is happening, but instead need instructors who are keen observers and able to advise ways and methods to develop the student-leaders personal leadership style. When done correctly, leaders can withdraw the wisdom and insight that accompanies experience, especially when mistakes happen and wrong decisions are embraced as a means to educate. When instructors get in the way, it limits wisdom that may be gained from the experience that is taking place. Instead of getting in the way, COLTS instructors find value in deferring the observations until the debrief afterwards. The debrief process in the COLTS program is designed to immediately consider the learning aspects of the simulated experience afterwards in order to extract as much wisdom as possible. Then, at the end, each student-leader will get a chance to have others reflect on what they learned in their own respective leadership section as well.

Conclusion

Whether it is a management team, a recent business start-up or a summer camp’s outdoor leadership program, we are all striving to teach, in a conceptual way, how to lead well. The issue is that leadership by definition is hard to teach due to ambiguity and personal subjectivity, so an all too common fallback approach is to lecture. But well-planned experiences even when simulated, especially in the realm of leadership teaching, is of utmost importance to incorporate when delivering a program or class striving to create leaders who are sensible and competent.

As we observe those training to be leaders, placing them in choreographed situations and potentially watching them fail may help fast track their leadership growth. Of course, this approach should only be employed while delicately keeping their personal and emotional wellbeing an utmost priority. When utilizing this approach, it is paramount to precisely measure when and how to amalgamate your observations for the purpose of the student’s maturation. This is the method that CLBC has utilized for over 30 years, successfully creating leaders who are able to respond to critical situations and lead groups confidently due to their training. Paired with a teachable environment such as the wilderness, and we have the means to inspire and train people far beyond individual capabilities.

About the Author

Daniel Vanderpyl works as the Director of Outdoor Programs at Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp in Southwest Alberta. He has instructed in the outdoor industry since 2013, and holds a Paramedic licence and multiple guiding certificates. He is a registered member of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG), Outdoor Council of Canada (OCC), Sparwood Search and Rescue (Sparwood SAR) and Alberta College of Paramedics (ACP). He is passionate about wilderness travel, experiential education, developing outdoor leaders, and enjoying ginger beer on mountaintops. He currently leads the Crowsnest Outdoor Leadership Training School (COLTS) program at Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp. Daniel can be contacted via [LinkedIn](#)

Endnotes

¹ Teneketzi F. *Even doctors keep their first aid skills fresh!* Retrieved from: <http://www.how-to-save-a-life.gr/first-aid-news/Even-doctors-keep-their-First-Aid-skills-fresh.aspx>.

² See <http://www.crowcamp.ca> for more information.

³ See <http://www.crowcamp.ca/crowsnest-outdoor-leadership-training-school> for a detailed syllabus and more information.

⁴ Graham, J. (1997). *Outdoor Leadership: Technique, Common Sense & Self Confidence*, p. 34.

⁵ Blackaby, H & Blackaby, R. (2001). *Spiritual leadership: Moving people onto God's agenda*, p. 191.

⁶ Powell J. Quote retrieved from: <https://www.fanews.co.za/article/investments/8/general/1133/the-only-real-mistake-is-the-one-from-which-we-learn-nothing/10920>.

⁷ Grinder J. Quote retrieved from: <http://www.lucyishida.com/cpd.html>.