

Hike Safety and Leadership Seminar Notes

Leadership attributes to strive for

- Good judgement; good listener; good problem solving.
- Safety awareness and safety skills, continuously developed over time.
- Outdoor skills and experience appropriate to the particular hike.
- Ability to identify and utilise other skilled resources in the group.
- Willingness to provide development opportunities for less experienced members of the group.
- Willingness to provide learning and growth opportunities for yourself and for the group.
- Willingness to seek group input on decisions or problem situations.
- Ability to manage interpersonal conflict within the group as expeditiously as possible:
- Ability to take charge and make decisions for the group should the need arise.
- Ability to be flexible: Outdoor leadership is seldom cut and dried and you will be challenged!

Preparation

- Plan the route; generally you should already have firsthand knowledge of the route.
- Review your own basic outdoor skills, knowledge of proposed route, gear, fitness.
- Review the trip notice for accuracy.
- Try to ensure that participants' experience matches the expectations for the trip.
- Before leaving home:
 - Review the leader and first aid kits (familiarize and check contents).
 - Ensure electronic devices are charged, and review the operating instructions.
 - Ensure that there are sufficient forms, especially waiver and minors' waivers.
- Waivers (it is in your own as well as the club's interest that this be done correctly):
 - Ensure names legible.
 - Ensure they are signed on both sides and witnessed at the time they are signed.
- Sign-in sheet:
 - Enter basic trip information before arriving at meeting place in order to save time.
 - Complete side-1 at the start of trip.
 - Take along on trip in case an incident should occur, and/or to take notes.
- Ensure all participants are adequately equipped:
 - For the trip and the prevailing conditions.
 - For a night out, should it be necessary (there have been occasions where participants were not adequately equipped, e.g. carrying only tiny packs with minimal spare clothing).
- Ask for any relevant medical history (in private) that might affect the ability to complete the trip.
- Brief everyone as to the nature of the trip. This is generally the last opportunity for someone to withdraw or to be asked to withdraw. It will most likely be too late at the trailhead.
- Solicit, appoint and brief assistant(s) and first aid person; make them known to the group.
 - If you are a new or less experienced leader, appoint an experienced assistant.
 - If you are an experienced leader, look for a prospective new leader to assist you.

On the trip

- At the trailhead:
 - Provide a final briefing of the proposed objectives, itinerary and route.
 - Hold a short **safety discussion** about possible risk factors of the proposed trip including suggestions, questions and concerns from participants – help keep safety front of mind.
 - Ensure everyone starts the hike together.
- Keep everyone informed as to the route/location/history/natural history. It helps to do some interpretive research ahead of time to make it as interesting as you can; and/or to draw on other interpretive speakers in the group who might have specific knowledge:
 - The more that participants know, the more self-sufficient they will be if needed.
 - Don't hold your cards close to the chest – make everyone feel a part of the hike.
 - If possible bring some extra map copies to help others learn about the area and route.
- Take the opportunity to chat with people, especially new participants; get a sense of their skills and experience, local knowledge, what gear they have. This could be valuable information in the event of an incident involving themselves, or they might have a special skill or equipment to assist others who might be in difficulty.
- As the trip leader, you should be familiar with the route; and you should:
 - Engender confidence in the group with your knowledge of the area.
 - Avoid the actuality or even the appearance of becoming lost, which can be disconcerting for other members of the party and induce stress and dissention into the group.
- Navigation:
 - Carry a map and be prepared to use a compass as your primary navigation tool.
 - A GPS can be a useful secondary navigation tool, but do not focus on it to the extent of losing situational awareness. Generally, a GPS is unnecessary on established trails or routes. An exception would be mark or locate a desirable waypoint for an off-trail excursion, such as where you depart the trail, or a notable feature. A GPS can be a valuable primary navigation tool if the entire trip is off-trail, such as Slim Creek Park.
- Pace and rest stops:
 - Set a steady pace that is also adequate for the slower participants.
 - Schedule a brief rest stop generally every half hour. These help to keep the group together by providing an equalizer between people with differing speeds, and opportunities for clothing/gear adjustments, snacks, bathroom breaks, interpretive chats.
- Staying together:
 - Consider the positioning of leader and assistants:
 - Front, back or somewhere in between; leading from the front is generally best, although the leader may also wish to range among the group.
 - Maintain control of the route at decision points, either in person or delegated.
 - Ensure the group is together at all trail intersections and divergence points.
 - Sweep and assistant(s) should know the specific plans of the leader.
 - Some separation is inevitable on trips on well-known established trails, but you can manage this by splitting the group into faster and slower parts between regrouping points.

- The group should routinely **stay close together when off-trail and/or on loop hikes** where there are fewer backtracking or regrouping opportunities.
- Nobody should take a separate route from the rest of the group without having a discussion and reaching a mutual agreement with the trip leader. Use common sense.
- If separation is mutually agreed, consider meeting place, time, contingencies, etc. This is an opportunity for the leader to ascertain what skills, local knowledge, and essential clothing and gear the person has with them, such as fire-starters, compass, and headlamp.
- On a trip involving hazardous conditions, e.g. frozen creeks or rivers, avalanche terrain:
 - You will (or should) be naturally cautious on the outbound leg of a hike.
 - On the return it is easier to become complacent and more spread out as both leaders and participants become more familiar and emboldened with conditions such as river ice; and as the potentially risky ‘get-home-itis’ takes hold. This can introduce more risk factors.
 - There can be a fine line between familiarity, confidence, over-confidence and complacency; it is all too easy to drift too far over that line. **Stay alert!**
 - Be alert to the possibility of surprises or changing conditions, e.g. snow, ice, weather, increasing tiredness, injuries, wildlife encounters etc., especially later in the day.
 - **Problems or accidents are generally a result of multiple factors; maintain awareness and resist complacency at all times!**
- Start documenting any incident on trip while fresh: last seen place/time, by whom, any other relevant factors.
- If somebody is found to be missing from the group:
 - Determine the last seen point.
 - Gather all known information and document it while it is fresh.
 - Decide how to utilize the available resources without compounding the problem by destroying sign that later searchers might need, or losing track of other members.
 - Conduct a hasty search, watching for and being careful not to disturb sign.
 - Decide if, when and how to escalate for outside help.

After the trip

- Complete side-2 of the trip report and have it witnessed. This is a valuable record of club activities and will take on added importance if an issue arises later.
- Spend a few minutes debriefing back at vehicles, especially regarding any incident that has occurred, but also to get feedback from participants to help improve future trips.
- If there has been a serious incident or near miss, consider holding a post mortem meeting within a few days, ideally with a third party ‘expert’ and/or facilitator, e.g. from another outdoor club.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE: AVOID COMPLACENCY!

Source reference: *Outdoors Safety and Survival* by Mike Nash; Rocky Mountain Books, 2012; Chapter 33: *Outdoor Leadership*, pages 219-246; ISBN: 978-1-927330-01-2; <http://www3.telus.net/pgoutdoors>

