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# HUMAN ATTITUDES THAT LEAD TO SUFFERING IN THE BACKCOUNTRY

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*"In the outdoors, natural forces do the killing (massive force, cold, heat), but it is often human attitudes and decisions that do the selecting and the positioning of the victim."*

*"The most dangerous element in any outdoor activity is not the natural environment or the activity, but the person involved."*

In many areas of human interaction, individuals can tend to "carry their environments with them" (that is, their behaviors evoke predictable responses from others, wherever they tend to be). It is true also that in the outdoors, some of our clients will bring the danger with them. Our role as leaders is to begin to think through what kinds of "danger baggage" might be carried in by our participants, so we can recognize it when it emerges, and intercept it before it produces a disaster.

What are some of these dangerous attitudes? Which ones might characterize my clients? Do these dangerous attitudes ever show up in me, the leader?

## 1. An unwillingness to change plans, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, and its accompanying behavior—an unfounded need to keep to a predetermined schedule.

*"The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going, and suffer for it."*—Proverbs 27:12

*"The rigid person is a disciple of death; the soft, supple, and delicate are lovers of life."*—Tao Te Ching

A *plan* is simply our best attempt to forecast conditions and design appropriate strategies. But when the conditions are different than anticipated, the strategies that are dependent upon them must of necessity be reconsidered. And so the most capable outdoorsman is always reevaluating and tinkering with the plan, continuing to fit it to present realities. Rigid unexamined adherence to plans or rules is always dangerous; "Rules are for fools," quipped Paul Petzoldt, founder of the National Outdoor Leadership School. Preserve an open and flexible mind, adapt and change as necessary, don't attach your ego to "completing the trip as planned," and you will successfully avoid becoming a *disciple of death*—the deceased adherent of an inflexible plan.

## 2. A desire to impress; overweening arrogance or ego, and its accompanying competitiveness.

*DARES: "Disregarding All Reasonable Expert Suggestions" or "Dangers Adolescents Really Expect to Survive."*

But any of us can allow our egos and image in front of others to tempt us to TOSS ("Testosterone Overrides Sensible Schemes") caution to the back seat. (Jim Burnett)

## 3. A lack of awareness of or failure to acknowledge some critical change in conditions (group strength, weather), and its near cousin, a reliance on wishful thinking, instead of dispassionate acceptance of objective data.

*Leadership radar* should be applied to personnel, climate and environmental conditions, and even group tenor.

- *Personnel*: Who is drinking water today, and who is not? Who didn't eat breakfast? Who is not living out their "typical" personality, and why might this be?
- *Climate*: Is something sneaking up on us (thunderheads, winds picking up), and what might this mean?
- *Group tenor*: Are we becoming casual about safety, overly competitive, unnecessarily hurried, or low in our energy level? What's going on?

ASSUME: Actions Seldom Supported Under Meticulous Examination

## 4. A blind trust in personal invincibility, the benevolence of the universe, and a belief that nature cares about me.

*"The prerequisite for misadventure,"* observed Daryl Miller *"is the belief that you are invincible, or that the wilderness cares about you. The wilderness does not care about your human rights. The unvigilant perish; the prudent survive."*

*"Mountains are not fair or unfair—they are just dangerous."*  
—Reinhold Messner

*"God doesn't care about your happiness—He wants you to GROW UP."*—C.S. Lewis

## 5. An unexamined urge to press on through obstacles instead of evaluating their objective dangers.

What explains this? Pride? Denial? Group-think? Fear? Al Siebert, in his study of *The Survivor Personality*, observes:

*“The survivor does not impose pre-existing patterns on new information, but rather allows new information to reshape [his mental models]. The person who has the best chance of handling a situation well is usually the one with the best... mental pictures or images of what is occurring outside the body.”*

**6. Avoidance or denial of personal weaknesses (lack of knowledge, lack of fitness, inadequate skill level or equipment).**

*Exceeding our abilities*—what does that mean? Burton Moomaw, formerly of Appalachian Mountain Guides, offers this taxonomy of learning:

- *The Novice*: Consciously incompetent—very aware of his limitations in knowledge and skill.
- *The Apprentice*: Unconsciously incompetent—begins to think that he knows, but doesn't yet know what he's lacking.
- *The Journeyman*: Consciously competent—beginning to master skills, but still needs to be very attentive throughout.
- *The Master*: Unconsciously competent—skilled and versatile enough that even instincts and gut feelings can be trusted, being based upon many and varied experiences. Skills are automatic and reflexive.

**7. A casual approach to details; neglect of due diligence owing to familiarity, laziness, path of least resistance thinking, or faulty communication.**

*“He may, with the good luck which sometimes attends children, drunkards, and persons of weak intellect, escape the dangers without even knowing that they were there. But if he affronts too often forces whose powers he had not attempted to understand, he will in the long run succumb.”*—Lord Schuster

*“Courage divorced from logic becomes hubris, in which arrogance etches away the old honesty. The good vibes of kharma change into the false understandings of hubris.”*—Galen Rowell

*“Climb if you will, but remember that courage and strength are naught without prudence, and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste, look carefully to each step, and from the beginning, ask, what may be the end.”*—Edward Whymper

**8. Hurry, for any number of reasons**

G. Pecoste advised: *“Go carefully lads, be careful; a single moment's enough to make one dead for the whole of one's life.”*

*“Slow is safe, and safe is fast.”*

**9. Materialism and greed, leading to ill-advised exploits (either to avoid sacrificing equipment, or to obtain free gear).**

**10. Naïve optimism about the demands of the trip, leading to a gross failure to plan (weather, equipment, timeline).**

Those *Ten Essentials*, in case we haven't reviewed them lately, are:

- Water
- Extra food
- Extra clothing
- Map
- Compass
- Flashlight/Headlamp
- Fire starter
- Pocketknife
- Whistle
- First Aid Kit

Plan ahead, and take every item on every trip outdoors!

Maybe we should add the eleventh essential: take your brain, and know how to use it.

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**Further Reading**

- American Alpine Club. *NCRC Annual Cave Accident Report, Accidents in North American Mountaineering* (Annual).
- Charles R. Farabee, Jr. *Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks*. Taylor Trade Publ. 2005.
- Lawrence Gonzales. *Deep Survival—Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*. W.W. Norton and Co. 2003.
- Al Seibert. *The Survivor Personality*. Penguin Book. 1996.

**WRMC 2008  
Conference Proceedings**



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