

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Ambushed by Myself: Traps and Pitfalls for the Leader/Instructor

“There are days when no one should rely unduly on his ‘competence.’ Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.” (Walter Benjamin)

Read these short but true accounts, and see if you can identify the common element. There is one trap that each of these individuals fell into – what is it?

- On Golden Earring (5.7, Moores Wall, NC), Cameron took a several meter fall, pulling his unanchored top belayer into an injury fall as well. Their analysis: *“We both decided that the accident was caused by a lack of common sense, but more because of the lack of difficulty involved. Seeing no present danger, we overlooked the obvious...”* (ANAM, 1991, p. 45)
- At Joshua Tree, Brad decided to free-solo Hobbit Roof (5.10d) but ended the day instead with a ground fall, a shattered right heel, and a trip to High Desert Medical Center. In his words: *“I had done this climb many times [but now realize that] I had no right to think that because I had done it before, I can do it every time.”* (ANAM, 1990, p. 30)
- While descending off the International Wall (CO), Mike slipped and fell 18 meters into a chimney. His honest appraisal: *“I have been on this wall many times before, often solo. My concentration was not there.”* (ANAM, 1989, p. 55)
- In January of 2006, five men and a puppy became stranded in Lost Creek Cave (GA) after their flashlights died. It was said that they had been in this cave many times before and *“knew what they were doing.”* When they were found, it was determined that they had two flashlights for the whole party. Incidentally, a clue found during the search was a pile of dog poop. (NSS News, March 2008, p. 8).
- Finally, Jed Williamson comments on a fatal fall at Chapel Ledges (MA); James mis-stepped as he was anchoring rappel ropes for a church youth group: *“Every few years, there seems to be an accident like this. Experienced climbers and guides engaged in routine operations become mentally engaged in something other than the tasks at hand.”* (ANAM, 1988, p. 41)

It is very clear that there can be a loss of vigilance that occurs with routine and familiar tasks. Ellen Langer (1991) refers to this as *mindlessness*: a state of mind characterized by an over reliance on categories and distinctions drawn in the past, and in which the individual is context dependent and, as such, is oblivious to

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novel (or simply alternative) aspects of the situation. A few key phrases about mindlessness:

- Rigid invariant behavior that occurs with little or no conscious awareness
- Treating information as though it is context free and true regardless of circumstances (Paul Petzoldt said, “*Rules are for fools!*”)
- Most common when people are distracted, hurried, multitasking, and/or overloaded

By contrast, listen to relevant parts of Langer’s definition of *mindfulness*

- Being actively alert in the present
- Being open to new and different information
- Having the ability to create new categories when processing information
- Having an awareness of multiple perspectives

Now think about the skills and procedures that we drill on to take groups safely into backcountry and adventure settings. We have procedures for anchoring ropes, lighting stoves, teaching paddle strokes, and everything else. And we do them many times, over and over, as we run the same trips in the same areas ... Is there the potential for eventual mindlessness? Are we surprised that we occasionally find ourselves literally going through the motions? So the first implication of this issue’s topic is to look at our personal performance, and our program agenda, and ask where we might be prone to mindless leadership. **Do this right now, with a pencil in your hand, before you read on...**

Langer suggests that how instruction is presented can have the unintended effect of inducing mindlessness: “[*It is likely to result from*] a single exposure to information. When information is given in absolute (vs. conditional) language, is given by an authority, or initially appears irrelevant, there is little manifest reason to critically examine the information and thereby recognize that it is context-dependent. Instead, the individual mindlessly forms a cognitive commitment to the information and freezes its potential meaning.”

Dattner and Dunn (2003) suggest that in this case, “*practice actually makes imperfect.*” Practicing too much in the same way can lead to mindlessness. They recommend that in most cases, it is better to improvise a little instead of merely recreating what has been practiced. “*Many experiments have shown that people who succeed on tasks are less able to change their approaches, even after circumstances change (being “wrecked by success.”)*. So the second implication of this issue is to think about **how we train our staff and assistant leaders.**

I have found that there is an inherent conflict here between my role as a boss and what is best for my employees as autonomous guides: I want a predictable standard operating procedure, a constant modus operandi, to satisfy my own mind and my insurance carrier. But in leading this way, I might instead be contributing to the mindlessness of my assistant guides. If they are not invited to tinker with, adapt, and maybe even improve on my procedures, when they get out in the field, they will be less attentive to idiosyncrasies of the situation, differing conditions, and alternative ways to accomplish the task.

Let’s do some serious reflecting on the questions posed here, and recommit ourselves to mindful leadership, at home, on the job, and in the backcountry.

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