

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Leadership I: Shared Purpose

This essay begins a 3-article series on leadership. One of my recommendations for outdoor groups is to always select a leader, even if going out with friends. In an outdoor situation, you may believe that you can all get along with your buddies and be totally democratic. But when the worst thing happens and it all hits the fan, having someone recognized and ready to serve as a leader will provide direction, focus, and efficiency to whatever the group needs to accomplish. Interestingly, in the Bible, God always works through a human leader; He never uses the commune concept. So this article series is built on this assumption – groups need leaders. Soon we will see why.

I will often start an adventure outing with a question for my group: “*What is the difference between a **team**, and a **random group of people** who happen to be in the same place at the same time?*” After some initial offerings like, “*A team cares about each other,*” or “*A team works together,*” we stumble on the answer: **Shared purpose**. When we are working toward a common aim, and have subjugated our personal aspirations to a group goal, we are a team. Conversely, we can be on the same court, wearing the same uniform, and aiming at the same basket, but if your goal is to make every shot you can, and my ambition is to get as many points for myself as I can, we are not a team. **Shared purpose**.

It stands to reason then that the enemy of team is individuation – anything more distinguishable by its individual traits than by its shared ones. Competing purposes might be ego, protectionism, and self interest. Paul Petzoldt shares a story that makes the point:

The attempt to plant a United Nations flag atop Mt. Everest in 1971 was a classic example. Thirty-two persons representing eleven different countries and speaking eight different languages led an army of four hundred low altitude porters and forty-two Sherpas to the highest mountain in the world. Renowned climbers from the United States, Great Britain, Switzerland, France, Italy, Norway, Japan, Austria, and India were brought together for the assault. →

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A French political hopeful, an Italian, and a Swiss woman were bent on becoming the first Frenchman, Italian, and woman on top of Everest. However, when progress slowed to the extent of their being asked to assist the Sherpas in carrying supplies to the upper camps, they claimed insult to their native countries and abandoned the expedition. The leader attempted to coax them back, but the woman responded by pelting him with rocks and snowballs.

Death struck an Indian representative of the party when he attempted a difficult rope traverse during a storm. He had been too proud to admit that he had no previous experience with such a rope traverse, and delayed calling for help until it was too late.

Someone broke out a bottle of whiskey in hopes of relieving growing tension; this only provided a catalyst for a monumental row with invectives shouted in four languages. (The Wilderness Handbook, 1974, pp. 128-9)

In any meaningful relationship (marriage, athletic team, climbing party), some sacrifice of self is essential in order for members to enjoy the larger benefits of being part of the relationship. The interesting thing about the Mt. Everest story is that it was not the variety of nationalities and diversity of languages that fragmented the purpose – it was the competing and self-centered objectives. Nothing can be more fatal to an outdoor expedition, literally and figuratively, than unbridled self interest.

What then is the primary task of leadership? One team member may be the best navigator, and another may be a better fire-builder or a stronger climber, but the task that the leader cannot abdicate is ***to fashion and then maintain shared purpose***. The shared purpose may represent a host of prior discussions, negotiations, compromises, and eventually commitments that are shared. There can be lots of back and forth to arrive at it, but the leader eventually must clearly articulate it, and then nurture and maintain it. Some specific applications for leaders then are:

1. Lead in fashioning a purpose together. This can be a concrete goal (“*Make it to the summit and return safely*”), or a shared commitment to certain values (“*Keep it safe, keep it natural, keep it positive*”). A good purpose is both aspirational (visionary) and practical. On the one hand, we never quite achieve it perfectly; on the other hand, we should be able to point to many examples of it occurring among us each and every day.
2. For it to be truly shared, there must be meaningful buy-in. This ownership can happen because the group actually hashes it out and produces it together, or it can be that the leader invites members to symbolically and genuinely adopt his winsome plan. It can accommodate some individual interests, but not idolize them.
3. Symbolize it. Interestingly, the climbing rope is an excellent symbol of this shared purpose. We all clip in, it holds us together, and it becomes difficult to go different directions if we are on the same rope. Occasional rituals can effectively remind us of what we have agreed to and what is important.
4. Return to the shared purpose frequently in little and big ways throughout the day – throughout the experience. Repeat it, reaffirm it, discipline toward it, hold team members accountable to it, and debrief around it at the end.

In a positive experience, leaders can unite team members toward achieving an outcome greater than the sum of the individual parts. John Gardner states, “*Leaders can conceive and articulate goals that lift people out of their petty preoccupations and unite them in pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts.*” And in a crisis, the shared purpose becomes the hope – the survival vision to strive toward -- that may be the saving grace for a struggling team. “*With vision, there is no room to be frightened. No reason for intimidation. It’s time to march forward.*” (Charles Swindoll) A team is formed when there is shared purpose, and the number one job of leadership is to fashion and then maintain that purpose.

I would welcome your feedback, reflections, and maybe related stories about this quarter’s theme. Read on about WILD GUYde Adventures trip options in 2010!

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How was your trip with the **WILD GUYde**?!

"My son in particular and the whole family in general, are still talking about our spectacular day on Sunday. This was a homerun beyond my wildest dreams, and it will remain a highlight for our kids for many years!" (Dad, and family, 2005)

"Thanks again for a great time! You had the perfect mix of patience, intimidation, challenge, and expertise to make it a great experience!" ("Young" couple, 2006)

"Really my only comment was that it was wonderful. I enjoyed having you as a guide, and will certainly recommend you. I appreciated (later even more) that once we were on the rocks you were willing to give us pointers but at the same time, you let us figure it out for ourselves. Thank you for an amazing experience!" (Climber, 2006)

"What a great experience we had! The girls learned so much, and were so impressed with your gentle manner. When you talked to them before they began rappelling, they were absolutely riveted. You made concepts so easy to understand with your calm and kind way of explaining things. The rappelling itself was fantastic! There were several girls that were so scared to begin with, but you were able to talk them through the experience and they said they were so glad they did it. I'm so glad someone referred us to you. We had a wonderful time!" (Girls group leader, 2007)

"Thank you so much for making our 12th anniversary so memorable! Your knowledge and expertise really made us feel at ease and yet challenged us to push beyond what we thought we could do. Our time spent rappelling and climbing was definitely the biggest highlight of our time in Virginia!" (Colorado couple, 2007)