

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Pitfalls for the leader/instructor, part 2: Leadership team dynamics

On May 28, 1987, Ben Benson and Frank Jenkins were approaching the summit of Mount Hunter (AK) when they triggered a soft slab avalanche. It swept both men several hundred meters down the slope, eventually killing Benson. Here is a classic example of what appears on the surface to be simply a capricious unavoidable “act of God.” Upon deeper inspection, however, it reveals its fateful human dimension. Earlier, the two had disagreed about the relative safety of the ridge route. The survivor also described Benson as “a very strong-willed individual who could be very difficult to turn from a specific direction once he made a decision.” Jenkins, however, was the opposite personality – “one who did not like to argue.” (*Accidents in North American Mountaineering*, 1988, p. 19).

This illustrates one of several leadership team dynamics that can contribute to disaster. I call this one *Toxic Combo* – two (or more) persons who may have marvelous individual strengths and competencies, but when put together, produce some lethal combination: misdirected motives, bad decisions, and poor quality execution.

Think of some potentially toxic combos on your leadership team:

- Strong-willed alongside acquiescing
- Amorous relationship
- Ego competition (too similar)
- Others?

It’s important to note that toxic combos are not limited to outdoor expeditions. This dynamic can occur in a pastoral team of a church, the management team of a small corporation, the counselor/junior counselor pair at summer camp, or even in a marriage. What might be some strategies to head this off? Are there some things that can be done during staff screening (Myers-Briggs, etc.) or staff training (simulations, forced conversations about different approaches to problem-solving or conflict resolution, etc.) that might help us to avoid the *toxic combo*? How will you apply this idea to your current situation? Read on to unpack yet another dangerous leadership team dynamic.

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There can be another hazardous leadership team dynamic; listen to a few telling lines from several catastrophes:

“Everyone knew the hazard was building up, but there was no designated leader who, with the weight of responsibility, would act in a conservative decisive manner and order a halt or discussion.” (fatal fall in Anemone Pass, British Columbia – ANAM, 1987, p. 17).

“This group was a typical mix of relatively experienced climbers. Likely, any of the four others could have functioned as a leader, but, as so often happens, none felt that he had been so designated or that it was even appropriate to take charge of others of similar experience.” (fatal fall on Mount Colden in the Adirondacks, ANAM, 1990, p. 52).

We call this *leaderless among peers*. It is maybe more common when friends are out with buddies, but it can also occur in program experiences if administration fails to designate a leader.

Common here are:

- Unwillingness to verbalize misgivings or raise questions about others’ readiness, skills, or competence.
- Hesitancy to slow or stop the action to force a discussion.
- Tendency to interpret any momentum as positive, without a discerning regard as to which direction it is pointed.
- Avoidance of taking ultimate responsibility.

My suggestion is, *always appoint a leader*, even when just out with friends. Then, if it all hits the fan, we will have a prior agreement as to who will be directing the action. We also need to be careful not to engage in avoidance by over-spiritualizing this issue. I have heard folks say that in Christian organizations, we should be able to be non-hierarchical. I adamantly disagree. Read the scriptural story: God never uses the commune concept. He always does His work through *leaders*, from the judges to the kings to the prophets to the apostles. Give thought here, and don’t allow yourself to be included in a future *leaderless among peers* disaster waiting to be written.

As always, I welcome your interaction and reflective feedback about this issue’s theme!

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