

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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The Leadership Trap of Mindlessness

In this issue, we return again to the topic of leadership. Given our authority and role in decision-making, our positions as leaders act like megaphones, amplifying the effect of our presence and decisions on group behavior. So if we are “off” in our judgement or motives, the effect on the group experience in general, and safety in particular, can be exponential. When I see a group behaving badly or unsafely in the outdoors, I instinctively think, *“It’s a leadership issue.”* In this month’s essay, we address one unique leadership trap to be aware of – competence leading to complacency.

Read the story lines below from various accident reports, and ask yourself, what is the common element?

- *“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...”* (Accidents in North American Mountaineering, 1991, p. 45)
- *“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)
- *“I have been on this wall many times before, often solo. My concentration was not there.”* (ANAM, 1989, p. 55)
- It was said that they had been in this cave many times before and *“knew what they were doing.”* (NSS News, March 2008, p. 8)
- *“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)

As leaders, it is often our skills and competencies that gain us the positions we hold. When these become so routine as to foster mindlessness, however, our competence can be our undoing. Ellen Langer has been carrying out the pioneering work on mindlessness. She observes the following characteristics of mindlessness (Langer, 1991):

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- 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.

So our very competence as leaders, our ability to “paddle that stretch of river blindfolded and with one arm tied behind our backs” might actually be contributing to eventual accidents and incidents. When we are “going through the motions,” running the same climbing trip for the 4th time in the summer, and “have it all dialed in,” we are actually beginning down a path of subconscious disengagement. And it is here that key safety steps might be overlooked, significant changes in weather or group tenor might be missed, or the uniqueness’s of today’s situation may not be noted. When we have unwittingly switched off our leadership radar, we are sitting ducks for an incident.

This can be a factor in our staff training programs also. Consider if the following elements might be present in your training or orientation programs:

“[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.”

By contrast, consider Langer’s definition of mindfulness (Langer, 1991):

- 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.

Walter Benjamin quips, “*There are days when no one should rely unduly on his ‘competence.’ Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.*” Think about how to keep yourself “fresh” and in the moment when leading, even in repetitive programs. Consider how to challenge yourself and your staff to change things up frequently, to keep attentive, adapting, improvising, and thinking. Two years ago, my son and I scrambled up the west approach of Seneca Rock to climb Green Wall, a classic 2-pitch 5.7 that I had done several times. As we geared up at the base, I discovered that I had left all my cams back in the car. So we happily climbed it “old school”, with all hexes and stoppers, refreshed in the retro-challenge of the day, and reminded that technological ease, familiarity, and competence should never be allowed to create complacency.

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