

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from

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Nine Leadership Statements You Never Want to Hear Yourself Saying Out There (Nos. 4-6)

In the last issue of GUYdelines, we introduced the first 3 of 9 Leadership Statements You Never Want to Hear Yourself Say Out There. This issue, we bring in 3 more. Each of these includes some key oversight or failing that could prove dangerous or fatal to you or your group. Take a minute before reading on and try to articulate to yourself what might be the problem with each of the following:

- **“Hurry up!”**
- **“Don’t give up guys – we are the team that never gives up!”**
- **“I’ve done this (trip, skill) so many times, I could do it blindfolded.”**

“Hurry Up!” In November of 1995, a 13-year old boy suffered open fractures of the femur and the humerus when he fell 75 feet while running along the top of a sandstone fin in Arches National Park.* In Yosemite, Mark Sorenson earned a ride in an evacuation helicopter with a broken foot when he chose to jump off a steep section instead of down-climbing; he was on belay, but was out-climbing his rope. His evaluation: *“I would say my [biggest] mistake was being impatient.”* ** The physical act of hurrying requires greater skill and dexterity than going slowly, and misjudging this can have catastrophic consequences. Physical hurrying can also place greater stresses on equipment (climbing anchors, etc.) Adam Holenberg’s rappel rope severed at a sharp point, in part because of his high speed bounding technique; three significant fractures will remind him of this error in the years to come.***

Sometime, hurry is more in the mental realm – trying to save time, racing against dark, or attempting to squeeze in one more ski run, or one more climbing pitch. Sam Gitchel rappelled off the end of his rope because the ends were not equalized; later he reflected:

“...several things may have contributed to my haste. This was to be our last climb of the day and as the sun began to sink in the sky, we could feel the late afternoon chill beginning to move in ... As I built the anchor and set up the rope, I was in a rather uncomfortable position. I was eager to get down and try the climb. The rope

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*was moderately tangled, so I tossed it down, hoping it would straighten itself out. But I forgot to even out the ends of the rope.” *****

Narratives from numerous other epics include the common theme of “late in the day” or “trying to get down before dark.” Mental hurrying tempts us to skip significant safety steps, make faulty assumptions, or disregard perfunctory precautions. It also decreases our situational awareness and input radar, so we give ourselves less time to pay attention to navigational cues, or process the implications of weather changes, or human fatigue. In May of 1995, two stranded hikers who had intentionally left the trail in an attempt to take a shortcut back to the rim of Kilauea (Hawaii Volcanoes National Park) became lost and began yelling for help after wandering around for three hours.*

The irony is that, when we create an incident due to hurry, we have actually defeated the very reason for hurrying in the first place. Wilderness First Responders say often: “*Slow is safe, and safe is fast.*” This is even and particularly true in emergency situations. If we are trying to hurry an evacuation along the path, and end up stumbling one of our rescuers off the trail into another injury, we have compounded the situation, and ultimately slowed the entire enterprise exponentially. If we are rushing out for help for an injury, and in trying a shortcut, end up lost, we have created a navigational epic to complicate the initial incident. In short, there is rarely a reason to hurry in the backcountry!

*Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks, Charles R. Farabee, Jr., Taylor Trade Publishing., 2005, pp. 439, 442.

**Accidents in North American Mountaineering – 2005, American Alpine Club, p. 53.

***Accidents in North American Mountaineering – 2006, American Alpine Club, p. 59.

****Accidents in North American Mountaineering – 2000, American Alpine Club, p. 51.

“Don’t give up guys! We are the team that never gives up!” Christopher Keyes# interprets the fateful 1996 Everest climbing season as an example of “*destructive goal pursuit.*” This, he explains, is when a group gets trapped into the idea that achieving a particular goal is key to their identity. “*Getting this summit with my clients, and the publicity that will result, will finally boost my guiding service and salvage my career,*” or “*Getting up this summit will finally erase all my previous failures on this mountain.*” When this occurs, an individual or team will progressively invest more and more resources into the fated goal, making escape possibilities more and more remote. Think of it like this: you are riding along with a friend as they drive a two-lane country highway. They go to pass a slower motorist ahead, but then notice an oncoming car. (“*I am the driver who doesn’t back down!*”) Instead of slowing back into their lane and waiting, they ACCELERATE, moving now even faster toward the oncoming disaster, and reducing the number of available options remaining.

Wise outdoor leaders will think carefully about how they motivate their groups. Having a singular measure of success can quickly turn the goal toxic. On one particular expedition that I led, we had so many changes in the first week, due to extreme weather, high river conditions, etc. that I finally shared with my group this Tao proverb: “*The rigid person is a disciple of death, but the soft and supple a lover of life.*” By the end of the trip, the students had created their own little song-chant about “*Don’t wanna to be no Disciple of Death.*” They had internalized the idea that, rather than stubbornly digging in our heels when things got tough, the survival-minded group was adaptable and flexible – willing to bend like the willow, and change plans when necessary. I have a friend who was entering her first adventure race with a partner, and their goals from the beginning were “*To finish the race as fast as we can, and to be friends at the end.*” Balancing other values with achievement is key to avoiding building a personal or group identity on a single and potentially toxic goal.

Destructive Goal Pursuit: The Mount Everest Disaster, Christopher Keyes, 2006.

“I’ve done this (trip, skill) so many times, I could do it blindfolded.”

“Do not mistake precision repetition for mastery. The real master is the one who can beat you with an old wooden racquet, with the sun glaring in his eyes and the wind blowing cross court. Adaptability to changing conditions – a continual process of ‘reflection, then correction’ defines the true master.” When we do the same trip in the same way time after time, we are tempted to start to think that we have everything dialed in and predictable. Our mastery is only truly tested when we show up and conditions are suddenly different. It is then that we are asked, “How skilled are we really, and can we adapt our approaches to meet the new challenge?”

There can easily be a loss of vigilance that comes 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 oblivious to 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 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 might find ourselves literally going through the motions?

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 re-creating what has been practiced. “*Many experiments have shown that people who succeed on tasks [early on] are less able to change their approaches, even after circumstances change (being “wrecked by success.”)*”

Irv Mondschein, US Olympic shot put coach, shared this truth in more earthy terms at a throwing clinic I attended in my track coaching days. “*Practice does not make perfect – practice only makes permanent. Only perfect practice makes perfect. Every time you do it wrong, you are carving your initials a little deeper in the dung heap!*”

Next issue, we will consider these final 3 “Leadership Statements You Never Want to Hear Yourself Say Out There.” Here is your preview:

- **“I didn’t hear thunder. Did you hear thunder? I didn’t hear thunder.”**
- **“Look, they’re floundering. Unlike us, they apparently don’t know what they’re doing.”**

- “Why would we change a perfectly good plan just because the conditions are a little different than we thought?”

Happy adventuring out there!

LRZ

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