SCENARIO

With the confidence he gained from his first outdoor leadership course five years ago, Peter decided to enrol in an adventure trip to Nepal. Their instructors were apparently experienced and skilled so the trip seemed safe. The participants were from all over the country. They had all enjoyed previous outdoor experiences. Everyone looked fit and ready for a fun adventure. The group met their instructors in Kathmandu. They were whisked away to the hotel and were given a quick briefing.

The next day, the group boarded a bus to travel toward the mountains. They were met by a group of Sherpas and porters who would cook, guide and carry their clothing and equipment. Peter was psyched – this was going to be great! They hiked through river beds and mountains, gaining and losing enormous amounts of elevation each day. Since it was fall, the weather was clear and cool. The group practiced the Nepali language each evening by playing volleyball with the porters and singing songs with them.

One day the instructors offered the group the chance to hike over a pass at 5 395 m (17 700 feet). There was some discussion about the route since the group had been advised to bring light hiking clothes. If anyone had extra warm sweaters or jackets they shared them with the porters. Peter thought it was a great idea to have such a challenge and get to a high elevation. He had total faith in the instructors and the program. It was snowing when they left camp at three in the morning. Up they climbed in two groups.

After 10 hours of hiking, the group was in trouble. One girl was suffering from hypothermia and a Sherpa carried her back down the mountain. Others were lying in the snow, vomiting, or just sitting, exhausted. The two hiking groups had lost sight of each other, and none of the participants really cared. They would keep going as long as they were told to do. Finally, the head Sherpa ran up to the lead group and said the group would return to camp. The group turned around and stumbled down the trail. Exhausted, cold, and sick, they finally made it to camp. The next day the experience was debriefed. The instructors informed the group that the porters had turned back well before the group had and refused to carry the groups' belongings to the next camp. It was also revealed that the next camp, a communal hut, had no firewood. The last group over the pass had used all of it the previous night. With the condition of the group they thought four or five people could have suffered severe hypothermia or death if they had not turned back.

The group was quiet. Peter thought he would have been one of the unlucky ones since he had wanted to lie down and go to sleep in the snow, a sure death sentence. He had strained a leg falling down the trail and was really scared. Mostly he had lost faith in the leaders and their ability to make safe decisions. He doubted his own abilities and swore that he would never participate in another organized trip unless he had all the details first. What had he been thinking, trying to go to over 5 000 m (17 000 feet) in sneakers and cotton pants? He had known better but trusted the leaders completely to make good decisions. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got, mostly at himself for doing something that was so unsafe. The experience also made Peter want to become an outdoor leader so that others could have safe and enjoyable experiences. He would get the training necessary to work with participants at their ability level. He also learned that life is fragile and it would be easy to die in the outdoors.

Peter's overconfidence after his first course was misplaced. He knew that outdoor experiences could change someone for the better, but now he had learned that poor decisions by leaders could lead to potential disaster. Peter understood and could reframe his scary experience so that he became determined to do better and to share what he had learned with others. He sought out further training and opportunities to learn technical skills. His teaching experience helped him to work with groups effectively and be sensitive to needs of participants at different age and experience levels.

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Peter had been forced to look at himself critically. He learned not to take nature for granted. He became much more self-aware, which helped him to develop into an excellent outdoor leader. Peter has now led hundreds of students through the mountains. In retrospect, he is glad that he had experiences that made him pay attention to what people can tolerate in outdoor situations. He makes conservative decisions and routinely leads safe trips. Peter was lucky to be able to derive the positive from a negative experience. He became a more complete human and a successful, mature outdoor leader (Martin, B., Cashel, C., Wagstaff, M., and Breunig, M., *Outdoor Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Human Kinetics. [pp 120–121]).

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