COMPETENCIES OF AN OUTDOOR LEADER HANDOUT

SELF-AWARENESS AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Being Self-Aware

A competent OL needs to be self-aware. To be self-aware is to be conscious of one's character, feelings and motives. As an OL, who is responsible for the safety, well-being and organization of a group of people, being self-aware ensures a higher quality experience for all group members. Being aware of individual feelings and motives will allow the OL to better relate to their group members.

Being Aware of One's Personal Abilities and Limitations

Self-awareness starts with a clear understanding of one's personal abilities and limitations. Without a clear sense of their own abilities and limitations, OLs will have difficulty setting challenges appropriate to the abilities and limitations of group members. As well, there may be a tendency to set the bar too high, which may jeopardize the emotional and physical safety of the members of the group they are leading. This can result in the OL becoming a possible danger to the group and diminishing the quality of the experience for all.

Being Mindful of All Actions

Good OLs are always mindful – intentional – in their actions. They act with regard to the ultimate goals of the group experience, which is a balance between being attentive to the needs of the group members and being attentive to the tasks that must be accomplished.

Managing Stress

Stress can be caused by a number of factors. While some may believe that stress caused by physical danger is the hardest to manage, this is not the case. Situations that place stress on the OL are often a lot less dramatic than a singular event such as a rope breaking during a climbing activity. The event happens so fast that adrenalin kicks in before stress can occur. Instead, it is the ordinariness of the situation which makes it so stressful. For example, a rainstorm catches a group 5 km (3 miles) away from the trailhead. Members force their own frustrations on the group leader, who not only has to deal with the group complaints, but also with the stream of rain running down the neck of their own parka.

Demonstrating Professional Conduct

OLs are placed in a position of responsibility and as such must conduct themselves accordingly in all situations. A lack of professional conduct could result in situations such as an injury during a paddling activity, or a breakdown in group dynamics while on an OAA. It is the inherent risk associated with OAA that makes professional conduct so important for an OL. Professional conduct is characterized through demonstration of the following qualities:

- trustworthiness,
- flexibility,
- approachability,
- commitment,
- awareness of the position of authority, and
- modelling.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflicts in OAAs are inevitable. The challenge, for the OL, is to stop the conflict before it escalates, or deal with it quickly and effectively as possible. Most conflicts that occur in outdoor situations are a result of:

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- weather conditions;
- varying levels of experience among group members;
- the challenging nature of the activity; and
- personalities of group members.

An OL who is able to communicate clearly with all group members will be better suited to manage conflict. There are always going to be situations where the OL is required to interact with difficult people. A group member who was a pleasure to have around at the beginning of a 10-day expedition, and who got along with everyone at the campsite, may, by Day 8, have blisters from ill-fitting boots and be arguing with everyone. It becomes the responsibility of the OL to deal with this situation. Conflict while on an expedition is like a wound: unless it is dealt with, it will just keep spreading and festering. Dealing with conflict is not a pleasant task, however, the first step is to always speak with the individual and discuss the issues in a calm and sensitive manner.

DECISION MAKING AND JUDGMENT

Decision Making. Decision making is the process of choosing the best option from a collection of possible options. In order to make this choice, the OL will be required to use their judgment.

Judgment. Judgment is an informed opinion based on past experiences. Judgment also provides OLs with the ability to anticipate problems before they occur. Their experience in leading people during an OAA provides them the foresight to know when something is going well or when it needs adjustment.

OLs are placed in the position because of the experience they have. It is then assumed that when leading a group, they will be qualified to make decisions that affect the safety and welfare of the group. That is not to say that OLs have to make the “big” decisions on their own: being able to communicate with fellow group members and use their experience and ideas to help make a decision is also an integral part of making a decision. An OL, who has completed the same route up a mountain, may benefit from another individual’s point of view before deciding whether or not to continue an ascent, or halt due to a lack of motivation in group members.

Decision making is a process which should be carried out decisively. Once an OL has considered their options and reached a decision, they should stick with it, unless circumstances change. They should not allow themselves to be swayed by other group members. They have the experience, have assessed the factors and have reached a decision. In OAA, where safety is always a concern, the OL must have confidence in the decisions they make and the group must have confidence in the decisions the OL has made.

FACILITATION OF THE EXPEDITION EXPERIENCE

Leading others in OAA does not guarantee that learning will occur. An outdoor experience can bring joy and wonder, and can help people develop new relationships and make discoveries. An outdoor experience encourages people to learn things about themselves, others and the outdoors.

It is possible to be outdoors and miss these opportunities or not enjoy the experience. Some participants do not want to learn in the outdoors:

- it feels unsafe in its newness;
- they have had previous negative experiences; or
- they are not interested in getting the most out of the experience.

An effective OL can facilitate the experience and shift the outdoor experience from a mere excursion in the outdoors to a dynamic learning experience.

Facilitation is the process of moving a group or individual toward a desired outcome. A facilitator provides the means for making experiences possible. For an OL, facilitation is a skill which fosters productive group

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dynamics, enabling all members to work toward completing the OAA, in a safe and enjoyable manner, while also developing interpersonal relationships.

OLs will often be required to:

- resolve conflicts;
- communicate effectively;
- foster personal trust and group cooperation; and
- debrief and guide reflection during and following an OAA.

TECHNICAL ABILITIES

OLs may possess excellent facilitations skills and may be extremely effective at organizing an OAA, however, without technical ability to serve as the foundation for conducting the activity, these skills cannot be used. Technical abilities are organized into two main areas – generic competency skills and specific competencies.

Generic Competency Skills

Generic competency skills are those skills in which, no matter the OAA, an OL must be competent. They include:

- weather prediction,
- wilderness first aid,
- trip planning,
- navigation,
- camp skills,
- general outdoor skills,
- physical fitness, and
- mental awareness.

Specific Competency Skills

Specific competency skills are those skills unique to the OAA the OL will be leading. Examples include:

- trekking,
- mountain biking,
- abseiling,
- climbing,
- caving,
- canoeing, and
- kayaking.

There is no requirement for an OL to be an expert in all activities. In many cases they choose activities that interest them the most and capitalize on the experiences they offer. Proficiency in an OAA can only be gained through experience. The more experience OLs gain, the more competent they become.

OLs cannot allow their skills to decay; they should continuously participate in professional development training to refresh their knowledge and skills. It is the responsibility of the OL to stay up-to-date in the areas in which they lead others.

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INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUES

Instructional skills are important because OLs often have the opportunity to teach and thus share important skills and knowledge with the people they lead. OLs with the responsibility of teaching others need to be well versed in skills such as using instructional aids, developing skill lesson plans and employing different teaching strategies. Experiential education is the primary method by which OLs deliver their educational content. Every lesson involves some degree of explanation and demonstration, and a greater degree of practice – which gives individuals the opportunity to learn skills in a hands-on manner.

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Environmental stewardship is a three-faceted term that takes into account environmental ethics, ecological literacy and parks and protected areas management. With the environment experiencing the heavy impact of current culture, it is OLs who must alter the attitudes of others toward preserving and conserving the environment. When leading groups, OLs must practice and enforce the environmental ethical code, represented by the seven principles of Leave No Trace, which serve as the basis for ecologically responsible interactions with the natural environment.

Ecological literacy entails thinking and acting critically in an environmental context, especially when making decisions and exercising judgment regarding environmental problems.

Many of the areas OLs use to conduct OAAs are managed by provincial and national agencies. It is critical that OLs are aware of the policies and regulations of the park/conservation area they are using and abide by these rules. The park/conservation area has implemented these policies and regulations as a means to reduce the environmental impact while still allowing people to enjoy the outdoor setting. OLs must understand that every action has the potential to impact the natural environment and that they must take the necessary precautions to protect the environment when travelling or camping outdoors. As well, they must teach low-impact camping, waste management and travelling techniques to their groups.

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Program management consists of two main areas – employing safety and risk management, and planning, organizing and managing. OAAs are, for the most part, characterized by the inherent risk they possess. Risk is one of the critical components that make outdoor programming so popular and successful. OLs must be able to balance risk and safety – too much risk and the danger of the experience will become unreasonable; too much safety and the activity will fail to remain adventurous. As an OL, there is a responsibility to assess the OAA for risk, manage risk during the activity and develop a contingency plan to ensure the safety of all participants. Most aspects of risk management are carried out during the planning phase of an activity.

OLs are required to complete detailed planning for trips/activities they lead. Proper planning is essential for any OAA and when it is not carried out thoroughly, the possibility for tragedy increases. Trip/activity plans include:

- emergency management details,
- contingency plans,
- time control plans,
- energy control plans,
- ration plans,
- communication plans, and
- equipment/resource procurement, etc.

Once a plan has been developed, the ability to implement the plan is based on the OL's organizational skills. Implementation involves creating a system for getting tasks done and requires the ability to coordinate the various components of the plan so that it comes together to create a unified whole.

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Management skills involve the ability of the OL to direct the group in an efficient manner to complete all required tasks throughout the OAA. For example, when arriving at the campsite, after a long day of paddling, an organized OL will have already divided the group into sub-groups to allow for multi-tasking to ensure the campsite is set up, water is collected, the fire is started and supper is prepared.

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