



CHAPTER

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Outdoor Leadership

“Leadership is not just passed on from the more experienced to the less experienced. There are too many people with a lot of experiences who don’t know what they’re doing.”

—Paul Petzoldt, outdoorsman and writer who climbed Wyoming’s Grand Teton mountain more than 300 times by the time he died at age 91



Leaders come in all shapes and sizes, and they use all manner of techniques to achieve success. At times they might be in the forefront of outdoor activities, though they are just as likely to allow others to step ahead. They can be determined to reach a mountaintop, run a stretch of white water, and rise to other challenges, but they also find satisfaction in doing whatever they can to ensure that others reach their goals. Many have become famous. Others might be known as leaders only among the groups they have led, but are remembered with fondness and admiration by those with whom they shared adventures. All are women and men who have practiced the art of leadership, a skill as important to trek adventures as any in this book.

Every group going into the backcountry should have a recognized leader, a person who can orient people and then keep them organized, supported, and moving toward their objectives. While much of what occurs in the field can be decided through discussions and mutual agreement, a leader must be ready to provide clear direction when decisions need to be made quickly or when group members are unable or unqualified to determine a realistic course of action.

Leadership comes to life in the outdoors as challenges reveal the true nature of people relating to one another and to their surroundings. Guiding a Venturing crew, Scout troop, or Varsity Scout team when the sky is clear, the nights are

A leader shares group responsibilities by delegating tasks and then providing resources and support so that everyone can succeed. In difficult situations, others will look to a leader for guidance, for wisdom, and for making essential decisions.

pleasant, and everyone is experienced and well-prepared can be easier than when the foul weather settles in or the Scouts' skills are minimal, but that's not always the case. Even seasoned outdoor travelers can suffer an injury or illness, or discover that they are confronted with other unexpected circumstances that will severely test them.

Effective leaders help the others develop trip plans, prepare for the trek adventures, and learn skills to be used during outdoor activities. They delegate responsibilities, providing the tools and information people must have in order to do well. They adapt their leadership styles in response to the needs of individuals and groups, and at times they may modify their own agendas, as the ultimate goal of a leader—establishing an environment in which others can achieve their goal—is of greater importance than summiting any mountain or running any river.

Preparing to Lead

Leadership is more than a set of skills to be mastered. It is about the willingness to listen, to observe, to share, and to serve the interests of others. It also is about using good judgment, making decisions, and putting plans in motion. You can learn much about leading well by reading about leadership, by watching others lead, and by taking part in formal training opportunities. Most important, though, is putting yourself in various positions of responsibility and trying out principles of good leadership in real situations.

From an assistant patrol leader helping to plan a meeting to the president of a Venturing crew preparing for an extended wilderness journey, a hallmark of Scouting is providing settings for people to learn how to lead by being leaders. As your own experience as a leader grows within and beyond Scouting, you can take a number of steps that will help you maintain your readiness to step into leadership roles:

- Keep yourself in good physical condition and your personal equipment set to go.
- Develop your technical competence so that it is sufficient for the demands of upcoming treks. Include training in first aid.
- Increase your understanding of leadership by observing experienced leaders, working with mentors, and encouraging feedback from members of your group.



Leading Responsibly

Outdoor leaders must stay within their abilities, agreeing to lead only those activities for which they have experience and expertise. If your Scout troop, Varsity Scout team, or Venturing crew is considering a whitewater kayaking trip, for instance, and wants you to be its leader, you must have a mastery of kayaking and of watercraft safety. You need to know how to orient your group for an upcoming adventure, how to direct activities during the trip, and how to respond to emergencies.

You also must gain the trust of those you will lead. Through your actions and your words, everyone will know that your decisions are based on the needs, interests, and safety of all.

Preparing Your Group

A leader has important pretrip responsibilities for orienting a group, setting the tone, and clarifying the reasons for guidelines that everyone will follow. Just as leaders can carry out their responsibilities most effectively when they are fully informed, group members are best able to succeed when they have a clear understanding of agreed-upon standards, and when they can share in planning and carrying out activities. Leaders who are enthused about upcoming events set a positive tone that can carry over into the field.

For more on orienting Scout troops, Varsity Scout teams, Venturing crews, or other groups for trek adventures, see the chapters titled “Organizing for Adventures” and “Planning a Trek.”

Leadership Qualities

While their styles may vary, effective leaders all share the following qualities:

- They ensure a safe environment for their groups and themselves.
- They establish ground rules ahead of time and insist that they are followed.
- They clearly communicate their expectations.
- They retain for themselves the right and responsibility of ultimate decision-making authority.

—From *Lightly on the Land*, Student Conservation Association, 1996

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Monitoring Progress

Seasoned outdoor leaders know that an important first step in coping with first-aid situations is this: “Don’t just do something; stand there!” The idea is that they must evaluate a situation before they can make good decisions about how to proceed.

Leadership usually is not a response to an emergency, but the approach is similar. To lead well, invest energy in listening and observing so that you can assess what is going on, figure out what a person or a group needs in order to succeed, and then find ways to address those needs.

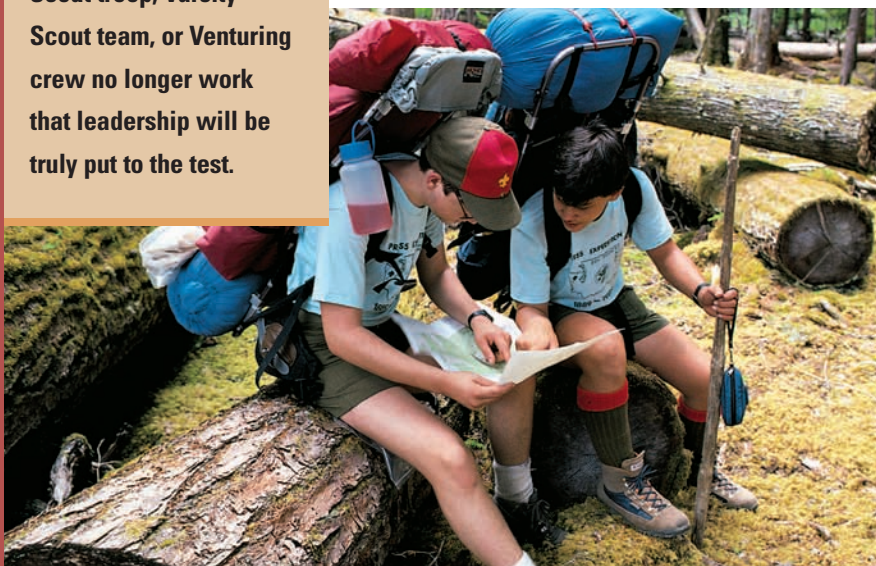
Individuals and groups seldom will act in exactly the same ways from one trek to another or even on succeeding days of the same journey, and what is true for one situation will not always be true for every other. People preparing for a trek adventure often are excited about the opportunities that lie ahead, but their initial enthusiasm may fade as they realize how much work lies between them and their goals—how far they will have to hike, for example, or the extent of the skills they have not yet mastered. They might even be at odds with one another and with their leaders, but as they begin to experience progress, they often come around to working alongside each other in pursuit of common goals. Successes lead to greater confidence and growing enthusiasm, and that can encourage everyone to focus on the efficient completion of short-term and long-term tasks.

“The adventure begins when you lose the map,” goes a tongue-in-cheek traveler’s saying.

Likewise, it is when the best-laid plans of a Scout troop, Varsity Scout team, or Venturing crew no longer work that leadership will be truly put to the test.

Adjusting Your Leadership Style

Responsive leadership requires that as you are hiking, camping, and enjoying other outdoor activities, you also are observing your group and its surroundings. By developing an evolving picture of group members’ attitudes, their progress toward goals, and the nature of the challenges they face, you can adjust your leadership style based on what the others appear to need.

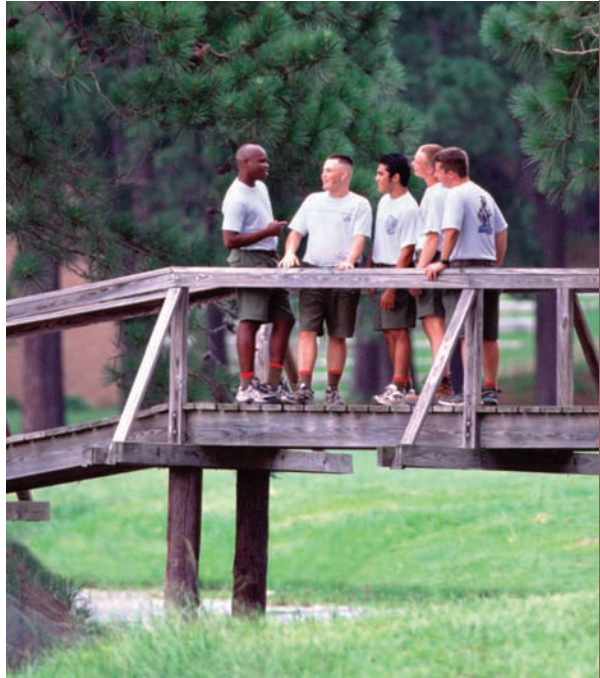




Individuals and groups unaccustomed to a particular kind of outdoor adventure, for example, might require lots of clear direction from you as they learn essential skills and are introduced to new settings and routines. Those who have had plenty of experience probably won't need that kind of hands-on leadership, but can thrive when you provide them with plenty of support and information, then get out of their way and let them figure out on their own how to proceed.

The more you know about those you lead, the better you can provide them with appropriate leadership. The abilities, backgrounds, interests, and personalities of individuals all are factors, and levels of enthusiasm and motivation are key indicators of a group's development. By continually monitoring your group, you can be ready to make adjustments whenever adjustments need to be made.

Be flexible in your approaches, noting not only what works for those you are leading, but also what is comfortable for you. Try different styles in different situations. At its heart, leadership is as much an art as it is a skill. Finding your own effective styles is a matter of doing your best with what you know at the moment, and then using the experience you have gained to do even better the next time.



Empowering Others

The greatest gift a leader can give members of a group is the clear understanding that they are responsible for their own success. Provide everyone with the guidance and resources they need to do well, then give them room to take care of things to the full extent of their abilities. In return, group members can offer their willingness to take on much of the work of making the group go, and to see tasks through to the end.

You can further empower people by striving to maintain an environment that is both physically and emotionally safe. Physical safety is largely a matter of risk management through organizational standards and the good

judgment of everyone in the group. Emotional safety is a more elusive concept, but its effects upon the well-being of each person and the group as a whole can be every bit as vital as physical security. For example, there is no place in Scouting for negative peer pressure or harassment in any form.

Maintaining Ultimate Decision-Making Authority

In addition to sharing tasks and empowering others, a leader must retain authority for ultimate decision making. When individuals can't come to an agreement on issues of importance, the leader makes the call. When conflicts arise, a leader does whatever is necessary to find resolution. Most of all, when safety is a concern, a leader finds ways to help a group minimize danger and manage risk.

To a great degree, you will have established your leadership authority by all of your actions that precede the moment when a decision must be made. If you have demonstrated your involvement and have earned the trust of those you are leading, you will find that they can be very willing to support your decisions. Explaining the reasons for your decisions, either beforehand or during debriefings after events, will further increase the quality of the leadership relationship.

At times, your decision-making responsibilities might involve dealing with inappropriate behavior. Most often that will pertain to safety issues—someone's unwillingness to keep a clean camp in bear country, for example, or an individual's habit of going off alone without telling anyone. It also can extend to personality conflicts, questionable language, and other actions affecting the quality of the experience for other members of a Scout troop, Varsity Scout team, or Venturing crew.

Ideally, nonnegotiable standards determined by the group before a trek begins will have outlined what is acceptable and what is not. The structure and tone of a group should provide further guidance for the ways that the members will conduct themselves and treat one another.

When inappropriate situations arise, talk with the people involved out of earshot of others. Discuss the concerns you have about their behavior, and listen carefully to what they have to say. Based on what you hear, you might be able to suggest ways that they can follow the group's guidelines and still get what they want.

Stay Calm

Don't respond in anger to the actions or words of others, even if what they have said or done upsets you. In emergency situations, try not to let fear and uncertainty cloud your judgment. By seeking workable solutions, you also are showing through your actions the way that others can act when they are upset or under stress.



Leadership Tools

Every leader develops his or her own style, though most successful leaders use the following tools:

Be Realistic

Do your best to see things as they are, not as you wish they were. Be a bit of a pessimist in terms of what might go wrong, but an optimist in guiding people toward the effective management of risk.

Be Consistent and Fair

Group members want to know what they can expect from you as their leader, and what you expect of them. Strive to be consistent in word and action, and make it clear that you are working together.

Step In

Cheerfully accept your share of the chores. Lead others by having fun doing whatever needs to be done.

Monitor Yourself

Are you chilly, hungry, sleepy, too hot, or too cold? Upset, angry, or worried? By doing something about personal issues, you can more clearly focus on the leadership needs of the moment. It might simply be a matter of putting on another layer of clothing, having something to eat, or taking a moment to gather your thoughts. You also might discover when you need more information before making a decision, or when it would be wise to talk things over with others in your group as you are making up your mind.

Be Caring

Perhaps the most powerful tool of leadership is this: Care about the people you are leading. Respect and value others, and help each person feel that he or she has important contributions to make. Look for ways to draw on the strengths of every individual to the advantage of the entire group, and let all members know you are pleased to have them along. Say something positive to every person in the group at least once a day.



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Communicating Well

The ability to communicate well is an essential skill for leaders of any team. Because the members will be assuming much of the responsibility for the success of their groups and will themselves act as leaders for many activities, they also can benefit from knowing how to share ideas.

Information about a group and its condition often is as close as your ears. “We’re getting tired.” “What shall we cook for dinner?” “I have an idea for a better way to bear-proof our camp.” “Isn’t this a bad place to be if that thunderstorm catches up with us?”

As you listen, try to delay making judgments on what you are hearing until you have all the information. “I got it,” is a good initial answer to those who have something to say. “Could you explain that to me again?” is an appropriate response when you don’t understand.

You can’t tailor every situation to be ideal. Now and then you will find yourself in discussions with others when sharing ideas is difficult. Practice communicating effectively, though, and you will find it to be a vital tool for addressing problems, resolving difficulties, and building spirit.



Feedback

People who are warm, dry, well-fed, and enjoying the challenges they face are bound to be upbeat and pleased with the way things are going. From overheard comments, laughter, and body language, you have clear feedback that a trek is going well. If people have become wet, hungry, chilly, or bored, though, you will know from their mood and lack of energy that aspects of planning and carrying out a trek have not been adequate for the journey, and that you might need to adjust your leadership style.

Tips on Receiving Feedback

Seeking out feedback from everyone can further clarify your understanding of what is occurring during a trek, and can help improve the performance of you and your group.

1. Listen carefully. Receiving feedback requires a heightened awareness of yourself and the person offering the feedback.
2. Listen actively. Restate what you are hearing in your own words so that the speaker knows that the message you are receiving is the same as the one the speaker intended to send.
3. Listen emphatically. Put feedback in its proper context by observing the speaker's body language, tone of voice, and emotions. Consider the speaker's reasons for providing feedback.



Communication

The following guidelines can help you in communicating ideas to others:

1. Listen effectively.
2. Convey information to the right person at the right time.
3. Stay consistent in the information you are sharing, but be open to making changes.
4. Be open to the ideas of others.

Feedback

Generate feedback by asking the following:

1. How are we doing?
2. How am I doing?
3. What will make things better?

Feedback often is a way of improving the effectiveness of a team while it is in the field. Debriefing and evaluating can occur after a trek, or at the conclusion of each day and each stage of an extended outdoor activity.

Tips on Giving Feedback

Offering ideas to others can help them improve their performance and expand the group's success.

1. Think about your motives. Unless feedback will be helpful, there is no reason to give it.
2. Find out if people are open to receiving feedback.
3. Deal only with specific behavior that can be changed.
4. Ask recipients of feedback to rephrase what they heard you say so that you can be sure they have understood your message.



Debriefing and Evaluating

Even the best outdoor adventurers can find room for improvement, and groups can always become more effective. After an outdoor activity, and at least daily during an extended expedition, sit down with everyone and discuss what went well and what could have been better.

1. *Debrief* by discussing key events of the day with everyone to get a clear understanding of what happened.
2. *Evaluate* by weighing that understanding against the group's goals, standards, and logistical tasks, then use your findings to improve future outdoor activities.



Among the questions that can guide debriefing and evaluation are these:

- What went well?
- What could have been better?
- What skills do we need to acquire or improve?
- What gear wasn't needed?
- What gear or supplies were we missing?
- Where shall we go next?

Celebrate Success

Every outdoor adventure you have will become a collection of fond memories. Take time during and after a trek to reflect on your experiences together, to celebrate your successes, to reinforce what you learned, and to realize how remarkable it is to be in the great outdoors with a group of friends, all of you doing your best.

The confidence of a Venturing crew, Scout troop, or Varsity Scout team grows as members succeed together—planning and carrying out their first wilderness trip, finishing a rugged hike, or mastering the techniques of winter camping. Success fosters success, and a series of achievements can inspire group members to get in the habit of setting out to do well. Fresh opportunities to succeed can increase their self-assurance and their eagerness to try adventures they know will test them and help them work hard.



A Final Word on Leadership

The excitement and challenge of being a leader should involve you deeply with those you lead, but allow yourself to relax sometimes away from other activities. On extended adventures, you could rise earlier in the morning to enjoy a quiet half hour to yourself—a chance to enjoy a cup of cocoa as you sit under a tree and watch the day beginning to unfold.

Give yourself permission to make mistakes, too. Being a leader is a learned skill. The more you do it, the more effective you will be, but there always will be room to improve. Do the best you can, and next time do even better.

Whatever leadership styles you choose, keep in mind the basics of leadership. Strive to empower others, reach a consensus when making decisions, and provide whatever a group is missing, and you will be well on your way to practicing effective and responsible leadership in the field.

“Leadership is the capacity to move others toward goals shared with you, with a focus and competency they would not achieve on their own.”

—John Graham (outdoor leader and president of the Giraffe Project), *Outdoor Leadership*, 1997