

helicopter medical-evacuation service or the local military? While technology is helpful, it has to fit within a wider risk management plan to be of use. An added challenge internationally, is that in developing countries the *infrastructure* may fail.

SHARING THE RISK MANAGEMENT PROCESS WITH STUDENTS

The goal of wilderness education is not merely to lead students through a landscape, but to teach them to be competent to live and travel in a very different setting than they are used to. Most wilderness education programs equip students to be independent by teaching risk management principles as a part of its program. This is done through concepts such as “leader of the day,” in which a student shares leadership tasks with the staff team, as well as through opening up decision-making and assessments to the students where appropriate. In an international setting, this can be expanded beyond the trailhead to include cultural and contextual considerations which impact the trip.

Sharing the reasons behind risk management decisions is important for student safety. “[T]he leader of an inexperienced party may mentally conduct a flawless evaluation of a hazard and determine that conditions are safe. But unless the leader shares the thinking that went into this decision, the members of the party may falsely assume that similar situations are always without hazard.” (Graydon and Henson, 1997, p. 443) We miss an important teaching opportunity if we do not share the reasons for risk management decisions with students while leading them. Obviously, not all risk management decision processes need to be, or should be, shared with students. However, as we have shared *appropriate* decision making with students, we have found that students become more competent, skilled and reliable. For example, working with the students through a structured decision making tree while deciding on the next days activities in a village helps the students to know more about what is going on, and to understand how to make decisions when they are on their own. Within an international setting, this can be especially important as it is an opportunity to discuss and deal with student preconceptions and potential bias. Villagers are not “quaint” or “idyllic”—they have real lives and are often struggling to survive in a very challenging environment. How we, coming from a relatively more privileged position globally, impact those situations are important to talk through with students.

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Both participants and instructors can get into, and out of, potentially dangerous situations. And, as a result of no harm coming to them, it can be difficult for program leaders, to know what is, and what is not, a dangerous situation. Over time, this increases the risk exposure of a program. “You can be misled into accepting dangerous levels of risk by simple phenomenon that might be termed nonevent feedback: nothing bad happened last time; therefore, nothing bad will happen this time. Nonevent feedback occurs when we do not experience the potential consequences of our actions” (Graydon and Hanson, 1997, p. 443). Nonevent feedback usually is applied to situations where someone engages in dangerous behavior and gets away with it, such as crossing an avalanche-prone slope, but not triggering an avalanche. Each time there is a “nonevent,” the person is lead to believe that the behavior is safe, when in fact it is not. People abroad often are part of nonevent feedback loops, where they unknowingly engage in behavior that is dangerous, but for some reason nothing happens. Opening up the risk management process to students by debriefing, especially after a "critical incident" where something has gone wrong or there was a near miss, is crucial to helping students overcome the dangers of the "nonevent feedback" that they often experience. Including local people in debriefing and evaluation sessions can help participants and instructors understand better possible “nonevents” that were in fact near misses. One reason this is important is that local people may be looking out for groups without the group knowing, from clearing the path of dangerous snakes to choosing a “better” beach to camp at when the real reason is avoiding a coming storm.

Sharing the risk management process with participants has helped them to understand how to assess risk, develop contingency plans, make good decisions, and how to learn safely and effectively in a new culture. We work on this with students throughout the semester. When the end of semester break comes, we require students to apply what they have learned: they are mentored by our field staff and are required to write risk-management plans for when they are on break. For example, students planning to travel to Southern Thailand by boat had to think through, and write up, what they would do if the boat was over-crowded, how they would check for life jackets, and what they would do in an emergency. On their return from break, students excitedly shared how their risk management plans kept them from getting into possibly dangerous situations, and how the plans made their travels easier, since they didn’t have to “make things up on the spot.” Instead they were guided by their planning. This experience

positively impacted the students' academic program. In the second semester, when these students started their internships, they were well prepared to be independent and responsible learners.

CONCLUSION

Many people perceive rock climbing as a high-risk activity. However, as borne out in accident statistics and analysis of person-hours per activity, there is a much higher risk of being killed or injured on the drive to the cliff than during the actual climb. We perceive traveling at high speeds in vehicles as “low risk” because we do it every day as a necessary part of our lives, with nonevent feedback reinforcing the idea that cars are “safe.” Rock climbing, however, is not a routine activity for many people, and for someone unfamiliar with the modern safety and protection systems that are a part of rock climbing, it seems like a dangerous thing to do. So too with going abroad. Some people perceive that *any* trip abroad is “dangerous,” while ignoring the high levels of crime in many regions of North America.

The dangers are not necessarily *from the* culture, but mediated through culture. That is, culture insensitivity won't (necessarily) put you in harm's way from people, but can lead to not knowing important contextual and/or environmental facts. Local people are key, and have lived and worked in these environments for years. Good and sensitive relationships can be your key to managing risk—from learning local weather patterns and seasonal variation, to specific animals and other hazards. “Culture” is not just something you have to deal with on the way in or out of an international wilderness expedition. Culture has shaped the landscape, as the environment has also shaped the culture in turn. An appreciation and understanding of the local context and culture is the key to international risk management. Risk management in an international setting is more than just checking the government warnings about a country or picking up a travel guidebook. Cultural competence, local relationships, and deep contextual knowledge are as important as appropriate equipment, technical competency, and a detailed risk management plan.

NOTES

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Some of the specific examples are composites or modified to preserve confidentiality.

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APPENDIX A: International Program Risk Management Questions

The following are a non-inclusive list of questions that programs with an international and/or cross-cultural component may need to consider. This is intended as a starting point for reviewing risk management issues in an international context, as each program will need to add to or delete from this list as fits their specific context.

One way to use these is to take your existing risk management plan and list each component on a flip chart or large whiteboard. Then determine what each component depends on, including what those things depend on—working backward in a “chain” of assumptions. Try and be focused (one component per session, for example) and exhaustive (be detail oriented). Once you have the chain of dependencies worked out, you can determine if those factors exist in the international or cross-cultural setting you will be working in. For example, medical evacuations generally assume that more competent medical professionals will come to assist in the evacuation. What if they don’t exist in the country you are operating in? What about when the patient gets to the hospital? What do you assume will happen then? (and so on).

The following questions are designed to help in that process, and help you being to review and revise your risk management plan for an international setting.

Context changes

- What language is used in the country? Are there different dialects in each region? Are your local contacts fluent in the language(s) necessary to operate there?
- Do your local contacts understand what you are saying and communicating (written or spoken)? How are you going to ensure that you understand each other?
- What language is used by the emergency services in the country? Do you have someone who can translate technical words into the appropriate language (e.g. in the case of reporting a medical emergency over the radio)?
- What differences are there in terms of legal expectations and norms? What differences (if any) exist in laws and duties? For example, while the “good Samaritan” law protects people who stop to help an injured third party in some countries, do those laws exist in the county were you will be working? What are the laws regarding medical care? Is your WFR trained instructor going to be put in jail for giving a sick villager an aspirin?
- What differences are there in terms of time expectations? How precise do you have to be? What are the local norms for “acceptable” lateness, etc.?
- List, as much as possible, common expectations you have in your current risk management plan. What *unstated* expectations are there in your plan? Do you expect that houses have electricity and phones? That hospitals have doctors? Next, examine those expectations in your country of operation. How many apply there? If they do not, what are you going to do about it?
- What key differences are there in terms of infrastructure? What are the roads like? Are they seasonal? What type of phone system is used? Can you get a cell phone? Is it legal

to own and/or operate a radio in the country you will be in? For example, are the “Talkabout” short-range radios your instructors use to communicate with each other really legal or not? Does it matter?

- Does an infrastructure exist for rescue and/or evacuation? What sorts of equipment are used? What types of radios? Do you have to register with local authorities or not?

Cultural shifts

- How is risk defined in the place you are working? Do local people, including local professionals, use the same language you do? Do the same words mean the same thing?
- How can you define “risk” in a way which all parties understand what it means?
- What is considered “normal” or “everyday” risk in the host country?
- How is “wilderness” defined? When places are translated in English as “national parks” or “forest reserve” what does that mean? Are there the same expectations regarding access and use?
- What unique risks (human and otherwise) exist in the populated wilderness? Are there unique “user groups” of people (villagers, hunters, etc.) who you might be interacting with?
- How do local people describe distances and directions? If you need to evacuate someone, for example, how are you going to get directions in and out of the area that makes sense to local people?

Other questions

- How can you break apart the risk equation (severity, probability and time) to use in an international context? What parts of it change (if any) in the new context?
- What assumptions are there in your own and your new culture about how things happen in terms of fate, agency, and how things happen? How can you compensate or bridge any differences in understanding?
- What extra protocols or safety standards do you need to add to your documentation and trip review (e.g. checking for seatbelts, etc.)?
- How skilled are your instructors in cultural competency? How much do they know about the local language and culture? How important will that knowledge be in a crisis? How can you compensate (manage the risk) of the “specific competencies” needed in the international context you are working in?
- Do technical skills need to be augmented with any site specific factors? For example, will bear canisters and/or food hangs be effective against tigers or other animals?
- Do you have bi-cultural and/or bi-lingual staff where necessary? Do your instructors and/or leaders have the necessary meta-skills (general cultural sensitivity) and specific competencies (knowledge about the specific culture) to act in appropriate ways with various people they might come into contact with, from villagers to government officials?

- Are your risk management plans taking into account time away from the “main” activity? How will you ensure your group is safe as it gets to the trailhead in the international setting? Have expectations regarding culturally appropriate dress been made clear to the group so that they can maintain a low profile? What other factors need to be considered?
- How do the leaders of your program deal with ambiguity? How can this be strengthened or developed more in your instructor training and orientation programs?
- Do you need to do a pre-trip reconnaissance? What important information can you get online or from books (such as US State Department Travel Advisories)? What do you need to go and see for yourself (ground check)?

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