Ambushed by myself: growing beyond several unexpected leadership pitfalls

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Objectives for this session

• To more deeply sensitize ourselves to the broad area of human attitudes and their causative and contributory effects on outdoor accidents and incidents;
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• To foster humility, honesty and transparency as professional traits that will allow us both to learn from our past, and ultimately enable us to lead and provide safer experiences for clients and friends in the backcountry.
It’s a leadership issue

“I never met a man who gave me as much trouble as myself.” (Dwight L. Moody)

1. In your outdoor adventure past, have you experienced an injury, accident, incident, or near miss?
2. Can you identify any role that you might have had, intentional or not, in creating the conditions for the incident? Is there anything about that incident that you were or would be unwilling to share with a colleague or superior?
3. Why?
4. Are you lying to me as you answer these questions?
What’s inside me, the leader, to contribute to a disaster?

1. Routine/mindlessness

“There are days when no one should rely unduly on his ‘competence.’ Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.” (Walter Benjamin)
1. Routine/mindlessness

What’s the common element?

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• “Every few years, there seems to be an accident like this. Experienced climbers and guides engaged in routine operations become mentally engaged in something other than the tasks at hand.” (ANAM, 1988, p. 41)
1. Routine/mindlessness

Characteristics of mindlessness (Langer, 1991):

- 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.
1. Routine/competence

Characteristics of mindfulness (Langer, 1991):

• 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.
1. Routine/mindlessness

“[It is likely to result from] a single exposure to information. When information is given in absolute (vs. conditional) language, is given by an authority, or initially appears irrelevant, there is little manifest reason to critically examine the information and thereby recognize that it is context-dependent. Instead, the individual mindlessly forms a cognitive commitment to the information and freezes its potential meaning.”
2. Competence: who is the real Master?

“Do not mistake precision repetition for expert performance. The real expert is the one who can beat you with an old wooden racquet, while the wind is blowing and the sun is glaring in his eyes. Adaptability -- a continuous process of ‘reflection, then correction’ defines the true Master.”
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3. Social anxiety-ego

“I think one of the interesting things about poker is that once you let your ego in, you’re done for.” (Al Alvarez)
3. Social anxiety-ego

So what is really happening when ego gets involved?

- *The Distraction explanation*

- *The Loss of Objectivity explanation*
3. Social anxiety-ego

HUBRIS: “excessive pride; arrogance”

(What’s going on in here? How can we tell?)

GROWING CONFIDENCE
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4. Leadership team dynamics

Toxic combo:

- Strong-willed alongside acquiescing.
- Amorous relationship.
- Ego competition (too similar).
- Others?
4. Leadership team dynamics

Leaderless among peers:

• Unwillingness to verbalize misgivings or raise questions about others’ readiness, skills, or competence.

• Hesitancy to slow or stop the action to force a discussion.

• Tendency to interpret any momentum as positive, without a discerning regard as to which direction it is pointed.

• Avoidance of taking ultimate responsibility.
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5. Directive leadership, fostering group-think and destructive goal pursuit

Groupthink – a definition: “A deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.” (Janis, 1972, p. 9). Janis then identifies 8 symptoms of groupthink:

- Illusion of invulnerability
- Collective rationalization
- Belief in inherent morality
- Stereotyped views of out-groups
- Direct pressures on dissenters
- Self censorship
- Illusion or unanimity
- Self-appointed “mind-guards”
We need more dissenting opinions.

Absolutely, sir.

We agree 100%.
5. Directive leadership, fostering group-think and destructive goal pursuit

Destructive Goal Pursuit (Kayes, 2006):

- **Goal**: an idealized future state, an optimal outcome.
- **Theodicy**: people who hold strong beliefs often seek to maintain those beliefs even in the face of contradictory information. Individuals rely on future desired states to rationalize current suffering.
- **Goalodicy**: destructive goal pursuit “The more a person, group, or organization relies on a future as yet unachieved goal as a source of identity, the more likely they will persist at pursuing the goal beyond what is reasonable.”
5. Directive leadership, fostering group-think and destructive goal pursuit

• “The goal serves not only as the destination but also as the means to justify the continued pursuit of the goal.” (2006, 44).

• Straw (1993) refers to this as “an escalation of commitment to a failing course of action.”

• Put this together with Janis’ ideas about Groupthink. What we observe is that when group identity and goal striving are intertwined, leaders may in fact wittingly or unwittingly evoke group-think to maintain commitment to both group and goal.
Applications and Take-aways

“The cultivation of awareness gives one the basis for detachment, the ability to stand aside and see oneself in perspective in the context of one’s own experience, amidst the ever present dangers, threats, and alarms ... Awareness is not a giver of solace – it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity.” (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 27-28)
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3. Learning from my past, or our organization’s history; unpacking the epics

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2. Programmatic and administrative audit: where is our organization/program vulnerable (routine, toxic combo)?
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   “On the occasion of every accident that befalls you, remember to turn to yourself and inquire what power you have for turning it to use.” (Epictetus)
4. What are the implications for us regarding staff selection? Training? What are some creative ways that we can integrate self awareness of leadership pitfalls into the staff interviewing and selection process?
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Resources


• K.P. Cross, *Not can but will college teaching be improved?* Reflections, 3, newsletter of the Provost’s Advisory Committee on Teaching and Learning, University of Western Ontario, 1-11.


