

Philosophy of Outdoor Leadership

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Fundamentals of Outdoor Leadership

Abstract

This paper explores why outdoor leadership is important to individuals and society as a whole. In this paper I will specifically focus on outdoor medical professionals and their role in the outdoor world, since that is the field of study I am choosing to go into. All the theories I studied seem to agree on the fact that the outdoors are important in an individual's health and well-being, thus making them better in society. I will be examining the viewpoints of Ellen White, Buck Tilton, the Outward Bound organization, and our Outdoor Leadership textbook. They show how the outdoors are important in the physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of people and how outdoor medical professionals utilize the outdoors in a way to accomplish their goal of helping people function at their optimum level of health.

Keywords: outdoors, medical, health, well being

Philosophy of Outdoor Leadership

My definition of Outdoor Leadership is promoting the health and well being of a group of people by utilizing the outdoors and leading people in such a way as to keep them safe while they enjoy their time in nature. Promoting health in someone includes his or her physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional well being. Outward Bound has the philosophy that “effective leadership makes all the difference in how a group performs and if a mission is accomplished” (Kelly, 2012). An outdoor leader, whether they are leading a trip, studying the environment, providing medical attention, etc., must have certain qualities in order to ensure that they are providing the best experience they can for their participants.

The outdoors affects every aspect of an individual’s well being; it affects their spiritual, emotional, mental, social, and physical health. I learned this early on as a kid. Growing up, my parents would take me hiking and camping any chance they got. Through all our family trips, my parents taught me that the outdoors could help my mental capacity. The fresh air would help me think more clearly, and the sunshine would give me my daily dose of vitamin D. The outdoors are also known to relax and restore the mind. A lot of this has to do with the colors that are in nature. In nature, we see a lot of greens and blues. Research has shown that blue affects people mentally by calming the mind and aiding in concentration. Green is the one color that your eyes don’t have to adjust to at all; therefore it is a resting color that provides balance and peace. By calming and restoring our mind in the outdoors, we are able to perform better in other areas of our lives.

The frontal lobe of our brain is one of the biggest parts of the brain that is affected by the outdoors. Mental (or thinking) is one part of the frontal lobe; the other is emotion. Growing up in Pathfinders taught me that emotions and self-esteem are affected by the outdoors in many

different ways. Anytime I would finish one of the outdoor tasks assigned to me in Pathfinders, I felt accomplished, thus raising my self-esteem. Psychologist Bowler studied the comparison of the same activity a child did in a natural environment versus a human-made environment. Their results showed that the children that performed the activities in the natural environment had reduced negative emotion such as anger, fatigue, and sadness (Bowler, 2010). It has also been proven that physical activity helps reduce stress and prevents cases of depression. By exercising, you release endorphins, which trigger the part of your brain that boosts self-esteem and your “happiness” level.

Not only do the outdoors affect us mentally and emotionally, but it also affects us spiritually. Whenever we used to go outdoors, my dad would love pointing out certain objects in nature from the majestic sunrise in the mountains to the little cardinal perched on a branch outside our house. From these objects, he would make a spiritual connection. He would tell me that the tiny baby sea turtles that were hatching were drawn away from the sea towards the lights on the beach just like we are drawn away from God and towards things of this world, and sometimes we need others to show us the way back to God just like we did for the sea turtles with our flashlights. Or he would tell me that there is something good that comes out of every season, even if it may not seem like it, just like something good comes out of every experience in our life even though sometimes we may feel devastated.

God created nature to show us pieces of who He is. Even Christ used examples of nature in His parables to explain things that were otherwise unexplainable to humans. But when God created this world, He put humans in charge of caring for it. This makes it our responsibility to keep the wilderness and the environment around us in good shape. As knowledgeable outdoor leaders, we can do this by using and enforcing the Leave No Trace principles, which are: plan

ahead and prepare, travel/camp on durable surfaces, dispose properly of waste, leave what you find, minimize campfire impacts, respect wildlife, and be considerate of other visitors (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, Breuing, 2006)

Along with helping people mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, the outdoors also helps people socially. Because people have greater self-esteem and emotional stability when they are outdoors, they are able to work more cohesively together. Being outdoors, especially on long trips, your survival instincts kick in. Sometimes you have to work together as a group to survive. A good leader will be able to teach the group how to work together for the greater good of everyone and how to benefit from everyone's strengths. There's no way you do anything outside and not use teamwork. By the end of the trip (or whatever you are doing outside), the individuals in the group have made solid friendships that will last a very long time.

And of course, the outdoors helps physical health in the sense that you become more fit by being active. By being active, we increase our metabolism and muscle mass therefore helping our body work at its optimum level. But that's not the only way the outdoors helps us physically. It also increases our health by providing clean oxygen for us to breath, and boosts our immune system. By getting "dirty" we allow small, mostly harmless bacteria into our system that stimulates the immune system. The immune system is easily able to destroy these bacteria, and in the process it becomes stronger and easier to stimulate. Therefore when someone that goes outdoors a lot gets sick, his or her immune system kicks in faster than someone that hardly ever goes outdoors. And if they do get sick, it is a lot easier to get better when they spend time outdoors. Ellen White says, "Nature is God's physician. The pure air, the glad sunshine, the beautiful flowers and trees, the orchards and vineyards, and outdoor exercise amid these

surroundings, are health-giving—the elixir of life” (White, 1948). (Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight, & Pullin, 2010)

A good outdoor leader will learn to utilize different strategies to help everyone in their group achieve their optimum functioning through spiritual, social, emotional, and mental well being. One of the ways an outdoor leader can help people in their group achieve this optimum functioning is by using good judgment and making good decision. Decision-making and judgment are not usually something that comes completely natural to a leader. Most of the time it comes with experience. But there are some other ways that leaders can help gain better judgment, such as seeking knowledge in education, using mentors, and maintaining a self-development plan (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, Breuing, 2006). Keeping themselves accountable for decisions made in the past and future also helps. Decision-making model are used to provide a concrete, logical list of steps to making a decision, which includes: defining the problem, gathering relevant information, considering priorities, considering options, listing solutions, evaluating solutions and consequences, implementing a decision, and reevaluating the situation (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, Breuing, 2006). When a leader makes sound judgments and good decisions, they increase the safety of the group drastically.

The reason I chose Outdoor Emergency Services as my major is because I want to be able to help people in the most effective way possible. I have had a lot of experience in the outdoors from camping, hiking, and Pathfinders when I was little to backpacking, snowboarding, rock climbing, whitewater rafting, caving, scuba diving, Wilderness First Responder (WFR) training, etc., as I got older. Because of these experiences, I am passionate about the outdoors, and as this paper shows, I believe that the outdoors are beneficial to everyone. But sometimes even with sound judgment and good decisions, accidents happen and people need help. I want to be able to

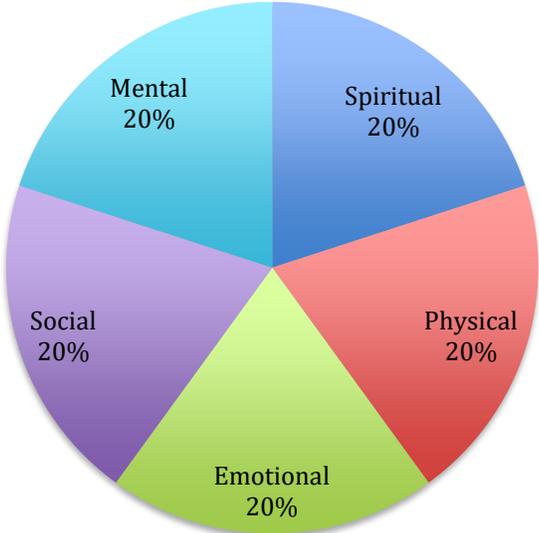
be there to specifically provide any medical attention they need. Outdoor medical professions are not easy. As Tilton says, “Wilderness medicine is often difficult and demanding. The wilderness can turn little emergencies into big emergencies. There is a smaller margin for error than in an urban environment” (Tilton, 2010). But though it can be difficult, I look forward to the challenge and the effect it will have.

As a leader, I tend to follow the Contingency Leadership Theory the most, which says that leaders are either motivated by tasks or relationships with their group. I am a very relationship-oriented person and I love helping, nurturing, and caring for people in any way they need. I can also be strong-willed, but I don’t try to push my opinions on others. These qualities help me a lot in my leadership experiences. If a group is doing well and I have a good relationship with them, I can be a good leader. But if I feel like I am not getting along with them very well, I will struggle more as a leader. I learned this through my experience of being a counselor; if I had a cabin that was obedient and liked me, I stepped into my role as their leader with ease, and we had a wonderful week. But if I had a disruptive cabin that disliked the way I did things, I would sometimes take it personally and I had a hard time being confident enough to lead. I fully agree with Kelly when he says, “Leaders need to know that success is not dependent on the leader, but on the leader’s ability to gain the respect, commitment, and energy of the group and to transform the group into a high functioning team all focused on a shared goal and outcome” (Kelly, 2012). As long as you have an individual’s respect, commitment, and energy, you can get them to do anything, not because they are forced to, but because they want to, which will make everyone’s experience much more enjoyable.

Conclusion

When a leader chooses to take on a leadership role, they are taking up a huge responsibility. They are not only responsible for their group's physical well being, but also their emotional, mental, spiritual, and social health for the trip. Most people would be scared off by such a big responsibility; that's why it takes a very strong person to be a leader. But the reward of seeing people working in the way that God created them to work, or in my case seeing them gain back their health, makes it all worthwhile. I like how Leroy Kurtz put it when he said, "I focus on what you can put into people rather than what you can get out of them" (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, Breunig, 2006). As long as you put others before yourself and are helping put all the emotional, physical, mental, social, and spiritual health into them, there's no way you won't feel accomplished and rewarded. You are able to help people better themselves, and when they become better, they help society as a whole. So you are able to help make a change in the world one step at a time. And that is what outdoor leadership is all about: making the world a better place one step at a time by promoting change.

Parts of an Individual's Health Affected by the Outdoors



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