

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from

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Nine Leadership Statements You Never Want to Hear Yourself Saying Out There (Nos. 1-3)

In the next three editions of **GUYdelines**, we are going to unpack nine leadership statements you never want to hear yourself say out there. Each of these statements carries freight – that is, each is indicative of a larger misperception, bias, or judgment error. In this edition we deal with the first three. So to get us thinking, here is your assignment: look at the statements below, and, before reading the rest of the article, pencil down a few thoughts about each one. What is the error? What is the problem with this statement? What does it show about the leader who says it, and what are the larger issues possibly at stake. Here are your first three:

- **“I don’t think it’s an issue – the other group leaders over there don’t seem too concerned.”**
- **“Let’s vote!”**
- **“Just do it the same way we did it the last time we were here!”**

Now let’s take each one apart.

“I don’t think it’s an issue – the other group leaders over there don’t seem too concerned.”

You are paused with your group and discussing the advisability of continuing up the ridge. It is later in the day than you planned, and the clouds to the south appear to be building and approaching slowly. You are aware of some fatigue and fitness issues in your crew. As you discuss, another group of seasoned looking mountaineers passes by on the trail and heads up the climb. You turn to your

group and announce, “*Well, we have used enough time here; let’s shoulder those packs and get underway.*” Here is an example of a situation in

Robin and I had the chance to visit Acadia Ntl. Park in Maine over Thanksgiving and hike on Mt. St. Sauveur with our daughter and son-in-law. We love to visit pretty places!



which you might have unwittingly relied on **social proof** rather than objective judgment about the details and facts of the situation. Seeing others taking action can influence us toward the same action, especially when we are ambivalent. This is true, whether or not we truly know that the others

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are more knowledgeable and skilled than we are. We desire certainty, and will tend to grasp for it, even from unconsidered sources. On the highway, we exceed the speed limit and “go with the herd,” telling ourselves that “*apparently, there are no enforcers in the area today.*” Teenagers, particularly those who are uncertain of their sexual standards, rely heavily on the behavior patterns they observe among their peers. Back on the mountain, confronting this bias will mean admitting that: we don’t really know that the other group has even talked about the weather and time of day risk factors that we are; their group may have very different skills and physical capabilities from ours; and, our primary concern should be our group’s protection and safety, and not our relative image in front of other groups doing similar activities. Confronting social proof decision making and taking a group a different direction requires courageous leadership – this is rarely easy, and we should be prepared for some internal resistance!

“Let’s vote!”

There are times when democratic or Liaise Faire leadership – letting the group have its way -- can be appropriate: “*Pizza or hamburgers?*” “*Miniature golf or a movie?*” But in serious situations when life or limb may be at stake, a leader owes his group everything he has, including his particular perspective and expertise. In addition, voting can introduce extraneous and possibly toxic motives into the decision-making process. Janis defines group-think as “*A deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in group pressures.*” (Janis, 1972, 9). Desires to fit in, or avoid discomfort, or to appear macho can become contagious in a group, and influence groups away from high-quality decisions or hard objective conclusions. Let’s not forget about “risk shift” – that well-researched phenomenon in which being in a group impels people to take riskier actions than when they are alone. Friedman, in *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (2007), argues that in today’s regressive (fearful) society, we are tending to select leaders who tell us what we want to hear instead of what we need to hear. Moreover, there are leaders who still have not worked all the way through their role, and would still rather be liked than respected. In these cases, voting is a form of abdicating real responsibility, and can be a way of winning cheap approval. The

final weakness of voting is that it assigns no real accountability. For fearful leaders, the out is always, “*Well, you guys voted for this.*”

“Just do it the same way we did it the last time we were here.”

“*Our canoe instructional sessions must be effective, because we have never had a canoe from our group flip in this rapid.*” **Illusory causation** is the phenomenon when people falsely perceive an association between two events or situations. Our superb canoe instruction might be to thank for our stellar record in that rapid, but it also might have nothing to do with our instruction. It might be that the boats we use are particularly well suited for this level of waves and flow, or that the river at this time of year never seriously challenges our paddlers’ skill levels. Particularly when individuals have experienced past success at a particular task, there is a strong bias toward assuming that previous experience foretells future success. Ultimately, illusory causation can drift into superstitious behavior: “*The Braves always win when I wear my special socks.*” Correcting this error means disabusing ourselves of the notion that the past guarantees the future. We must open ourselves to awareness and alertness, and remind ourselves that no day is ever identical to the one before it. We must be receptive to the idiosyncrasies of the day, and willing to change our behaviors and mindset when we notice subtle differences from the past, whether that is in the environmental conditions of the day, or our relative group strength and abilities. The past is only a precedent if you call it one.

Next edition (Spring 2017), we will introduce three more leadership statements that you never want to hear yourself say out there. Here they are in advance, if you want a head start. Think through each one, and identify how you would explain each. What is the core error of judgment or perception embedded in each statement? Do a little homework, and we will talk together about these in the next newsletter. Happy adventuring out there!

LRZ

- “**Hurry up!**”
- “**Don’t give up guys – we are the team that never gives up!**”
- “**I’ve done this (trip, skill) so many times, I could do it blindfolded.**”

