

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from

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Nine Leadership Statements You Do Not Want to Hear Yourself Saying Out There

Certain pronouncements are evidence of faulty thinking. Therefore, there are certain things that we do not want to hear ourselves saying, because we will be betraying the fact that our thinking is flawed. In this, the last of the "Nine Leadership Statements You Don't Want to Hear Yourself Say Out There," we unpack three more examples of flawed and unsafe thinking.

"I didn't hear thunder. Did you hear thunder? I didn't hear thunder."

There is an unmistakable relationship between wishful thinking and denial. Most of us do not like unpleasant news -- news that we know is going to involve effort, pain, discomfort, hardship, and inconvenience. So the temptation is to avoid facing it, or if possible, reshape it into something less negative and more appealing. Politicians call this

"spin," but what might be expedient in the political world can be deadly in the natural one. Stephen Covey used to say, "*That which we desire most earnestly, we believe most easily.*" I have seen groups in the wilderness rationalize navigation mistakes by blaming the map-makers, ignore clearly dangerous weather clues (thunder, etc.), and make activity plans that would demand exponentially more endurance and skill from each and every team member than any of them had heretofore shown the capacity for.

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Lester R. Zook, *WILD GUYde Adventures*
1047 Stuart St.

Harrisonburg, VA 22802 (540) 433-1637
lester@wildguyde.com

When outdoors, objective facts are our harsh friends. Sugar-coating difficult truth does not position us for survival -- it puts us in a cognitive fantasy world and neutralizes our best efforts to deal with a situation. Al Siebert, in his study of *The Survivor Personality (1996)*, observes: “*The survivor does not impose pre-existing patterns on new information, but rather allows new information to reshape [his mental models]. The person who has the best chance of handling a situation well is usually the one with the best ... mental pictures or images of what is occurring outside the body.*”

When I was growing up, my father would force me to confront this tendency to hear only what I liked to hear: whenever I would ask a difficult question, he would respond: “*Do you want the truth or an answer that pleases you?*” Wise and discerning group leaders will find themselves asking this often as they lead their groups toward honesty and realism.

“Look, they’re floundering. Unlike us, they apparently don’t know what they’re doing.”

The more you travel in the outdoors, the more other groups you will encounter. Some will be beginners, some advanced, and many in the middle range. There is a subconscious tendency to rank or rate others based upon our observations -- of their skills, their gear, their fitness, etc. The longer I am in the outdoors, the more I realize that this tendency can be toxic. If my group is having success, it may be because we prepared well, but it may also be a happy coincidence that none of us can take credit for -- the weather has been good, my group members brought the right equipment, all of us are having a positive health experience. Similarly, if another group is struggling, they may be stupid or unprepared, but they may also have been hit with a health issue or equipment failure that was unforeseen. A little humility (“*There but for the grace of am I...*”), and then a leaning toward Good Samaritanism is called for, instead of an unseemly arrogance or condescension. In my 35 years in the outdoors, I have been on both sides of the equation -

- I have been both the helper, and the humbled recipient of assistance and good will.

“Why would we change a perfectly good plan just because the conditions are a little different than we thought?”

Most of us have, no doubt, sat at the proverbial kitchen table with friend and trail map, plotting the perfect trip. In the flushed anticipation of the event and the excitement of planning, the mileages sound perfect and the challenges very manageable. The greater test of our wisdom occurs later, however. Out on the trail, the weather turns raw, a team member is not as strong or fit as we expected, or a navigational error introduces a 3-hour delay into the day. What now of the plan? Do we flex and change, or do we doggedly believe that, because it was perfect at the kitchen table, it must continue to be adhered to? The data suggests that a remarkable number of us will continue to “push the plan,” sometimes even in the face of overwhelming evidence that we should adapt or abort.

Russell and Brenda Cox’ hike to the summit of Mt. Lafayette in New Hampshire ended in tragedy when the couple ignored advice about deteriorating conditions and continued their trek upward. Whiteout conditions and 75 MPH winds engulfed the pair on their descent. The local Mountain Rescue Service acknowledged that this was yet another case of a party pressing on when they should have retreated.

King Solomon was not a mountaineer, but he seems to have understood something about this human tendency to fall in love with a plan, even at the expense of rationality and flexibility: “*The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going, and suffer for it.*” (Proverbs 27:12)

Chinese philosophers also teach the value of adaptability: “*The rigid person is a disciple of death; the soft, supple, and delicate are lovers of life.*” (Tao Te Ching)

A plan is simply our best attempt to forecast conditions and design appropriate strategies. But

when the conditions are different than anticipated, the strategies that are dependent upon them must of necessity be reconsidered. And so the most capable outdoorsman is always reevaluating and tinkering with the plan, continuing to fit it to present realities. Rigid unexamined adherence to plans or rules is always dangerous; “*Rules are for fools,*” quipped Paul Petzoldt, founder of the National Outdoor Leadership School. Preserve an open and flexible mind, adapt and change as necessary, don’t attach your ego to “completing the trip as planned,” and you will successfully avoid becoming a *disciple of death* – the deceased adherent of an inflexible plan.

Happy adventuring out there! **LRZ**

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