

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
WILD GUYde Adventures, LLC

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When Judgment Fails

For the thinking piece this quarter, I am drawing heavily from material presented by Brendan Madden at the 2010 and 2011 Wilderness Risk Management Conferences. Brendan is the national operations director for Outward Bound Canada, and he has done a lot of good thinking about how we make decisions. What he offers is a glimpse inside what we often refer to as judgment, helping us see that our "objective reasoning" might not be so objective after all. Let's start with a scenario that Brendan used at the Conference to get us thinking:

You are the solo leader on a late summer, 4-day hiking trip in the North Cascades, WA. You are leading a group of six 16-year olds from a summer camp. This is your 5th summer leading hiking and light mountaineering trips for the camp. You are on the 3rd day of your trip, and somewhat behind schedule. This worries you somewhat, because you got in trouble for coming back to camp half a day late on the last trip.

Here is Elijah James -- our Grand GUY -- WILD GUYde Adventures GUYde-in-the-making. Congratulations Eli for your 2nd birthday on May 31, and parents Ethan and Melissa for surviving the first two years!



You pause with the group for a water break before beginning the ascent up Knifeback Ridge, a steep and committing hike., Once on the ridge, there is no easy descent down the sides; it is forward or back. The ridge climbs 1,500' before descending again, and usually takes 2-3 hours to hike. The day is sunny and warm, with a light west wind. To the west are large cumulonimbus clouds with flat, dark

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bottoms. You take note of the clouds, but your instinct tells you that you will have plenty of time to complete the ridge before any serious weather moves in. As you drink your water, a party of 5 seasoned looking mountaineers passes you on the trail and begins the ascent. You decide it is time to go, and you tell everyone to put their packs on.

Now where does that decision come from? Some of us have rules of thumb that we rely on -- truisms that we hold to be pretty inviolate -- such as "Don't stand in a canoe," "Leaves of three - let them be," or "Measure twice, cut once." In the outdoor leadership world, we have even created pneumonics to remind us of these: SRENE for climbing anchors (Solid, Redundant, Equalized, and No Extension), ABCDEF for first aid (Airway, Bleeding, Circulation, Disability, Environmental danger, and Formulate a plan), etc. These can be helpful when making a decision, but advanced decision-making may require adjusting these "rules" to accommodate particulars in a given situation. This might be why Paul Petzoldt, founder of NOLS, said famously, "Rules are for fools," and why another notable college professor (yours truly) says that the correct answer to any question asked in any college classroom is always, "It depends..."

Madden, however, suggests that there are other less conscious influences on our decision-making processes that we should develop an awareness of. Unexamined, he labels them as decision-making traps -- mental shortcuts that might lead us to incorrect conclusions. He introduces them with his own acronym: FACETS

- *Familiarity*: When we have made a particular decision recently in the same or similar situations and gotten away with it, we are more likely to repeat that decision-pattern. What is familiar seems safer to us than taking an unfamiliar action.
- *Acceptance*: We tend to make decisions that will earn us respect, for being adventurous, cautious, gregarious, or whatever the currency of acceptance happens to be in the particular group at the particular time.
- *Commitment*: A plan is correct if it fulfills a previous promise. We will be more likely to

decide something if it aligns with a commitment we have previously made, like getting to the summit or finishing before sundown.

- *Expert halo*: Someone coming off as an expert in one domain is more likely to be viewed as an expert in other domains, whether or not this is actually true.
- *Tracks (scarcity)*: We will tend toward a decision if opportunity is scarce. For example, "I only have one week off to do this, so here we go" (even if there is significant avalanche danger on that mountain).
- *Social proof*: We see others doing it, so we perceive less risk.

Take a few minutes and reread the scenario above, and then pencil in possible evidences of each of these FACETS in the story, and the decision process that might have taken place.

If you want another challenge, take these 6 FACETS with you to work, and while engaged with a group in a meeting or working on a project, try to discern if any are operating in the group dynamic.

The greater lesson is that we as leaders need to practice being self aware. *We need to think about our own thinking: what is influencing me, and how might I be compromising objectivity or even safety by unwittingly taking one or more of these mental shortcuts.* As we courageously and honestly learn to read our own biases, we will become better leaders of safer and happier outings and adventures with friends and clients. As always, I welcome your feedback, thoughts, illustrations, and reflections on this topic. Happy adventuring out there! **LRZ**