

# Leading Beyond Invincibility, Group-Think, Stupidity, and Other Catastrophic Attitudes

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## Objectives for this session

1. To more deeply sensitize ourselves to the broad area of human attitudes and their causative and contributory effects on outdoor accidents and incidents;
2. To reflect on and work toward correcting expressions of invincibility that may emerge in our individual leadership practice;
3. To understand more specifically the social dynamic of group-think, and its potential presence in outdoor activity and expedition settings;
4. To propose a working definition of stupidity that has operational utility for outdoor leaders; and,
5. To create staff training and programmatic applications that facilitate sound decision-making so that, ultimately, we can lead and provide safer experiences for clients and friends in the backcountry.

## Invincibility

*“If you want to hear God laugh, tell your plans. If you want to hear danger laugh, think that you’re invincible.”*

*“Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”* (Proverbs 16:18 NIV)

*“We all know we are mortal, but we don’t always live like we know it.”* (Anon)

Some faces of Invincibility (Alan Ewert, Amy Shellman, and Lewis Glenn, 2006)

1. One Size Fits All thinking
2. Believing something that isn’t true
3. Ignoring red flags
4. Super Instructor syndrome
5. Meeting the Train/Headin’ for the Barn

## Group-think

*“A deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.”*  
(Janis, 1972, p. 9)

8 symptoms of group-think:

1. Illusion of invulnerability
2. Collective rationalization
3. Belief in inherent morality
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups
5. Direct pressures on dissenters

- 6. Self censorship
- 7. Illusion of unanimity
- 8. Self-appointed “mind-guards”

**Task importance**, the extent to which making correct or accurate judgments mediates important rewards and punishments for participants, and **task difficulty** have been shown to influence group-think (Baron, Vandello, and Brunzman, 1996, p. 915)

<b>TASK DIFFICULTY</b>	High	<p><i>“Over the mountain or through the swamp?”</i></p> <p>MEDIUM conformity pressure</p>	<p><i>Challenging river crossing, or maybe evaluating a vague medical complaint</i></p> <p>HIGH conformity pressure</p>
	Low	<p><i>“Pasta or burritos?”</i></p> <p>MEDIUM conformity pressure</p>	<p><i>Practicing lightening drills</i></p> <p>LOW conformity pressure</p>
		Low	High
<b>TASK IMPORTANCE</b>			

More recently, Kayes (2006) has done some thinking about the psychology of goal-setting, and how personal and shared goals can become destructive forces. He uses the 1996 Mount Everest disaster as his case study.

*“Pursuing the summit of Everest becomes part of who you are. Your self-image become inseparable from the summit. Contingencies, unintended consequences, and other obstacles attempt to get in your way but ultimately fail to distract you. And distractions they are, since such obstacles only remind you to focus on what is important – achieving your goal. You focus on the summit. You become determined to meet your goal. The goal itself is straightforward: summit the mountain. You know, at least in theory, how this can be done. You put trust in the expedition leaders, and they reassure you they have it all figured out. Stay the course, don’t get distracted, and listen to their guidance. Don’t worry about the inevitable setbacks, such as the lack of sleep, the uncomfortable cough, the egos of your climbing partners. Focus on attaining your goal. You don’t need to worry about finding excuses because you will have success. Your sense of self and the goal have become inseparable.”* (2006, p. 41)

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.”*

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

*“Goalodicy emerges as leaders and their followers begin to ignore new information, especially when this information contradicts current beliefs about achieving the goal. Goalodicy provides a tool to maintain the motivating power of goals, even when new information may indicate that the goal cannot be achieved. The*

*problem of goalidicy lies in the following complication: Goals motivate leaders and their followers to continue to put more effort into achieving a desired outcome. In many cases, however, the additional effort will not lead to goal achievement. Goalodicy describes a situation in which the more effort that is put into achieving the goal, the more likely the goal will become destructive.” (p. 44)*

A few observations about group-think and goalodicy:

1. Reinforcing group norms is not just a matter of a few exerting their will on a group – it is about reinforcing group identity – something, incidentally, that we tend to give considerable time and attention to early on in our program groups and expeditions. Are we sowing the seeds of goalodicy?
2. “Tightly coupled to a weak chain.” “Any mountaineering party can only accomplish what its weakest member is capable of (Fredston, Fesler, and Tremper, 2000, p. 4). By reinforcing group identity, we have more tightly coupled ourselves to the weak link in the chain, making escape even more difficult.
3. Let’s not forget about “risk shift” – that well researched phenomenon in which being in a group impels people to take riskier decisions than when they are alone.

### **Leading beyond Group-think and Goalodicy**

Group formation: Instead of fashioning a group identity based upon our ability to achieve --- to overcome the obstacles we will encounter – we should early on fashion an identity based upon our responsiveness, flexibility, willingness to listen, and group ability to learn.

Personal and group relationships: Edmondson’s (2003) study of surgical teams found that higher performing teams intentionally:

1. Fostered inclusiveness; encouraged active participation by each team member.
2. Minimized power differences; emphasized teaming over individual ability.
3. Had leaders who communicated humility; the leader can still learn.

### **Diagnosing Toxic Goals**

1. Narrowly defined goal; only one measure of success.
2. Public expectation; elevating the stakes
3. Face-saving behavior; maintaining status; avoiding admitting something embarrassing
4. Idealized future; fulfillment; the ultimate achievement; success will fill in personal gaps
5. Goal-driven justification; “*I can endure present hardships because once I achieve my goal, these hardships will go away...*” (Kayes, 2006, p. 75)
6. Achieving destiny; my only meaning in life

Fostering multiple goals: balancing the importance of making the summit with the necessity of a safe descent. This more closely reflects reality out in the field, and it can force “judgment-call” conversations among group members.

### **Functioning in the field:**

Several of Janis’ suggestions for minimizing the negative expressions of group-think:

1. Each group member has permission to be a critical evaluator. The leader must model acceptance of critique, even of his or her own judgment.

2. Leaders should withhold their own preferences and judgments early in the decision-making process. Kathryn Dant, in “Groupthink – the Dark Side of Teaming and How to Counteract it,” suggests limiting the early influence of a senior leader.
3. Several groups can be assigned to work independently, and then bring their own conclusions about the question or problem. Dant again calls this, “creating constructive conflict within the group.”
4. Outside input can be sought, and then reflected back into the group decision-making process (not particularly workable in an expedition context).
5. A group member can be assigned the role of “devil’s advocate,” both to challenge prevailing ideas, and to be a partner for any indigenous group member who wants to question the process or group conclusions.
6. A session can be spent “thinking like the enemy,” and devising concomitant scenarios or strategies. In a backcountry expedition setting, time can be spent brainstorming about alternative weather, logistical, or injury scenarios.
7. When a preliminary consensus has been reached, a “second chance” meeting can be held in which members are encouraged to express any residual doubts and rethink the issue before committing to a definitive plan.

## Stupidity

### What does stupidity look like?

- Presumptive certainty
- Unwarranted exceptionalism
- Unwillingness to change
- Ignorance squared

I would offer that stupidity is *someone who refuses to learn*. If we define learning as behavior change growing out of observations and reflective thought, then a person breaking down at any of these points (failure to observe and attend, incapacity or unwillingness to reflect, resistance to changing course or modifying constructs, refusal to grow) is stupid. Some authoritative support:

- John Dewey said, “*Learning is thinking about experience.*” We are not learned if we have merely had an experience – we are learned if we have experienced something and then reflected on it, extracted meaning from it, and applied it.
- George Santayana, the American historian, observed, “*Those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*” Learning is the corrective that we apply to past failure.
- *The past is always prologue*. So when we see someone repeating a destructive cycle for themselves or others, ignoring statistics, experience, and evidence, we can say, in tones more observational than insulting (and hopefully, **before** it all hits the fan): “*I think we are about to see stupid!*”

**Now let's talk about mindfulness.** Look for the conceptual similarities with curiosity that we have already mentioned.

Ellen Langer pioneered the work on mindfulness. She describes being mindful as:

1. Being actively alert in the present
2. Being open to new and different information.
3. Having the ability to create new categories when processing information.
4. Having an awareness of multiple perspectives.

**So if stupidity is linked to an unwillingness to learn, then, contrary to conventional wisdom, the opposite of stupidity is not intelligence.**

The opposite of stupidity is *curiosity* – an inquiring mind, and a desire to learn and know.

### Take-aways

1. Humility as a pre-condition to learning: Are you more willing to learn than you are wanting to cling to a particular self-image? How important is it to you in your activity or your leadership role what other people think?
2. Gaps in your resume (skill learning, accident preparedness or incident management)

People who hold to the one right way to do something are often limited in their skills or intimidated by change or both.

What is your *Personal Curiosity/Coachability Quotient (PCQ)*?

3. Debrief your own (or your organization's history). Can you identify any of these elements in incidents of which you have been a part? Walk through them, writing out key elements/ingredients.
4. Cathye Haddock (1999) tells us that the epic stories we tell are often actually HIPO events (near misses, incidents with a High Potential for Harm) that we have camouflaged with glory and heroics. Are you courageous enough to unearth your epic stories; is there some truth-telling that needs to happen? What can you learn from looking honestly and deeply into your past experiences? What is the humor hiding?

*“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)

5. Use actual cases to get staff members and trainee leaders talking about and identifying the human antecedents to disasters (Label it, Analyze it, Elaborate upon it, Personalize it).
6. Create 2 leadership training scenarios to both illustrate the particular dynamics and to give trainees practices in intervention. Write a role-play script for each with an open-ended conclusion.
7. These dynamics can affect leaders in the field (not just clients). How might this influence our staff hiring protocol? Should you add a few relevant questions into your interview format about either historical or hypothetical situations? How can an interviewee demonstrate to you their receptiveness and ability to learn from their experiences?
8. Creating mechanisms so we can learn from our history: does your incident report format invite documentation/interpretation of the human elements as a causative or contributing factor? By modifying the document, might you start to gather information about incidents that can subsequently be used for reflection, organizational learning, and leadership training?

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