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## Instructor Traps: What They Are and How They Impact Our Decision-Making and Judgment

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### Wilderness Risk Management Conference Proceedings



Submitted to:



Wilderness Risk Management Conference

Killington, VT

October 27-29, 2006

September, 2006

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## **Instructor Traps: What They Are and How They Impact Our Decision-Making and Judgment**

*It was nearly 5pm and it had been a long snowy day in the mountains. The campsite, along with a hot meal and a warm sleeping bag, was less than a half-mile away. John, one of two instructors, was leading the group toward a wide, open snow slope. He paused momentarily as he approached the slope. He knew it had some avalanche potential and he was also very familiar with this route as he had done it over a half dozen times. It had never presented any problems in the past and after a cursory glance, he continued to lead the group out across the slope.*

### **Overview:**

One of the primary duties of outdoor leaders, instructors, and guides is to make correct decisions in times of uncertainty or potential hazard, either to their students/clients or themselves. This paper explores the concept of “instructor traps,” or those situations that can provide a false sense of security or effectiveness to field instructors and/or impede their ability to make good decisions and deliver high quality experiences. A sampling of these “instructor traps” includes the following:

- “One-Size-Fits-All” – what has worked in the past will work again
- The “Type I error,” or believing something when it isn’t true
- The “Type II error,” or an illusionary or false sense of supervision,
- Ignoring the “Red Flags,” i.e., running the stop sign.
- The “Super Instructor,” i.e., the need to project invincibility,
- The Priscilla Syndrome, or “I’d be crazy to go out there.”
- “Meeting the Train” – rigid adherence to schedule
- Assumption of Unanimity; i.e., we are all on the same page of music.
- Playing the power game; “Well, what do you think you should do?”

The purpose of this paper is to briefly discuss decision-making from a theoretical perspective and then move to a discussion of instructor traps. As previously stated, instructor traps are situations that can arise over the course of an outdoor experience which may interfere with effective decision-making by the instructor. For example, in the opening vignette, the instructor, who had a fairly high degree of familiarity with the terrain, may have been basing his decision to cross the slope primarily on his previous experience with that specific terrain (i.e., what has worked before will work again), rather than on his assessment of the snowpack, and hence may have unnecessarily exposed himself and the group to an avalanche hazard. In this case, the decision to cross the slope was thought to be correct on the basis that it had previously been crossed without incident. This type of potential error in judgment may be

due to what has been referred to in the literature as the “familiarity heuristic,” and will be discussed further in this paper.

Outdoor instructors typically make decisions in naturalistic settings which are by definition complex and ill-structured, thereby compounding their difficulty. Because of the importance of making good decisions, outdoor organizations often devote a great deal of time in training staff to be effective in their decision-making. Within the outdoor adventure setting, decision-making is often complicated by the following factors:

1. Instructors are faced with environmental conditions (e.g., heat, cold, fatigue, dangerous circumstances).
2. Decisions are often made in under conditions of uncertainty of outcome. Often, the instructor or leader may not be sure what to do; there may not be one clear correct answer.
3. The event may present a situation in which the instructor or leader may not have any past experience or training.

Organizations have attempted to deal with these factors and particularly with number three, with a variety of methods including the use of checklists, instructor manuals, and simulations or scenarios utilizing role-playing techniques. Indeed, a number of trainers and researchers suggest that training opportunities that utilize some form of role-playing can be more effective than more traditional techniques such as lecture and rote because it can accelerate the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Sogunro, 2004).

Moreover, at a previous WRMC, Ewert and Galloway (2002) have suggested that simulation exercises using video technology can be an effective training tool for decision-making. They point out that video can enhance learning by presenting more realistic training scenarios that engage the learner on a number of dimensions such as remembering past experiences, interaction with colleagues, and so forth. In addition, Jim Garrett and Bob Box have created Outward Bound’s Instructor Judgment Training program, which has been delivered at the WRMC since 2000. This training utilizes the Harvard Business School’s Case Study Method to

engage participants in decision-making while examining actual incident scenarios. Despite these advances in the facilitation of the decision-making learning process, Hastie (2001) reminds us of several vexing questions that can profoundly impact the decision-making process we, as outdoor instructors and leaders go through, but as of yet, remain unanswered.

First, what makes a decision good? Obviously from the perspective of game theory, a good decision maximizes desirable outcomes while minimizing undesirable outcomes. In the outdoor adventure setting, however, there are often multiple outcomes that can be realized, some good, some bad, but all occurring at the same time. While much has been written about the process of making good decisions (Hammond, Keeney, & Raiffa, 1999), there appears to be a general trend of moving away from judging the “goodness” of a decision based purely on its rationality and moving toward assessing the accuracy or success of that decision while taking into account the external factors the decision-makers faces such as time pressure, weather, consequences, etc. Within this context, the adventure education industry’s shift from a heavy reliance and emphasis on adjuncts such as policy-laden instructor manuals to placing more credence on instructor judgment seems to be in line with the academic field of decision-making. While programs still have policies in place which instructors must abide by, these policies tend to be limited in number, allowing for greater discretion by the instructor when making decisions in the field. This may be largely due to the complex array of factors which interact and influence field-based decisions.

Second, what makes a decision difficult? The literature has been fairly robust concerning factors that make decisions difficult. These factors range from the commonly understood ones such as inclement weather to the less widely acknowledged variables such as the presence of heuristics and biases, accessibility in memory, base-rate fallacies, and motivational biases (Ajzen, 1996; McCammon, 2002). In addition, Prospect Theory (Cooksey, 1996; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982) suggests that decision-makers “weight” a particular outcome and combine this weighting with a value before making a decision. Thus, a particular decision represents not only the likelihood that something will

happen but also the importance or value of that happening. Following this reasoning, a particular action or outcome could have a high probability of happening (e.g., an avalanche occurring on a particular slope) and be very important (e.g., if it slides my students could be killed) or it could have low consequences and be relatively unimportant. The point is that according to Prospect Theory, individual instructors, either consciously or unconsciously, develop a decision from this type of evaluation.

Finally, the question of what type of information we draw from in order to make decisions remains an issue. Different terms are used to describe the information base that is used. For example, Maule (2001) refers to external versus internal information. Information that comes from a decision-maker's memory is termed internal while that which comes from outside the individual, such as a close lightning strike, is considered external. In a similar fashion, Hammond (1996) proposes that individuals make decisions based on a continuum framework anchored at one end by intuition and at the other by analytical thinking. Both examples represent *ways* in which the decision-maker accesses (or does not access) information.

All three of these problems present the adventure field with challenges in how staff make decisions and the quality of the decisions they make. In addition, the three problems just discussed also serve to contribute to the topic of "instructor traps." Once again, in this discussion, an instructor trap is defined as those situations that can provide a false sense of security or effectiveness to instructors and which may interfere with instructors' ability to make good decisions. A sampling of instructor traps and how they affect one's judgment and decision-making are discussed below.

#### **Instructor Traps:**

1. **One-Size-Fits-All – What has worked in the past will work again.** This concept has also been referred to in the literature as the familiarity heuristic (McCammon, 2002). Heuristics are general "rules of thumb" people use to inform their decisions. These heuristics often facilitate the decision-making process, but can also lead to errors in judgment and poor decisions. While it may often be the case that what has worked in

the past will work again in the future, when a decision factor (e.g., participant ability, motivation, weather) changes, simply doing what one has done before is no longer sufficient for making sound decisions. Moreover, this way of thinking may lead to increased frustration and new tensions when such factors begin to interfere and the course no longer proceeds as initially planned. Rather, the situation needs to be re-examined and the decision made based on the current conditions/circumstances at the time.

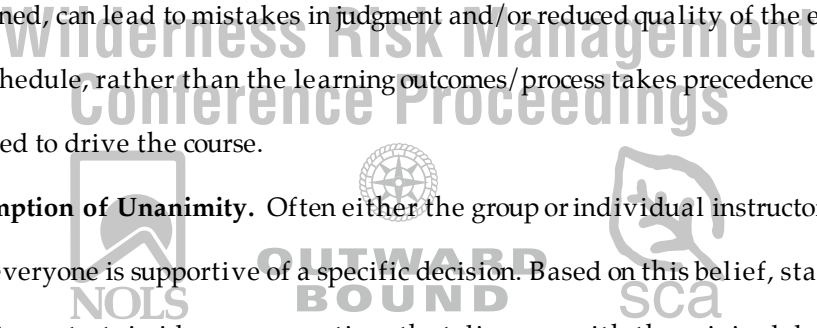
2. **The “Type I error,” or believing something when it isn’t true.** In situations of uncertainty, when there is no one clear answer, a number of things can occur. Among them are force-fitting information to fit the situation, rationalizing, and bolstering decisions. For example, when teaching navigation, participants have a tendency to make the terrain fit to where they think they are on the map, rather than first identifying land features and then piecing together their location. Following a claim that one thinks they know where they are and where they need to go, others, often with little information to support or refute the decision, have a tendency to support the decision and may even actively rationalize the choice and/or support the decision through bolstering. This “bolstering” serves to reduce the anxiety and dissonance associated with the uncertainty of the situation, even if the decision is a poor one. Outdoor instructors can fall prey to the same type of error.
3. **Ignoring the “Red Flags.”** Many times when things go really wrong it is not because of one decision/ factor but more likely due to a series of decisions or combination of factors. When these “red flags” are ignored, they can cascade into one another and lead to potential problems. There are a number of reasons why these “red flags” may be ignored. One is that when a decision is made, future decisions are often based on and in accordance with the original decision. One reason for this congruency in decision-making is that it reduces the level of cognitive dissonance experienced by the decision maker (Festinger, 1957). To illustrate, an instructor decides the group will make a

summit attempt on a particular day. On the way up, some clouds begin to move in. The group continues up. Soon the group is in a mild whiteout and the instructor decides that they will continue up, placing wands along the route as they go. As the group ascends the instructor realizes they are off-route and is unsure where they are on the mountain. However, the terrain is manageable and the instructor decides to continue up the mountain. Eventually, the terrain steepens beyond the group's ability to safely negotiate and they must now find their way back down the mountain in a complete whiteout.

The difficulty with "red flags" is that they can be hard to recognize and/or acknowledge when they appear, and often it is only in hindsight that they are even identified as warning signs. Moreover, often red flags don't result in a dangerous situation; the storm blows over, or the rapid has a "sneak-around." One way to increase awareness of and sensitivity toward red flags in staff training is by using case studies to examine decisions as well as the circumstances leading up to incidents.

- 4. **The Super Instructor Syndrome.** It is not uncommon for outdoor instructors to project a sense of invincibility - after all they have the knowledge and expertise, and most are strong, fit and comfortable in physically demanding conditions. Many are proud of their physical capabilities which, along with having experience with challenging situations, may lead to a culture of invincibility. Thus, even if the instructor is not feeling well, has an injury, or is dealing with an emotional issue, s/he may discount that situation, operating under the belief that s/he can handle it and the group just fine. Moreover, much energy goes into ensuring that the needs of participants are sufficiently met (e.g., well hydrated, fed, warm, dry), which can sometimes lead to self-neglect on the part of the instructor, potentially leading to errors in judgment. Incidents resulting from the "Super Instructor" syndrome can be reduced by fostering a supportive environment/culture that encourages staff to accurately and continuously assess and express their physical and emotional needs.

5. **The Priscilla Syndrome.** It is fairly typical for instructors and students to have differing perceptions of the risks inherent in a particular activity. While this is often either dismissed, or purposefully played up to provide a greater sense of adventure, it can also lead to psychological distress. Originally coined in the 1970's by an Outward Bound instructor, the Priscilla Syndrome has come to represent a situation where instructors might feel completely safe with an activity or environmental condition while their students feel completely unprepared and very much at risk.
  
6. **Meeting the Train.** Instructors often find themselves faced with real or imagined rigid schedules. The bus is arriving at a specific time or the resupply staff is expecting the group by a certain time and the group is late are common examples of the pressure a time schedule exerts upon the decision-making process. This sense of urgency, real or imagined, can lead to mistakes in judgment and/or reduced quality of the experience as the schedule, rather than the learning outcomes/process takes precedence and is allowed to drive the course.
  
7. **Assumption of Unanimity.** Often either the group or individual instructor believes that everyone is supportive of a specific decision. Based on this belief, staff often do not expect or entertain ideas or suggestions that disagree with the original decision. Without this diversity of opinion, poorly conceived decisions often go unchallenged or are not adequately reflected upon. Related to this, a power dynamic between two instructors may also impede the decision-making process. Consider the brand new instructor who is paired with a veteran instructor. It is not unreasonable to imagine that the new instructor will likely go along with whatever decisions are made by the more experienced instructor. This may become a problem if the junior instructor fails to voice his/her opinion even when they disagree or have a concern about the decisions made by the senior staff member. Thus, it is important to empower everyone (staff and students) to raise concerns they have about any decision being made by anyone on the course.





8. **Playing the power game.** Often captured in the statement, “what do you think you should do?” this instructor trap is characterized by differing power structures such as a new instructor coupled with a highly experienced instructor. As in some of the other examples, this diversity can serve to reduce communication and constructive questioning of a specific decision. Similarly, instructors can overuse the “Well, I don’t know, what do you think?” response when asked a question by their students. If not facilitated well, this type of response may lead to unnecessary anxiety and frustration toward the instructor and/or experience.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

One purpose of this paper was to offer a discussion on potential “traps” outdoor instructors can fall into, and to increase instructor sensitivity so that these traps may be avoided. By increasing awareness of the factors that influence and potentially impede one’s judgment and ability to make good decisions, instructors can address these factors and better understand and monitor the basis of their decisions. A discussion of instructor traps would be appropriate during staff trainings, as well as during pre-course planning meetings, to highlight the potential for traps to interfere with good judgment and decision-making.

Given the high degree of importance most programs place on the instructor’s ability to make appropriate decisions, especially in times of uncertainty and under difficult conditions (weather, time pressure), focus during training should emphasize the decision-making *process*. This process includes factors that facilitate, as well as those that impede one’s ability to make appropriate decisions. There are often a myriad of possible solutions, but rather than focusing on each individual possibility, training should focus on helping staff recognize what and how factors influence their decisions ( i.e., their decision-making process) and facilitate their ability to establish priorities. Ultimately, the goal of any program should be to equip their staff with appropriate knowledge and effective tools for making decisions.

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