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The Field Leader Program

The information found on this page provides additional information pertaining to important concepts found within the Field Leader course. This page provides additional details which may be of interest to experienced outdoor leaders and programmers.

It is not intended for future Field Leaders, but for program managers, organizational leaders, fellow certifying bodies and relevant stakeholders who want an in-depth understanding of what the Field Leader program is about and how it can promote and enable accessible education and recreation in the outdoor environment.

This page is also useful for those who enjoy reflecting on outdoor leadership and thus meet their desire to have a deeper reflection.

Principles of High-Quality Low-Risk Programming

The Field Leader course is designed to empower the leader to meet the challenges found in leading others in low-risk terrain. These challenges include providing a productive and supportive psycho-social environment for participants. Consequently, the Field Leader curriculum is focused on the roles and responsibilities of the outdoor leader. Major themes include:



Mindful leadership: The successful leader is mindful of their personality and motivations and how they can affect their leadership performance. He/she uses strategies to reconcile their personal interests with those of their participants so as to maximize their service of the group today and improve their mastery over time.



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Participant-centered experiences: Throughout the event cycle the leader actively seeks to be aware of the physical and psycho-social state of their participants and modifies their leadership as appropriate.



Purposeful programming: Every program should have clear objectives. That purpose is delivered to the highest quality by careful matching of the participants to the learning/experiential outcomes and the resources available.



Systematic planning: Tools are provided to assist with planning that honours the themes of the course.



Collaborating: Team building with participants, co-leaders, our organization, and other stakeholders maximizes our ability to deliver quality and safety.



Communication: Two-way verbal and non-verbal practiced in a climate of dialogue, empathy, and compromise is an essential component of successfully actualizing the other activities required for superior leadership.



Learning through reflection: Personal and organizational de-briefing practices maximize learning and continual improvement in the delivery of quality and safety.

The success of the individual leader is highly dependent on the cultural environment in which they work. Ideally, that environment embodies the values and supports the processes listed above. The field team will include a team leader who embodies the attributes of the 'Effective Supervisor'.



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Supervision in Context of Field Leadership

The full benefit of the Field Leader Program is only realized when every element of the program is in place. The single most important element is the Supervisor or in a flat organizational structure Team Leader. Here we will call this person the 'Field Team Leader'

The Field Leader Program is designed to maximize the potential of each person within a field team to contribute to the quality and safety of the program. Success in achieving this depends on strong teamwork within the organization such that:

- Each individual is empowered to make decisions within the limits of their expertise and according to their role in the team.
- Each individual receives the support required to:
 - Enable them to make their contribution
 - Assist them in recognizing the limits of their own expertise
 - Help them grow their abilities.

Each individual trusts every other team member to perform their role with integrity

This sort of team exemplifies a 'service culture'. In this culture, the traditional organizational structure is inverted so that the Field Leader sees their primary role as being to meet the needs of the participant, and the Field Team Leader sees their role as being to meet the needs of his/her team members.

In functional terms, this means that the Field Team Leader answers to the needs of Field Leaders, including their need to have clear expectations set.



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The Field Team Leader has these responsibilities:

The Field Team Leader trains, mentors and supports the team members. The overarching goal is to enable Field Leaders to perform their duties to the highest level they are capable of.

When achieved the Field Team Leader is effective in:

- Empowering field leaders to make decisions within their area of competence
- Maintaining motivation toward the goals of quality and safety
- Identifying areas for intervention and/or growth
- Achieving administrative efficiency
- Creating and maintaining an organizational culture of participant-centered programming

The Field Team Leader takes responsibility for verifying that each Field Leader is competent to assume the field responsibilities demanded by the programs that they lead.

Verification requires active monitoring of demonstrated performance. This monitoring must be a 3600 process and must include recorded data from participants, co-leaders, and stakeholders.

The Field Team Leader ensures that the risk management protocols are followed. (In larger organizations part of this responsibility will fall to a higher authority.)



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In order to perform these duties, the Field Team Leader must have certain attributes as follows:

- Be an experienced outdoor leader
- Be imbued with the virtues of empathy, tolerance, and patience
- Be able to delegate
- Have conflict resolution skills
- Be able to manage details effectively
- Be decisive when required

Integrating Management of Physical and Emotional Risks

Traditionally, risk management programs have focused on reducing physical injury risk. This can be a mistake if we fail to recognize that there are risks associated with emotional safety. Maintaining emotional safety is an important aspect of outdoor programming.

The Principles of High-Quality Low-Risk programming which are designed to reduce physical risks are equally effective at promoting emotional safety. However, there are two additional factors that need to be recognized:

- 1** Being aware of participants' emotional state requires concentration and effort. Consequently, it is important for a leader to operate in terrain where they are competent in managing physical hazards associated with their venue.

Otherwise, they may become overwhelmed and maintain physical safety but reduce emotional safety. This is the reason why Field Leaders are initially restricted to defined low-risk terrain, and why demonstrated competence is the requirement for programming in more complex terrain.



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Physical risk is an inherent part of outdoor programming. Designing a program in such a way that participants are exposed to the lowest possible level of risk can lead to reduction in program quality and a level of challenge that is too low for the group.

This is important considering that participating in outdoor physical activity brings large physical and psychological (including emotional) benefits. An appropriate balance between injury reduction and benefit maximization should be made.

Field Leader courses will prepare leaders to manage the physical risks associated with outdoor programming while creating an environment promoting emotional safety.

Risk Management in the Field Leader Program

The Field Leader program is an innovative way of reducing risk in outdoor programming. It is inspired by two facts. First, most outdoor programming can be conducted in a way that keeps physical injury risk very low. Second, it is essential for leaders to maintain emotional safety while delivering outdoor programming.

The Field Leader program differs from traditional approaches in two fundamental ways.



New leaders are restricted to leading in terrain that is inherently safe with respect to physical injury. Training and certification at this stage is focused on developing the leadership skills that promote high-quality programming while reducing physical risks and promoting emotional safety.



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More experienced leaders are accorded the authority to lead in more complex terrain through upgrading their skills and through demonstrated performance as verified by their team leader or supervisor.

This strategy ensures that two very important things happen:

- A strong quality and safety culture is nurtured.
- Leaders don't end up in terrain that is too complex for them to manage safely. It is this error that has resulted in most serious physical injuries during outdoor programming.

For the new leader the progression and factors required to support that progression are as follows:

- The Field Leader training course provides an introduction to the roles and responsibilities of the outdoor leader. The powerful learning strategies used in this training implant these roles and responsibilities as values to be pursued.
- The new leader will begin by working with more experienced leaders who share and practice the same leadership values. This experience strengthens commitment to those values and builds competency in leadership roles and responsibilities.
- During this period the new leader is mentored by his/her team leader. Observed performance determines what level of responsibility the new leader is charged with. The new leader can assume the senior leadership role once the team leader is confident that observed performance justifies this responsibility.



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Moving Beyond Low-Risk Terrain

Progression to leading in more complex terrain has traditionally been founded on acquiring certifications that demonstrate increased technical skills. However, this approach will be flawed unless higher technical competence is backed by an assessment of both judgment and demonstrated competence in the 'soft' leadership skills of the leader.

The Field Leader program promotes safety by emphasizing the role of 'observed performance' as a co-prerequisite for progression to leading in more complex situations.

The experienced leader:

An important feature of the Field Leader program is that it recognizes there are many excellent outdoor leaders who are running safe and quality programs even if they do not have a full complement of certifications to prove their competency.

Such leaders do not need to start at the beginning of the certification process but can become authorized to lead in more complex terrain once their observed competency has been verified as adequate by a team leader or supervisor.