DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 593 RC 017 497

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TITLE A Humanistic Approach to Emotional Risk Management.
PUB DATE Oct 88
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adventure Education; Experiential Learning; *Outdoor Activities; *Outdoor Education; Program Design; *Risk; Stress Management
IDENTIFIERS Outdoor Recreation; *Risk Management

ABSTRACT

Adventure programs attempt to control or limit injuries in high-risk programming. This risk management has concentrated on the physical safety of participants at the expense of emotional and developmental security. In the zeal for accident-free statistics, a highly controlled, directive approach is created that treats individuals according to a presubscribed plan of objectives, rather than as the unique combinations of experiences, fears, skills, and needs that they really are. A two-fold need exists, one for consistency and uniformity to control accidents and the other for individual adaptation and diversity to ensure success. Two of the most important elements in risk management are a positive attitude and an understanding of the real risks to participants involved in the activity. These elements are accommodated by following a sequential learning pattern in which basic skills are mastered before allowing individuals to get in over their heads. Rules are carefully explained and the real dangers isolated to place the responsibility for safety ultimately in the hands of the participants. While most programs have developed a curriculum based on this cumulative approach to physical safety, this strategy has not been applied to the management of psychological risk. Programs must foster development of the same two processes in psychological risk management as those developed in physical risk management, that is, to create a positive attitude towards risk-taking, and to provide a competency-based, sequential approach to the amount of emotional and psychological risk required in each activity. (ALL)

A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO EMOTIONAL RISK MANAGEMENT

Robert L. Rubendall

As many adventure programs blossom into large scale, virtually mass production systems, instructors and program directors must begin to guard against a new set of dangers. It's far too easy to concentrate on participant numbers, income and budgets often at the expense of the quality of the experience for the individual. Yet with the conscientious facilitation of an experienced instructor/trainer, quality and quantity don't have to be mutually exclusive.

The buzz word of the 80's is risk management, an attempt to control or limit injuries in "high risk" programming. Unfortunately, this all too noble concern has concentrated solely on the physical safety of participants at the expense of emotional and developmental security. In our zeal for accident-free statistics, we frequently create a highly controlled, directive approach that treats individuals according to a presubscribed plan of objectives rather than the unique combination of experience, fears, skills, and needs they really are. There is an apparent need for consistency and uniformity on one hand in order to control accidents and for adaptation and diversity according to individuals on the other to insure success.

This apparent quandary does not have to limit the effectiveness of adventure programs, so long as we acknowledge the key element of personal growth - the integrity of individual choice. Schools dealing with large numbers of participants such as Outward Bound, that are highly invested in safety records, have discovered that two of the most important elements in risk management are a positive attitude and an understanding of the real risks involved in the activity by the participant. This is accomplished by taking a sequential learning pattern in which basic skills are mastered before allowing an individual to get in over his head. Rules are carefully explained and the real dangers isolated to place the responsibility for safety ultimately in the hands of the participant.

While most programs have developed a curriculum based on this cumulative approach to physical safety, this philosophy has not been carried over into psychological spheres. Rather than carefully guide a participant through a progression of trust building, group awareness, and risk taking to begin to activate the personal motivation for growth, this process is often stifled by unilateral decisions on the part of the instructor being forced on the individual.

For example, let's look at the hypothetical case of Tina, a reluctant 14-year-old student attending a one-day adventure program culminating in a high ropes course experience. All day long she plays a reserved, back seat role in group activities and verbal processing. Now she's the last person to start up the ropes course and is facing orchestrated

peer pressure as well as an instructor who is convinced that, since everyone else made it through the course, Tina can too. She is relentlessly badgered to continue, long after the tears start flowing and she claims she can't make it. Finally, after the support of the group is long overcome by impatience and cold feet, Tina makes it to the zipline platform, where her greatest fears are realized. The process of coercion, badgering, and shouts of, "Come on, Tina; it's easy! Hurry up! We're freezing down here!" continue and finally, with some physical persuasion (a gentle push) from the instructor, Tina leaves the platform and arrives safely on old terra firma.

Many instructors would argue that because Tina wasn't allowed to back away from her fears, the experience will be well worth the negative aspects of terror and alienation from her peers. What really transpired was that Tina was forced to go through the motions of taking a positive step towards growth without having been prepared emotionally to do it on her own.

Tina is an imaginary case, of course. But I know of at least one real situation precisely like hers that caused an entire three-day residential program for over 100 high school students to change facilities the next year. The first question I was asked by the school coordinator searching for a new site was, "Do you force everyone to go through the high ropes course?" Now this concern may have been taken a bit out of proportion, but the fact that this young woman's experience was so powerfully negative demonstrates that an instructor or program so inflexible

to individual needs is not providing a positive personal growth environment.

Choice is perhaps the singlemost important element of personal growth in stress/challenge programming. There is no expansion of awareness or unblocking without freely accepted risk taking. Simply pushing someone through a "high risk" activity is not the same as that individual consciously choosing to face the activity with an open mind. Yet, too often we think that growth is some magical by-product of the activity itself. Rather, personal growth takes place when an individual is both physically and psychologically prepared to accept the risk; the activity is merely a means of providing the catalyst.

Now it might be said that personal growth is not the objective of every high ropes course experience. Perhaps a program is designed to focus on dealing with fear, so that an individual can do so more readily in the future in other situations. How will Tina have benefitted from "dealing with" her fears? First of all, any future stressful situation will probably inspire the same irrational, uncontrollable anxieties that gripped her on the course. Rather than face it more readily, she'll envision herself about to be forced through a very unpleasant experience again and, if she has an opportunity this time, will avoid it at all costs - just the opposite reaction the program goals envisioned! Secondly, any positive self-esteem she may have built up during the day will have been negated

by the breech in trust committed against her. In short, risk taking will be perceived negatively by Tina until this experience is overshadowed by stronger positive areas.

A professor of mine once claimed that what is strong enough to cure is also potent enough to cause harm. The fact is that facing challenge is as risky psychologically as it is apparently risky physically. Programs must foster development of the same two processes in psychological risk management as are developed in physical risk management: 1) Create a positive attitude towards risk taking, and 2) Provide a competency-based, sequential approach to the amount of emotional/psychological risk required in each activity. And in the case of Tina, if this process brings her to a point where she is emotionally ready to confront only the first ten rungs on the rope ladder, why not reward that effort as being the appropriate level for that individual? Would any responsible instructor force a student who consistently demonstrates an inability to handle a canoe in Class II whitewater into Class III? Why should our differentiation of students' psychological/emotional preparedness be any different?

How do we as adventure program providers insure that this breach of participant integrity is avoided? The first step is to realize that the measure of success of an instructor is not how many students he/she can get through a particular experience, not to see what crazy sorts of risks an individual is willing to take. Csikszentmihalyi talks about the "flow experience" in his Beyond Boredom and Anxiety as occurring when a particular stress/challenge stimulation perfectly

matches the ability level of the individual facing it. If the challenge is too great, there can be no accomplishment; too little and not enough risk taking is involved to stimulate the "flow". Instructors must be trained to recognize this "flow experience" in each individual and provide challenges as close to each person's abilities, both physically and emotionally, as possible. And the group must be encouraged to support the relative success of each person at whatever level it may appear. This is the humanistic element that is so often absent in many programs.

Take another look at the two criteria cited earlier in this article for emotional/psychological risk management - creating a positive attitude towards risk taking, and providing a competency-based, sequential approach to the amount of risk involved. Starting with a simple activity like a trust walk can provide the basis for a discussion around willingness to take controlled risks and how we can temporarily rely on someone else for our ultimate safety. Discovering that this can lead to a new level of enjoyment and awareness of the surrounding environment is the positive payoff for taking the risk. A series of non-competitive games can establish a safe atmosphere for participation at ones appropriate level. They can also foster a sense of the instructor being a part of the group and not a drill sergeant. Allowing students to pass on a trust fall and/or come back to it later if necessary is another way to demonstrate that the individual must freely choose to risk if growth is to occur. The

purpose of all of these activities, if properly structured, is to create a positive attitude on the part of the individual towards risk taking. A very directive, aloof instructor who has fixed results for each activity predetermined for the group may actually increase participant resistance.

Equally as important is the need to take things progressively in relation to risk and evaluate each person's ability to handle it as they continue to function throughout the experience. Students should be well informed about what they're being asked to do, what the real dangers are, and why it's important that they make a sincere attempt at their own level of effort. Then the role of the instructor is to encourage, probe, and challenge to promote expression of feelings and problem solving strategies. Often a student's first response to going over the Wall is "No way!" Rather than reply, "You'll do it," try asking, "What do you think the problem requires of you? How do you perceive your role in in? What can you get from others in the group to help you get over?" In other words, put the responsibility for problem solving back on the individual and the group as much as possible. When they fully understand what's required of them, they'll make the decision to accept the challenge and how they wish to approach it. If the group as a whole refuses to accept the challenge, then you know there are some fundamental prerequisites lacking in preparation of the group for this activity, and you must be willing to go back

and develop them.

By the time the students get to the peak challenge of the program, they should have a firm sense of trust in themselves, the group, and the instructors, a good peer support system without competitive overtones, and an awareness of why the risk taking may be advantageous. Without these underlying tenets, they are not ready to make the growth that a solid, well structured program can provide. No amount of pushing or prying can take the place of this sequential development.

Novice instructors often measure their success by the percentage of individuals they can get to complete a "high risk" activity. Experienced leaders measure their success in the healthy, long term growth of several individuals per group, as well as the positive learning taken home from the experience by the majority of the participants. They see the willingness to risk and "teachable moment" within each individual and cater to him with respect for that person's needs. And, above all, they're willing to say to someone, "It's okay to say 'no', so long as you look past the fear and initial resistance to formulate your decision."

In closing, let me leave you with this final thought. How many counselors or therapists would expect 100% results from a single session? Why then do we seem to think that for stress/challenge

programming to be quality, everyone's life must be changed overnight? People are at the very heart of our business, and only by treating each individual with the inviolable respect they deserve can we hope to allow them to grow and face life with a more positive, creative attitude.

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