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ABSTRACT

Northland Support Wilderness Experience (NSWE) was a bicultural (White and Maori) wilderness therapy program that operated in New Zealand from 1985 to 1990. NSWE conducted 11 wilderness expeditions per year with approximately 10 participants each, and provided 18-month followups for participants, parents, and significant others. Participants were aged 13-29; were at risk of being caught in destructive or self-destructive lifestyles; were referred by welfare departments, the courts, schools, or other sources; and participated voluntarily. Expeditions were demanding 10-day outdoor experiences characterized by extensive group meetings, group guidance and counseling, and group monitoring of participant behavior. This paper outlines aspects of the following program elements: (1) roles within the leadership team; (2) participant preparation and group building activities; (3) group development of a behavior agreement establishing behavior boundaries, group goals, consequences for breaking the agreement, and guidelines for participation and safety; (4) sharing power and control with participants, including the role and tasks of the day leader appointed each day by the group; (5) group activities and learning sessions for "korero time" (talk time); and (6) empowerment for participants, employees, and program administrators. (SV)

Northland Support Wilderness Experience

MARTIN RINGER

Martin was formerly founder and Director of the NSWE, a bi-cultural Wilderness Therapy programme in New Zealand. The programme operated from 1985 to 1990 and its efficacy was demonstrated in an extensive and thorough evaluation conducted by Dr Margaret O'Brien of the University of Auckland.

Synopsis:

NSWE began in September 1985 as a pilot research project working with young people who were at risk of being caught in destructive and self-destructive lifestyles, and developed into a well established reputable outdoor therapeutic programme.

After four years of operation and development the vital statistics of the programme were:

Staff:	8 persons full-time
Expeditions:	11 per annum with 10 participants each
Other Clients:	Approximately 150 parents involved per annum Up to 350 other clients: trainee leaders, teachers, tutors, social workers, etc
Follow-up:	18 months for expedition participants, parents and "significant others"
Referrals from:	Social Welfare, Department of Justice, schools, work-based training programmes, parents and relatives and self-referral
Intervention type:	Bi-cultural, based on demanding 10-day outdoor expedition
Selection Criteria:	Must want to participate (ie voluntary not compulsory programme); aged between 13 years and 29 years (with some exceptions); reasonable health, minimum fitness, either sex, any race; belief that they can change

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Roles within the leader team

On each expedition there is a permanent staff member as leader, and a "contract leader" or a second permanent staff member as deputy leader.

Usually an adult "observer" also accompanies the expedition.

Contract leaders are employed for the duration of the expedition and some follow-up days, only after they have completed a 5-day intensive contract leaders' course and often not until they have also been observer on an expedition.

Observers are usually people who want to learn about The Northland Support Wilderness Experience (NSWE) model. However they often have skills such as family therapy or knowledge of things Maori, that they are invited to contribute.

Each team of leaders/observers meets prior to the beginning of the expedition to sort out roles that suit their individual skills, knowledge, personalities and established relationships. A key part of the agreement that is established is a commitment to sort out conflict between members of the leader team. This often involves a daily meeting after the "whole group" evening meeting - and often lasting until midnight! Experience has shown that clarity and congruence among the leader team is vital to the success of an expedition.

Ideally, too, the whole leader team meets prior to the expedition with the person who recruited the group, to be briefed on the important issues in the lives of each participant.

Setting up the group

When visitors to the programme meet a group during its preparation days, they often say things like "what a nice bunch of young people".

Their comments are of course quite true. The behaviour of the group in the environment of NSWE is usually co-operative, happy, cheerful and fun loving even from the first few hours. However, *exactly* the same group if placed in a normal classroom environment in a high school or in a corrective institution would surely be sullen, possibly aggressive and most certainly disruptive. The key is in the process and environment involved in setting up the group.

To set a group up to be positive and cheerful is a complex task, involving many aspects; like staff attitudes, non-verbal behaviour, and an acute cultural and personal sensitivity that cannot be simply described in words.

However, some thoughts that come to mind are that:

- all staff interact freely with participants. Administrators etc interact with participants in the same way that leaders and community team members do. "Have a cuppa tea" could come from any staff member;
- each of us seek to treat any person with whom we are spending time as *the most important person in our lives* at that very instant. Yet we also seek to be clear about how much or little time we have available to spend with that particular person;

- each staff member has their role clearly defined for each new group that we work with, and we support each other in sticking to those roles, ie clarity and consistency are vital;
- staff endeavour to be "real", congruent, respectful, caring and open in their interactions with participants. Fun seems to be a common theme too. (Quite a tall order - obviously not always achieved!)

The actual sequence of tasks in setting up a group varies significantly from group to group and leader to leader. The process cannot accurately be broken down into steps either. There are often two or three activities going on simultaneously.

Steps in the process

The first phase of setting up the group occurs during the first part of the first day and consists of:

- participants arriving
- group building exercises
- packing food
- packing packs
- health checks
- communal lunch

Participants often arrive accompanied by friends, parents, family members and/or social workers. Their companions are welcomed and offered a "cuppa". Family members, etc, leave soon afterwards. The newly-arrived participants are introduced to everyone who is in the building at the time, or given to another participant who will do the introductions. During the next few hours this participant will spend time with:

- the occupational health nurse doing a health check
- a leader doing a fitness test
- a leader showing them how to pack their pack
- other participants packaging up food for the expedition.

During this time there is a lunch break where all the Wilderness staff who are in the building that day have lunch with the group.

At some time during the first day when all group members have arrived, the whole group gets together in one place for games, learning each others' names, and often introducing themselves and being introduced to Wilderness staff. This may coincide with the lunch break. Throughout the whole time actions are taken that respect Maori cultural values, eg "grace" before meals.

In the evening a formal welcome is held for participants and their friends and families and/or social workers. This is done in a bi-cultural way. This is followed by a photographic slide presentation of a typical 10-day journey and a discussion on the sort of changes that the parents can expect to see in their sons and daughters, ie "beware".

The group either beds down on the floor of the activity room or goes home or to their boarding place for the night.

Day Two is spent on:

- communication skills training
- negotiating a behavioural agreement
- discussing the route, etc, in detail
- writing up the day book and duty roster
- being introduced to the day leader, roster, etc systems
- negotiating the basic rules for discussion group times (korero times).

The communication skills training is brief and simple and consists of practical exercises in listening, and an exercise of "stamping out put-downs".

The day also usually includes a few hours of bouldering (doing small rock climbs) in the afternoon before driving up to the first overnight camp or to catch a boat to the first campsite.

Behavioural agreements (contracting):

A behavioural agreement/contract is an agreement about behaviour made between the group leaders and the participants, between participants themselves and between leaders themselves.

Behavioural boundaries can originate from

- the institution; eg no drugs, alcohol, sex or violence
- social and cultural norms of group members
- actions required for the group to achieve its purpose (eg personal growth using the outdoors as a venue)
- actions required for individuals within the group meet their needs
- the need for the group members to maintain morale and trust amongst themselves.

Core/key elements to a behavioural agreement are that it

- is created in a consultative way so that *every* group member has a sense of ownership of and commitment to the "agreement"

- is agreed to clearly in all of its aspects by each group member in the presence of the group
- is achievable, ie "not pie in the sky"
- includes a specific enforceable consequence for breaking each "item" in the contract, eg "No Drugs" could be followed by the consequence for taking drugs, eg "get kicked out the group".

Other factors that may be useful for a behavioural agreement are that

- it is negotiated between the actual leaders who will be with the group when it is being applied
- it is kept "on top" by the group in that it is constantly referred to, (joked about!) applied and seen to be applied
- the group members themselves apply the consequences in a consultative way. It can become counter-productive if it is merely another weapon that the leader uses to gain power over the group
- its usefulness is kept under close scrutiny. The formal behavioural boundaries that are required early in a group's development are often much more rigid than those required late in a group's life. It is best to be seen to review the contract to take this into account, rather than ignore it or let it slide.
- the process of how the agreement will be "enforced" is discussed with the group.

Some steps in the process of setting up an agreement

Do this on a big sheet of paper or black/white board. For illiterate groups pictures rather than words would need to be used.

1. Establish that the group does in fact have a goal. Taking into account individual differences, eg the group goal may be in their words "For all of us to get from Cape Brett to Punaruku", yet each member may have agreed individually in the interview/selection process that he/she wants to "get my life sorted out". Yet individual differences will occur within this broad goal: for example - Alison may mean by this that she wants to stay at school for another year, but Andrew may want to conquer his physical violence and explosive temper.
2. Establish the rules of the institution, *own* them as leaders and acknowledge that they are in fact pre-conditions for being in the group. Discuss their purpose and usefulness in helping the group achieve its goal.
3. Ask questions such as: "what do you want from us" (the leaders); "what do you want from each other" (group participants) and say what you want yourself. Brainstorm the needs, then ...
4. Check on how realistic and achievable each item is. Discuss item by time.

5. Go through and negotiate consequences for breaking the agreement. Each *behaviour may need a consequence of different "severity"* eg not doing "my job on the duty roster" requires a different consequence from getting drunk on stolen alcohol. The consequences need to be negotiated carefully with the group. They can provide most of the ideas for consequences.

6. Fill in the gaps; it is useful for leaders to give examples from previous contracts, and to point out if there seems to be a clear gap in the agreement.

7. Have an "agreement/signing" time where everyone in the group including leaders and observers/visitors are seen and heard to agree to the whole contract. Have one or more group members copy it down to take with the group.

Some possible traps in using behavioural agreements

- that it becomes a replacement for normal healthy discussion on what's OK and what is not OK from minute to minute during the group's life;
- that it becomes too complex, detailed and long-winded to be practical, and instead becomes a burden to the group;
- that consequences of breaking the agreement are ignored or avoided, so it becomes a "living lie";
- that the leaders lack the skills to set up/facilitate the discussions that are essential to administer the consequences of breaking the agreement;
- that it is rigidly applied even after it ceases to be useful: ie, that it is not reviewed.

An agreement is successful if it gives the group safe and wide boundaries so that all members have the security of knowing that clear and reasonable limits have been set so as to minimise destructive behaviours.

Remember the purposes of the behavioural agreement are to enable the group to achieve its goal(s); to provide the security of having agreed behavioural boundaries; to give the freedom to act within these boundaries without fear of overstepping unspoken boundaries. Another advantage is that in the process of setting up the agreement, a whole lot of topics are brought into the discussion, eg sex, drugs, etc. After they are discussed once, they remain as discussion topics for the lifetime of the group.

Things that may be included in a Contract for a Wilderness Group are:

1. A Goal Statement - in the group's own language;

2. Limits on:
   sex
   alcohol
   drugs
   physical violence
   destructive communication "put downs"

3. Guidelines for: safety
participation in activities
staying together
conservation
spiritual observance
duties and tasks

Sharing the power and control:

The Wilderness leaders' function is to set the environment so that the participants achieve maximum benefit from the experience, ie personal growth, learning of skills, empowerment, growth in self-esteem, and an enjoyable time.

The Wilderness Staff Leaders do this by

- developing trusting and respectful relationships with participants (and with co-leaders).
- modelling the sort of behaviours that they expect would be useful for participants;
- setting limits on safety - both physical and psychological for the group;
- teaching and instructing in the skills that the participants need at any given time;
- giving moral, spiritual and psychological support to participants in the form of listening, touching, talking, counselling and helping with tasks when appropriate;
- facilitating discussions/"huddle ups"/korero;
- negotiating boundaries (behavioural agreements) with group members;
- working supportively with the participants who are "day leaders" for that particular day;

Day leader

The Day Leader is a participant who is chosen by the group to do the routine running of the group for a 24-hour period. It can be useful for that person to have a small "support group" as a sounding-board as well.

Day Book

The Day Book is a note-book that has in it:

- the menu for the expedition;
- a list of food and party equipment and which item is in whose pack;
- tide tables and other vital logistic information;
- the duty roster.

Duty Roster

The Duty Roster is a list of tasks that need to be completed each day, along with the names of the persons who are scheduled to do those tasks each day, eg collect water, collect firewood, cook, clean campsite, dig toilet hole, etc.

Wilderness staff leaders, the contract leader and the observer are included in the schedule which is usually prepared by the participants themselves.

Relationship between Wilderness Leader and Day Leader

The relationship between the Day Leader and the Wilderness Leader team is complex, and often requires very good communication skills on the part of the Wilderness leaders. There is a fine balance between abdication and delegation, and between supporting the day leader and disempowering him/her.

It would be much simpler (but less effective) for the Wilderness Leaders to take on all of the leadership roles themselves. However empowering the young people gives them opportunities to learn which would be lost if they were put under an authoritarian system.

An essential part of the day leader system is that after the end of their "tour of duty" there is a structured discussion (korero) on "how it was", ie how other group members and Wilderness leaders responded to the day leader, and how the day leader responded to them. Clearly this discussion needs to be skillfully guided for it to be a positive "success" experience.

The purpose of the day leader, day book, contracting and duty roster systems is to put the power, authority, control into the hands of the participants. This is appropriate for matters where the participants have (or have access to) the knowledge, experience and judgment to make decisions that result in successful, satisfying experiences for the day leader and the group. However, it is not appropriate where the experience of the Wilderness leader is required, eg on matters of safety.

Tasks for Day Leaders

It would not be appropriate, for example, to ask a participant to teach Canadian canoeing skills if she/he has no experience in that. However, areas of responsibility that are often taken by the day leader are:

- administering the timing for the day, ie get-up time, rest times, discussion times, etc.
- calling the group together for meetings, meals, discussions;
- reminding each person what their duty is for that day and encouraging them to do it if necessary;
- carrying the "day book" which has in it information about who has what food and equipment in their packs and what is on the menu for the day. (This way the day leader becomes the source of information about logistics - an "important" and central role);

- linking with the Wilderness staff leader team to discuss limits on safety, practicality of various options for travel, campsites, etc;
- keeping the group together and encouraging participation in activities;
- monitoring the group's behaviour in relation to the behavioural agreement.

"Korero"/Talk Time/"Huddle-ups":

Korero is the "glue" that holds the group together, and is a vital part of the learning process in experiential education.

We used the words "korero time" to mean, "now is the time for the whole group to get together to talk".

During a korero session any of the following could occur:

- negotiating or re-negotiating the behavioural agreement;
- discussing how to administer the consequences of someone breaking the agreement;
- giving feedback to the day leader;
- deciding on logistics for the next day - route, get-up times, who will be the day leader, etc;
- sorting out conflict and interpersonal problems;
- a discussion on the day's events and how they have affected each group member;
- group members talking about themselves, why they are on the expedition, and what they will be doing in the future;
- making decisions on what to do when something unexpected has happened;
- teaching/learning sessions on practical skills, people skills (eg anger management) or things Maori;
- telling stories, jokes, singing and having fun together;
- discussing how the learnings from this expedition can be built into the everyday life of the participants once they return to their homes and everyday lives.

Korero times are vital in that they:

- regulate the behaviour of the group;
- enable decisions on logistics to occur;
- integrate, internalise learning from action and experiences;
- provide the venue for social "success" experiences for participants.

Empowerment:

Employer

Group Leaver

Participant

The essence of Northland Support Wilderness Experience is empowerment; empowerment of people to use their skills and experience to the highest level that they can possibly achieve.

This means letting people follow their strengths and abilities provided that their actions must lead demonstrably towards our reaching our goal.

It means making mistakes and trusting that we have the energy, flexibility and commitment to learn from those mistakes.

It means, for the hierarchy, letting go of the need to control and direct.

For us to successfully empower our participants, we need to experience empowerment as employees of an organisation. For the administrators, empowerment means being strong enough and sure enough of the people in our employ to be able to say to others in the community - "I think they made a mistake, but they do so much so well that I like to give them that freedom". It means being firm about learning from the last mistake - guiding them in a direction so that they can learn from it, then leaving the freedom there to repeat the mistake if that is the best they can do.

Empowerment means believing in myself - I am strong enough, capable enough, lovable enough so that no matter what happens within my organisation that might reflect poorly on me, I can support these people to do things their way.

Empowerment is not abdication of authority: it is remaining clear about the need of the organisation to be effective and efficient, yet acknowledging that my way of preventing ineffectiveness or inefficiency may not be the best for everybody. It means acknowledging and really hearing the wisdom of the people who are at the workface, or who are group participants. It means meeting them on equal terms - human to human - expressing my needs as a representative of the organisation, hearing their needs, and finding creative ways of meeting both sets of needs.

Copies of Margaret O'Brien's evaluation study of NSWE are available from Jon Barrett, Basecamp, Mabie Forest, Dumfries, Scotland, DG2 8BH

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