

Improving Our Approach to Managing Risk

by Adam Brown

There just aren't that many great anecdotes about risk management. Well, there are, but they sure make for dull reading:

The group was hiking through the bush and nobody got hurt.

After the day was over, the boys walked to the busses and got home without incident.

During swimming, we explained all the rules. After an hour at the beach, everyone went to dinner.

There's no conflict. No climax. No acts of heroism or bravery. As a camp director, I love to hear anecdotes like these from my staff. Stories with conflict and climax can be told around a campfire — they don't need to happen in real life. At least, that is my preference.

As outdoor educators, we are actively managing risk all the time. Our work involves putting other people's children into unfamiliar environments on a daily basis. No one in the COEO community will doubt the benefits of out-of-doors learning and new experiences, but parents, school boards and insurance brokers are increasingly aware of the risks associated with being in new settings. We have a very real moral and legal responsibility to be experts at risk management. Thankfully, I think we are.

By and large, as outdoor educators we do a fantastic job of minimizing risk and keeping our participants safe. We write excellent policies, we adhere to strict standards and operating procedures, and we train our staff teams with a fervor not commonly seen elsewhere in the "real world." These ingredients make our programs successful and attractive to clients. They keep our facilities safe and our people healthy, thus allowing us to deliver new outdoor experiences and lessons to the children and adults with whom we work.

Outdoor education — be it canoe tripping, adventure programs, field studies or anything else — is inherently risky. We deal with unpredictable settings and situations, where change is constant and outcomes are sometimes uncertain. In this naturalistic environment, our risk management procedures have the potential to break down and people can get hurt. It might be a change in the weather, staff fatigue, a lapse of judgment or just a freak accident. We may have written the best policies, set the highest standards and hired the most talented people . . . but accidents can still happen.

I've mentioned the areas where, as an industry, we excel: we have great policies and operating procedures, good standards and stellar people. But there are three more areas where I think we can improve. Specifically, I think we can do a better job training good decision makers, reporting and utilizing incident data, and providing adequate supervision that leads to proper and regular retraining. Our programs and facilities will benefit from a fresh approach to risk management, and we can share more stories like the ones at the opening of this article where a first-aid kit was not needed — even though it was stocked and ready!

Training Good Decision Makers

Teenagers are not good decision makers. We know this from first-hand experience (unlimited examples are available on YouTube; see "skateboarding"), but we also know this from research into brain development. I attended a session with Dr. Joseph Riggio at the 2007 Tri-State Camping Conference where he showed images of brains as they develop. Basically, immature brains are wired to make impulsive, risky decisions (Riggio, 2007). With an underdeveloped frontal-cortex, Riggio says, immature brains act from a "gut instinct" rather than logical processing. This was only of passing interest

until I learned that our brains don't reach maturity until we are 25-30 years old. This has a huge impact on how camp staff and student program leaders who may be delivering outdoor education programs need to be trained. We can't expect them to be good decision makers – they just aren't wired that way.

Luckily, teaching decision making is just like teaching any other skill – provide proper instruction, give time for practice and break things down into smaller steps. At Cairn Presbyterian Camping where I work, for as long as I've been there, staff have been taught decision making using a simple rubric called "The 4S's." Cairn Directors, Beth and Travis Allison, felt that the 4S's covered everything we did at camp, and empowered all of the campers and staff members to make good decisions. Here are the 4S's – and note, you must be able to answer YES to all four questions before deciding to undertake any activity.

1. Is it SAFE?
2. Does it SERVE the community?
3. Does it promote SELF-ESTEEM?
4. Is it good STEWARDSHIP of the environment?

If the question is whether to climb trees – safety receives a no. If the question is whether to choose a highly competitive game, while it may be safe (in the short term), it often doesn't serve the community or promote self-esteem. We know from experience that a lop-sided score only leads to conflict and bitterness, but our first-year camp staff members need help to come to that conclusion. We give them the 4S's.

The 4S's may not be perfect for your situation (though you're welcome to them), but they demonstrate good teaching principles. The process of decision making is broken into easier steps, and Cairn staff members are trained to ask all four questions. When in doubt, they will come to a director for clarification, but they are usually able to choose wisely based on this training. Immature brains are quite able to follow clear instructions, and the 4S's are made clear through instruction and practice.

We know that training is the "only thing that won't break in the field," and most of our staff members are very well qualified for what they do. But skills and knowledge are never a substitute for good decision making. We can't give our people the years and years of experience that will immediately make them into superstars – but we can at least give them a head-start on making the right decisions and minimizing risk.

Reporting and Analyzing Incident Data

A universal headache for outdoor education program managers and camp directors is incident reporting and paperwork. It's necessary, but it can also be time-consuming, inaccurate and meaningless. When paperwork is filled and filed, but not analyzed, we don't learn from our mistakes.

Many organizations have difficulty getting forms filled in properly. It's a logical problem to have, really – we're outdoor educators, and many of us got into the field to get away from paperwork! Often the problem is simply logistical, and we need to provide our staff the time and space to fill out the proper forms. For a database of forms from all across the world, try the International Incident Database Project: <http://incidentdatabase.org>. There you will find sample forms that might suit your needs and streamline your reporting system.

Once your organization is able to adequately document incidents, it's critical to use the information being reported. There's no sense allowing additional injuries to occur in the same way. The best way to document this information is with the assistance of technology. In this way you will be able to track incidents in real-time and identify trouble areas in your facilities and programs.

The best way to store lots of information is in a computer database.¹ With the power and flexibility of a database, it is possible to track

¹ This idea was presented by Dave Secunda of Avid4Adventure, and he was pleased to have it passed along.

any variable and easily identify where your risk management systems are breaking down.

Dave's system is this: fill out incident forms as per usual; there's no substitute for paper and pen — especially in the outdoors. Once the forms are completed, the information needs to be entered into a database. The easiest way to do this is to use an online survey tool (such as surveymonkey.com). Create your survey so that each question reflects the data fields on your incident form, and the survey "answers" serve as your incident database fields. Survey Monkey is a simple tool to set up, and automatically generates relevant statistics, graphs and analysis of the data that has been entered.

The beauty of this system is that you will be able to track every variable on your incident form separately. So, you might discover that your week-long programs see the most injuries on day three. Or, you might discover that lunchtime is when most bumps and bruises occur. You can look at incident information in any way you like, and identify trouble locations, trouble activities, trouble staff members and trouble hours.

The analysis, using Survey Monkey, is straightforward, and the computer database is not going to get wet in the rain or crumpled in a backpack.

Proper Supervision and Retraining

In my role as a camp director, I have to deal with many day-to-day responsibilities. E-mails, phone calls, paperwork and maintenance concerns keep me very busy. I'm certain that all of us are overworked and bogged down. But we need to ensure that we're prioritizing time to spend properly supervising and retraining our staff members. We need to make sure that we're never too busy to keep our people safe.

Proper supervision allows us to provide feedback and correction to our staff teams. When we take the time to "walk the field" we're able to maintain our high standards — both in our facilities and in our

programs. Best of all, we're able to protect our employees from harm, so that they can protect their participants from harm.

As summer arrives, and the weather gets warmer, proper supervision protects our staff members from dehydration. It is important that we intentionally guard their welfare and minimize their exposure to risk. Proper supervision allows us to limit the number of swimmers in the pool, so that the lifeguards are able to adequately monitor the swimming area. Proper supervision requires us to limit the number of climbers at a climbing course, so that the staff there are able to stay sharp and focused. Proper supervision allows us to know when the maintenance team needs help cleaning the shop, so that they can have the right tools when they are repairing the school bus.

After we have armed ourselves with information by using an incident database, we need to appreciate that proper supervision also involves regular retraining of our staff members. We need to ensure that changes are being implemented, new operating procedures being followed and participants being cared for properly.

Have a Safe Summer

Our responsibility as risk managers is constant and heavy. But the joy we get from safe programs makes it all worthwhile. Have a safe summer!

References

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