

What Is Leadership?

Leadership is not a science to be picked up in one book or course, but an art to be learned over time. Good leaders sometimes tell people what to do, but leadership is not just giving directions—it's liberating people to do what is needed in the best possible way.

Like most mountaineers, I'm addicted to climbing stores. I pet the \$500 sleeping bags. I play with the new hardware. I try on boots and parkas. But the new electronic stuff grabs me most of all—wrist altimeters, GPS devices, and the like. And of all that high-tech gear, for years it was an avalanche rescue beacon that I coveted the most.

An avalanche beacon, as you may know, is a small, single-frequency radio that transmits a steady beep when it's in *send* mode, and picks up beeps from transmitting beacons when it's turned to *receive*. The strength of the signal varies with the distance between the sending and receiving beacons. Carried on backcountry climbing or skiing trips, these gadgets have guided rescuers to many a climber or skier who has disappeared under five feet of wet snow. Since I was often out in Washington's Cascade Range—one of the most dangerous avalanche areas in the country—and since I had intentions of becoming an old man, I finally sprang for one.

Using an avalanche beacon takes some training and practice, so I signed up that winter for a two-day course, held on the slopes of Mount Baker, near the Canadian border. For the first day and a half, the eight people in my training class practiced finding and “rescuing” beacons in gunny sacks buried in the snow. With our own beacons on *receive*,

we each honed in on the signals from the buried sacks. We grew so accomplished that soon we could find a buried sack and dig it up in three minutes or less—which is a whole lot better than a Saint Bernard can do.

Then came our graduation test. For the first time in two days, the eight of us were told to work as a group. We were given some instruction on group rescues—for example, posting one person to watch for new slides. One of us, Tom, a crack telemark skier, was named leader. Tom was given no special instructions on what leaders of rescue teams were supposed to do. But he nodded gamely and away we went, directed to a nearby slope where the test would start.

Sure enough, no sooner had we got there than we found a “dazed” skier stumbling toward us, screaming that his partners had just been buried in a massive slide. We all dropped our packs, stuck in our earpieces, and prepared to break the course record for finding the buried sacks. Now all superstars with the equipment, we started crisscrossing the slope, with about the same level of coordination as kids on an Easter egg hunt.

Tom, unsure of how to deal with the growing chaos, made a few timid moves to impose order, but in vain. Since six of us headed to the side of the slope where the beeps were the loudest, one sack “died” because we were too late getting to the small ravine where it was buried. We lost more points because nobody remembered to stand lookout.

Driving home from the mountains that evening, I had plenty of time to think about the screwup. It wasn't lost on me that in a real crisis our poor coordination could have meant a lot more than a hypothermic gunny sack.

What had failed was not technical expertise, but leadership. Tom did the best he could, but like a lot of people who spend time in the outdoors, he'd focused his time and energy on learning technical, not leadership, skills. Suddenly anointed leader, he didn't know what was expected of him. The rest of us hadn't helped much as followers, charging off on our own before he even had a moment to collect his wits. And the training course we were taking had taught Tom nothing about leading. He was just supposed to know what to do.

The course was excellent in every respect but this one. It was also very typical of the outdoors trainings I've experienced in forty years of being around mountains and mountaineers.

It's not that outdoors organizations and people don't know that leadership is a major, often decisive, element in why some trips succeed and

others fail. We've all had experiences that have ended either well or badly because of the leadership. Poorly trained leaders can produce bad outcomes of many kinds—a wet bivouac caused by poor trip planning; a minor accident that becomes a major problem because of rash decisions and poor communication; a negotiation that fails because no one has the skills to resolve a conflict. Some of us have been in jams in which leadership has meant the difference between life and death. Yet many, if not most, outdoors organizations will devote hours or days or years to teaching technical skills—but then assume that people will somehow pick up leadership skills by themselves.

Sure, some people do pick up leadership skills on their own and, given enough opportunity for trial and error, they do fine. But most do not. Especially in outdoors situations where bad leadership can have disastrous consequences, it's not wise to trust that competent leadership, with no formal training, will always emerge when needed.

But what is *leadership*? No two people seem to describe it the same way.

A good place to start the definition is to look at what people *expect* of leaders. Here is a list culled from hundreds of questionnaires collected at my outdoor leadership courses for The Mountaineers. Feel free to add to it.

People expect good leaders to:

- be good at planning and organizing;
- be self-confident;
- be technically competent, which for outdoor leaders includes competency in basic skills such as first aid, routefinding, and reading the weather;
- care for other people;
- make good decisions;
- be trustworthy;
- communicate well;
- inspire others to be at their best;
- build and maintain morale;
- be good teachers and coaches;
- be able to deal with difficult people and handle conflicts;
- be able to build and guide teams; and
- anticipate problems and deal with them proactively.

Expectations point the way to a definition, but there's more. Leadership is not a science to be picked up in one book or course, but an art to be learned over time. It's not simply a set of rules to be followed, but an ability to build relationships. It's not merely skills and techniques, but a subjective blend of personality and style. Leadership involves not only the

body and the mind, but the spirit and character as well: good leaders have the intuition, compassion, common sense, and courage it takes to stand and lead.

Good leaders sometimes tell people what to do, but leadership is not just giving directions—it's liberating people to do what's needed in the best possible way. Good leaders don't depend on their position to give them authority; they depend on earning trust. They don't mandate good performance from those they lead; they inspire it.

From all of this, here's *my* definition: *Leadership is the capacity to move others toward goals shared with you, with a focus and competency they would not achieve on their own.*

I have no doubts that leadership can be taught, and that all the skills and qualities in the list above can be nurtured in anyone. Some of it, such as planning and organizing, is basic and straightforward. And some of it, such as instilling trust and using intuition, involves elements of spirit and character that can be both complex and sensitive. All of it is essential to good leadership, and all of it is covered in the chapters that follow.

Leadership issues are arranged in this book so that skills and insights in the earlier chapters are building blocks for later lessons. Chapters Two and Three, for example, deal with effective attitudes toward leading, and with trip planning and preparation. Chapters Four and Five discuss leadership styles and the particular opportunities and challenges for women in leadership roles. Chapter Six, on making decisions, focuses on the balance between intellect and intuition. Chapters Seven through Ten discuss caring, responsibility, communications, and courage. Chapter Eleven, on team building, introduces the key concept of vision, which carries through to Chapter Twelve, on resolving conflicts. Chapter Thirteen is about handling stress. Chapter Fourteen brings you in from the field to discuss leadership of organizations. Chapter Fifteen offers guidance on launching and leading political initiatives, such as those sparked by environmental concerns.

As a quick reference aid, each chapter ends with a "Learning to Lead" checklist of the key points just made.

The book's organization and style are meant to make the subject accessible. Leadership doesn't belong on a pedestal, reserved for the most talented few. It's a continuum of abilities, with all of us leaders-in-training.

Of course some people make better leaders than others, because of innate gifts, such as steady nerves and quick minds. But I'm convinced, from years of watching, that everyone can be a competent leader—even the shyest of wallflowers—at the level at which they need to lead. I'm not saying that anyone can be president of your organization, or get an expedition to the summit of Everest. And no organization should ever allow

people to lead trips or events beyond their competencies. But every one of us can develop the leadership skills we need to meet the leadership challenges we deal with, right down to guiding a family beach walk in the rain.

It may not seem that family outings should require much in the way of formal leadership, and it's true that many of us go into the hills with our buddies without a designated leader. But the outdoors has a way of confounding expectations. It would be rare if you spent much time outdoors and never had to grapple with a significant leadership challenge caused, for example by an unexpectedly difficult group, or by a sudden emergency that demanded leadership skills.

These are the times when it's naive to expect that "someone" will step forward, and that competent leadership will "somehow" happen. If nothing else, consider leadership training to be a smart insurance policy.

Finally, while nearly all the examples and stories in this book focus on outdoors situations, the guidance in this book applies to leadership in *any* situation. You can use it to lead a company work team, to organize an event or campaign in your community, or to deal with your kids. Leadership issues crop up all over our lives; expect this book to affect more than your next hike in the hills.