

Communication is key on group trips

BY ERNST BERGMANN

Over the years I have reviewed a number of reports of mountaineering accidents; the rationale for doing this is, of course, to understand the factors that cause or contribute to accidents. When analyzing causes and contributing factors of accidents and problems on mountaineering trips, one reoccurring theme I've noticed is a problem with communication. Problems with, or a complete lack of communication is rarely the root cause of an incident, but communication problems are often contributing factors in a majority of accidents and incidents.

That a trip leader should clearly communicate the plan and intentions for the trip is obvious. Make sure to address the complete group, try to confirm that your communication was received and understood.

Some other communication issues are more easily missed and neglected. Here are a few hints and reminders for trip leaders and participants about common communication issues.

Establish a climate of open communication

That's a responsibility of a trip leader and all participants: establish and maintain a climate where every participant is comfortable speaking up and addressing problems. We have probably all been on trips where somebody did not indicate early enough that they were cold, tired, afraid, developing blisters, etc. until what would have been a slight delay developed

into a major problem for the group. That's a pretty good indication that the group dynamics, and possibly the leadership style, is problematic and not conducive to open communication.

Communication is a two-way street

Good communication by a trip leader or others goes in two directions; it includes listening and observing too. It means being in tune with how the rest of the group is doing and feels about the direction of the group. It's a useful thing for a trip leader to remind him/herself often to listen and observe the group.

Communication is not only verbal

Never forget that your facial expressions and body language communicate as much, or sometimes more, than what you are saying. Non-verbal communication is pretty powerful and never to be underestimated. Your dog can't talk but it's easy to tell when it is angry or scared; in turn your dog can read your emotions too. Some of your trip participants may not know you as well and may not have comparable instincts to your dog, but they are likely smarter.

Non-verbal communication can help your communication if you are aware of it. More importantly, a conflict between what you are saying and what your body language and facial expression is communicating can lead to big problems with group dynamics, group management and leadership. Telling everybody that you

are confident and enthusiastic when your body language and facial expressions say otherwise is a sure-fire way to undermine confidence, leadership and group dynamics.

Non-verbal clues also help you when observing your group. A lot of things can be gleaned from facial expression, body language and behaviour in both man and beast.

Modelling behaviour

Do as you expect others to do. That's especially true for a trip leader. If you tell a group to ski carefully down an icy slope with a heavy pack, to ski slowly in dense trees or keep the lines tightly together, you'd better demonstrate exactly the behaviour you would like to see. Advising a group to carefully side slip a steep step in tricky snow with a heavy pack, but then ripping down it yourself will predictably lead to mayhem.

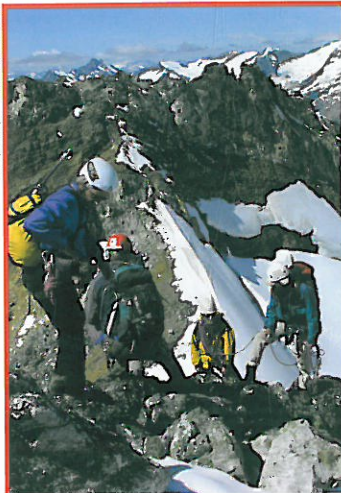
Be prepared for a communication breakdown

Your preferred and obvious means of communication may not work when you need to communicate the most. Exactly at the time when fast and effective communication becomes critical—in an emergency—communication often becomes much more difficult or impossible because of noise, wind, distance or other factors. Be prepared and plan for this with alternative means of communication: hand signals, whistles or electronics. These days GMRS radios are cheap, light and ubiquitous; they can be worth their weight in gold. You need to prepare these alternatives ahead of time, though.

These are some of the most common group communication issues which can all be avoided with planning and preparation.

Edmonton Section Chair Ernst Bergmann is also the ACC's Safety Committee Chair who spends as much time in the mountains as he can all year round.

PHOTO BY PAUL GEDDES



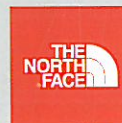
2011 TNF-ACC Summer Leadership Course

Hundreds of amateur leaders volunteer their time at both the Section and National levels to ensure that other ACC members have a safe and enjoyable time in the mountains. The ACC is committed to the development and training of these trip leaders and camp managers. Every season ACC Sections across the country send 10 future volunteer leaders to The North Face – Alpine Club of Canada Leadership Course.

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