

## Risk management: Walking the tightrope

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**Risk plays about as pivotal a role in experiential education as oxygen does in sustaining the human body.** Without unknown outcomes and the motivation to explore them, experiential education probably would not exist. Risk in experiential education often is framed in the context of adventure-based experiential education, and it is in the adventure-based arena that this issue of the Journal focuses.

With adventure-based learning as our backdrop, consider the premise that risk-taking is not only critical to the learning process, but is also essential to the maintenance of the human spirit. Therefore, experiential educators have an obligation to create opportunities for clients where they face the unknown and persevere despite the perceived potential for significant loss, and often because of this risk.

**A paradox of our time is that as a society we seek security at nearly all cost, yet that very security breeds a complacency that seems ultimately to erode our spirit.** Never fully surrendering to this complacency is critical to the human condition. Finding a port in the storm is always a comfort, just as warm soup is on a cold, rainy day, but a life lived solely in port is one of missed opportunity. Meaningful struggle for existence is deeply embedded in our psyche, and the more secure and comfortable our world becomes, the more critical adventure-based education becomes. There is a danger, however, in how we present ourselves to society. We must take great care to articulate that we do not engage in these experiences simply so that we may face death or die. Quite the opposite is actually true. We embrace risk so that we may fully experience life. In fact, we would not get very far as educators if we regularly injured many of our clients. It is the walking of this tight-rope between an adventurous education and a secure one that compels us to consider the management of risk.

With risk as an essential element of the learning process, and the generally embraced notion that safety is the top priority in the institutional context of adventure-based learning, consider the following definition. Risk management is the process of operating a set of controls and decision-making filters to avoid the chain of seemingly inconsequential events that lead to the loss of something valuable, be it a financially-- based asset, a physical or psychological injury, or death. Considered in this context, most incidents of loss are symptoms of a failure in the management system (e.g., a system may comprise a group on a ropes course or an entire organization). History indicates that rarely has an accident occurred because of one catastrophic event (Erceg, 1997; Liddle and Stork, 1995; Schimelpfenig, 1997). The O-rings did not fail in a void on the challenger space shuttle, and neither do most incidents in adventure programming (Gladwell, 1996). Hindsight nearly always allows us to clearly see the red flags. Our challenge is to peek into the future and anticipate the chain of events before catastrophe strikes. As our field evolves, we will continue to mature our hindsight and consequently improve our foresight. Fortunately there are many tools at our disposal that enhance our ability to do this. Conducting internal and external peer reviews help program managers see their operation with more clarity. Tracking incidents and reporting them to databases like the Wilderness Risk Managers Committee continues to build our understanding. Engaging formally in the AEE accreditation process

demonstrates significant commitment to taking a global look at an organization's management system. What follows in this issue are a number of models and perspectives that draw from our collective professional hindsight.

The last Journal of Experiential Education with a focus on safety and risk management appeared in 1984. In that issue Williamson and Mobley (1984, p. 5) opened with a statement that still rings true today, by saying, "...each article is but a variation on a theme, mirrors reflecting similar information in slightly different ways." It has been 14 years since that issue was published and in some ways a lot has changed, and yet many of the concerns remain the same. The content of those articles is still quite relevant. Although many of the core issues (i.e., having a risk management plan, tracking incidents, training staff, using staff manuals, etc.) have remained the same, our level of sophistication in terms of approaching risk management has grown significantly. Developing standards, talking about incidents, and in general "getting over" professional insecurity has allowed us to move forward.

We now recognize the subtle relationships that impact risk management. In this issue, Johan Hovelynck's article takes the reader beyond a linear cause-and-effect model of analyzing accidents to a systems approach. The article does a fine job of re-framing the difference between direct causal relationships and more interconnected and complex relationships and sets of circumstances that contribute to accidents. The end product is a theoretical model that has great practical application.

The "shrinking of our globe" and a more "traveled" client profile are leading many programs to offer experiences beyond their national borders. With this come risks that are unfamiliar and often beyond one's own cultural paradigm. Dan Garvey's article on International Risk Management is an outstanding practical guide that will begin to frame the issues related to travel beyond national borders. Much of the information contained in the article is based upon Garvey's own experience, so read on and enjoy the wisdom of his experience.

Even with the plethora of writing about and discussion of risk management (Bernstein, 1997; Furlong, 1997; Williamson & Gass, 1995; Gookin, 1997), the field remains rather scattered in its collection of research on the topic. In Risk Management: Research Needs and Status Report, Terry Brown catalogs the current research on risk management and provides direction for future works. The next logical step in this realm is to coordinate research projects and writing in such a way as to facilitate practitioners' access to the information. Brown's article begins to push us toward a more coordinated research agenda.

In a time when the dangers of physical risk are acknowledged by all responsible leaders and significant effort is being put forth to control for them (e.g., first aid training, piles of safety gear, and staff training), the call to consider the psychological element, which consumes much of our dialogue related to methodology, rings loud. Dene Berman, Jennifer Davis-Berman, and Mark Gillen address the psychological dynamic in their article, Managing Behavioral and Emotional Issues in Adventure Programming. Readers will find a sound model and some practical advice in this seminal piece.

I will close with one final thought-risk management is currency. To the degree that we can manage risk, we will succeed as individual programs and as a field. Good risk management is currency with participants (are you doing all that you can to keep me free from harm?), with custodians of public lands (will we need to rescue you for foreseeable reasons?), with insurance companies (are you worth the risk?), with peers (are you a professional?), and with the broader

educational systems within which we operate (are you just a bunch of adventure junkies?). In the end, the bottom line is this-we rely on the potential for loss (or at least the perceived potential), yet the actual loss is unacceptable. The greater our ability develops to engage the potential for loss, while reducing the actual loss to acceptable levels, the more successful we will be.

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