



OUTDOOR COUNCIL OF CANADA
CONSEIL CANADIEN DE PLEIN AIR

Partners In Leadership / Partenaires En Leadership

Leading When Participants Express Difficult Behaviors

Tips and Tricks Guidebook Series

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Disclaimer

The information found within this document is for informational purposes only. It is intended to be used in conjunction with knowledge acquired through a Field Leader certification course. The document offers helpful tips and tricks for novice Field Leaders and cover general principles associated with the topic of the guidebook. This guidebook is not intended to be used as part of a training program. It is not a replacement for training programs offered by other organizations. The OCC always encourages Field Leaders to access recognized training programs when seeking to develop their skills.

Introduction

Outdoor leadership offers many rewards and challenges. A common challenge for many leaders is how to respond when others do not want to follow their leadership. As such, the Outdoor Council of Canada has created this guidebook for Field Leaders. The intent of this document is to present an overview of approaches available to leaders when participants express difficult behaviors. Note that this guidebook is intended as an introductory tool and does not cover all theories and situations.

Getting on the Same Page

What is a difficult behavior? It is important to acknowledge that the answer to this question will vary depending on the context and the person. In this document, we will look at the difficult behavior from the perspective of the leader. By this we mean that if the leader struggles with the behavior expressed by another person, it is considered difficult. Usually, the leader will feel that their leadership, or their self-image of leadership, is being threatened.

This includes behaviors such as calling out, wandering off, not following safety rules, showing disrespect, and many others. These will constitute the majority of situations a leader will face. Difficult behaviors that involve physical threats and emotional trauma will not be covered here. These are more challenging and additional training is recommended if you are expecting such situations.

The Basis of Difficult Behaviors

All of us seek some form of happiness. Throughout our lives, we act in ways which we believe will get us closer to happiness. One person's happiness will be different than another's, but we all seek the same thing. When we have the impression that our potential for happiness is threatened, we do what we can to change the situation. In a group setting, another person's actions can threaten our happiness. This creates a power struggle and can lead people to express difficult behaviors.

This is a very important concept to understand. Oftentimes, when faced with difficult behaviors, it is easy to blame the other person and assign some lack within their personality (e.g. they are stupid, mean, stubborn, unreasonable, etc.). This is called judging the other person. It only serves to bring people further apart and will reduce the effectiveness of your leadership.

Ultimately, the other person is not what you judge them to be. They are expressing behaviors which they believe will fulfill one of their needs and increase their happiness. If both people engaged in this situation find ways to fulfill their needs, the difficult behavior should disappear.

Identifying other's needs can be quite challenging and confusing. If you struggle with this, see appendix A for a short list of most common needs and some concrete actions you can take to address them.

Some Approaches to use all the Time

Prevention is far better than intervention when addressing difficult behaviors. The best way to prevent difficult behaviors is to build a positive group environment. Such environments usually include the following characteristics: trust, emotional safety, shared values, respect and fun.

Building Relationships

Probably the most powerful approach to prevent and address difficult behaviors is building positive relationships with others. The most common way to do this is to learn about your participants. As you spend time with them, ask questions about their lives, interests, thoughts, and how they are doing. Showing genuine interest can have a great positive impact.

In addition to conversations, you can use humor and comments from the group to build relationships. For example, if somebody says a joke while you give instructions, it is fine to laugh at it, and maybe even add to it. By doing this, you are not only building a relationship with the funny person, but you are also showing others that their input has value. Essentially, you want to demonstrate respect for all your participants to the best of your ability. By doing this, you are fostering trust between you and your participants.

A simple and effective trick used by many leaders is to bring a few candies on their event. Sometimes, a few gummy bears are much more effective than many caring words. Furthermore, the candy may help a participant get enough energy to keep going a little further.

Expectations

Setting clear expectations for the group is a great first step to create a positive environment. Expectations are not just rules. Expectations define what it means to be part of this group and how people can integrate with it.

Usually, it is better to keep the list of expectations between 2 and 5. Too many expectations and people will not be able to follow them. Expectations including vague concepts (e.g. respect) should be defined through relevant examples (e.g. not interrupt others when they are talking, or not swearing, etc.).

Expectations, and how to meet them, should be discussed with the group before or early in the event. This will likely increase buy-in. A group that agrees to push themselves hard to reach a summit will be much more likely to remain positive when they are tired and thirsty. If you have the time before your event, it is a great idea to define these expectations with the group to help increase participant buy-in.

Rules

Some requirements cannot be negotiated with the group. In such case, it is better to set clear rules. As best as possible, the reason behind the rules should be explained. Remember that rules limit freedom of action, which can create the impression that a need will not be met. Often, explaining the reason behind the rule enables the other person to see that their needs are not threatened. Ideally, rules should be few and connected to safety (physical and emotional).

The key with this tool is the quality of the explanation. Telling participants to stay within sight will only go so far. Demonstrating how easy it is to get disoriented in a forest and explaining how quickly participants will get cold when lost will go much further.

Offering Control and Freedom

As event leader, you have a lot of control over what happens and when it does. This is a good thing since you probably have the most experience and are responsible for the event vision. However, whenever possible you should give some control and freedom to participants.

Some examples include letting participants decide when and where to do an activity, how to run an activity, take charge of the navigation, solve some problems and make some unplanned decisions. Outdoor events are filled with decision making opportunities and the leader does not always need to be the one choosing. The more mature a group, the more freedom you can give.

Giving control and freedom helps create a balance with rules and expectations. By balancing these, you will meet participants' needs in many different ways.

Increasing Understanding

Oftentimes, participants will be unable to behave as expected simply because they did not understand or missed what was said. As such, checking for understanding is an important part of the process. Asking a participant to repeat instructions in their own words, requiring them to write the information and reviewing key points can reduce confusion. These techniques should only be used for essential information as their impact is reduced if they require too much time.

Checking for Agreement

Implementing all the recommendations above is great. However, this will only bring you so far if your group is not in agreement with you. Before leaving the trailhead, it is a good idea to confirm that all participants agree with expectations and rules.

Oftentimes, a simple "thumbs-up" or asking for a head nod is sufficient. However, remember that offering an honest opinion in public can be uncomfortable. The best way to guarantee an honest response is to build a sense of trust amongst the group. If you are unsure that participants have given an honest opinion, consider using the following techniques:

- Ask participants to make a circle and face outwards. Ask them to put their hand in a fist behind their back. Ask a question and participants can show their level of agreement with their fingers behind their back (1 finger equals low level, 5 fingers equal high buy-in). This technique is quick, but offers limited privacy.
- Ask participants to write their opinion and drop the piece of paper in a confidential container. This technique offers the most privacy. However, it takes a good amount of time.
- Ask a question to the group. Once you are sure the group understands the question, walk away and give participants a few minutes to discuss amongst themselves. This technique takes the longest. However, it gives more ownership to the group and gives them the opportunity to discuss the issue.

Filtering Participants

Sometimes, asking a participant to stay at home is the best course of action. Before the event, it might be possible to post information which will filter participants (e.g. this event is not for you if you walk fast and hate waiting for others). At least if they behave contrary to what was posted, you know that they came aware of the situation and can hold them accountable for their choice.

In other cases, you may need to document why you believe a participant cannot join your event. With enough documentation, you can go to your supervisor and make a case for your decision. Many Field Leaders may not have that luxury (e.g. teachers, camp counselor, etc.). If this is your situation, ensure your events include various backup plans.

Being Transparent

Explaining to participants the impact of their behavior on you can be a powerful motivator for positive choices. This gives them an opportunity to understand you better and to help you. Most people want to be helpful towards others and are willing to make small adjustments.

Some leaders hesitate to be transparent as it gives a sense of weakness and vulnerability. Keep in mind that transparency and weakness are not the same thing. However, the line between the two can be confusing, especially when beginning to use this technique. Your own comfort level will guide what you can reveal. Start with small things and see how it goes.

To guide you in this process, think about the reasons why you share some information with participants. If the objective is to clarify or educate, you are probably sharing relevant information. If your objective is to deal with a personal struggle, or receive support, you are probably overstepping your role as a leader.

Knowing Your Participants

During your Field Leader course, you have learned that knowing your participants is essential to quality planning. The same applies to creating a positive group dynamic. To help you get a sense of where your participants are at, you will need to use your situational awareness. Your participant's body posture and actions can tell you much about their internal state. If you are new at this, focus on these nonverbal cues:

- Frowns,
- Hunched shoulders,
- Looking down
- Struggling to stay the group.

These behaviors, when sustained over time, could be early indicators of low satisfaction.

It is a good idea to look at conversations in the group. Look for signs of cliques. These are more likely to be closed to outside opinions and interventions (including from a leader). Smiling participants chatting with a diversity of people are less likely to express difficult behaviors.

Remember that conclusions based on participant observations are mostly assumptions. It is always a good idea to confirm their accuracy. If not, you may end up aggravating the situation. Knowing your participants will enable you to find the best approach to set expectations, rules and offer realistic ways in which participants can find freedom and control.

Additional Approaches for Difficult Situations

Sometimes, even with prevention, participants will express difficult behaviors. In such case, you will need to address the situation to reduce the tension within the group. Remember that the goal of the intervention is to find a way for everybody's needs to be fulfilled. Patience is an essential component of any effective intervention as the resolution can take some time.

It Starts With Oneself

When you perceive a difficult behavior, you should ask yourself why you are bothered by it. We all bring our own values to a situation and when people act contrary to these, it is easy to be annoyed. Knowing your own judgment will enable you to better assess the situation. It is not uncommon for a leader to perceive a difficult behavior, where in reality it is their values that are being challenged. Ask yourself: is the behavior affecting the group dynamic negatively?

Sometimes, people behave in ways which we truly don't understand. If this is the case, it is a good idea to ask for help. Others may have helpful perspective, which can make your intervention easier. One of the great advantages of working within a leadership team is that issues, perspectives, and ideas can be shared and bounced off one another.

For example, imagine a participant who cannot stand still. Are you the only one bothered by this behavior, or is it affecting other participants? If you are the only one, you could still intervene. However, you will need to take much more ownership as to why this is an issue. Then, ask yourself if you can understand why the person is fidgety. If you cannot, you should probably ask for help before intervening.

Remember the Basics

Is the person hungry, thirsty, tired, cold/hot or nervous? The person might be struggling with one or more of these issues. Addressing any or all of these, may be all you need to do for the behavior to disappear.

Showing Empathy

Empathy is the key to any intervention. Remember that the other person is trying to fulfill a need. Sometimes, they may not be aware that they are doing so. This makes the situation much more complex. The fastest way to the root of the issue is showing empathy. Try to see the situation from their point of view. The better the relationship, the easier it will be to understand their perspective.

Showing genuine empathy is difficult. We have our own values, emotions, struggles and judgment. All of those get in the way of our ability to be empathetic. If you struggle with feeling empathy, start with the following approach:

1. Just listen.
2. Observe for some non-verbal cues that may help you understand their situation.
3. Listen some more, don't offer advice or solutions.
4. Whenever you can relate to their situation, let them know (e.g. "*sounds like this is difficult for you*").

If you are fairly good at doing the above, consider adding the following:

1. Ask yourself how it would feel to be in their situation.
2. Ask them open ended questions to learn how it feels to be in their situation.
3. If relevant, share personal stories showing them you have been in a similar situation.
Don't do this to offer advice, or to upstage, just to show you have been there.

Good empathy builds trust and demonstrates that you are both on the same team. This foundation will be essential in finding a common agreement regarding changes to the behavior.

Being Patient

Many tense situations only became worse through well intentioned, yet untimely interventions. Timing is important. Although acting early is often beneficial, sometimes letting a behavior run its course is the best choice. Ask yourself:

- Is anyone in danger?
- Is the person so emotionally activated that they will not respond to my intervention?
- Is this a repeat behavior?

Depending on the answer to these questions you may choose to wait and see. Usually, when people perceive threats they do not respond to reason. Giving people time and space is often the simplest way to bring them back to a state of reason. After some time has passed, you can then approach the participant and address the situation.

One-on-One Chats

If you managed to build a strong relationship with the participant, it will be much easier to initiate a conversation about their behavior. Depending on the severity of the behavior, this can be a casual or a formal conversation. Choosing the right level of privacy is also important.

When having this type of conversation with a person, it is better to avoid facing them. Facing a person can be perceived as confrontational. Walking or sitting beside them can reduce tension.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing what a person said increases understanding. Paraphrasing is using your own words to reiterate what the other person said. This gives them the opportunity to know if their message has been understood and shows empathy. If your paraphrase is not accurate, they can clarify some aspects until you both understand the same thing. You can also ask the participant to paraphrase you to ensure they understand what you expect of them.

Group Discussions

Sometimes the behavior and its impact must be addressed through a group discussion. If this is the case good preparation is crucial. Choose your timing wisely. If an issue requires a group discussion, try to address it as soon as possible, yet consider that group discussions require time and energy. Wait until people are fed, rested and warm.

Once the time is right, you will have to frame the conversation with the group. Framing a conversation can be compared to a frame around a picture. The frame contains the picture, embellishes it and protects it. Your frame should do the same thing for the conversation.

The first step to framing is to let people know the purpose of the conversation. You will have the delicate task of naming the issue without blaming anybody (e.g. “it seems that teasing is going too far in the group”, as opposed to saying, “Jack is a jerk to Roger”).

Afterwards, you will have to set the ground rules to ensure emotional safety (e.g. don’t interrupt, all opinions matter, use “I” statements, use facts, etc.). As the conversation evolves, these rules will probably be broken. A gentle reminder on the spot will be necessary. Emotional safety is paramount. The conversation will likely amount to nothing if some people feel intimidated.

Don’t fill the silence. Sometimes participants need time to think about what they want to say. Silence is very uncomfortable. Five seconds can feel like a minute. However, a person may need a full minute of silence before sharing an important piece of information.

Throughout the conversation, try to keep track of those who talk and those who remain silent. If somebody talks a lot, it may be necessary to ask them to remain silent for a little while. The opposite is also true. Try to get the opinion of those who remain silent. They may have perspective that has not been said yet. If somebody is likely to be silent, you may want to talk to them prior to the group conversation and let them know that you will require their input.

Look for the involvement level of the whole group. A group conversation is not useful if most participants are disengaged. Keep the conversation within a reasonable time. However, if participants see value in the conversation and are engaged, it is OK to go beyond the set time.

Facilitating a group discussion can feel intimidating. Sometimes, you will have to find your inner courage to do what is best for the group.

Conclusion

Leadership is a complex role. Good judgment is an essential skill and your approach will change according to the situation; this is especially true when facing difficult behaviors. This guidebook contains a few approaches that increase the chances of finding a positive outcome for all. If you are new to leadership, or struggle with dealing with difficult behaviors on your event, keep it simple. Try one approach at a time and wait until you feel comfortable before adding more.

Keep in mind that the tips and tricks found in this guidebook are aligned with the dominant North American culture. Many Canadians use different cultural norms and some of the advice mentioned above can have the opposite effect. Most common mistakes include asking a person to not look away when you talk to them, speak with less emotion, or to not interrupt others. Each of those behaviors is considered normal in one or more cultures. Asking participants to behave contrary to their cultural norms can create tension. Once again, know your participants.

Words on paper can only go so far. Now, it is time for you to lead a group and feel the discomfort of facing difficult behavior. Remember, even the best leaders face head-scratching situations. We all make mistakes and we learn from them. If you want to learn more about these skills, you may want to look into trainings for non-violent communication and therapeutic crisis intervention. Your best tool is your willingness to look at the other person’s behavior as a genuine attempt to fulfill a need. You will be much more likely to understand why they behave this way and offer something of value. Remember, we learn the most when we are slightly uncomfortable.

Appendix A

As mentioned earlier, it can be difficult to correctly identify what another person's needs are. Luckily, Dr. Spencer Kagan has spent many years thinking about this and has developed a model which associates most needs with seven broad positions. For each position, it is possible to implement concrete actions addressing the situation.

To better understand the information contained in this appendix, it is recommended that you consult the "*What is Win-Win Discipline?*" article From Kagan Publishing & Professional Development's website. The article can be found by following this link: http://www.kaganonline.com/free_articles/dr_spencer_kagan/ASK15.php Although the article focuses on students in a classroom, the same principles and positions can apply to any participant.

Here is a presentation of Kagan's seven positions and a short list of actions you can implement during an event:

1. Attention Seeking
 - Offer praise when participants behave positively, build relationships, have one-on-one chats, check for understanding.
2. Avoiding Embarrassment
 - Mention that mistakes and struggles are part of being outdoors, be transparent about your own struggles, offer some privacy when talking with them.
3. Anger Venting
 - People experience anger. Let participants know when it is OK (e.g. if the weather is awful, if somebody gets hurt, etc.), give space when somebody is angry, be patient, show empathy.
4. Control Seeking
 - Be clear on how participants can get freedom and control the outcome, confirm agreement before starting main activities.
5. Energetic
 - Be clear on rules and expectations, inform students where and when they can freely spend their energy, include non-structured activities in open low-risk terrain, talk and walk and keep group discussions short.
6. Bored (or does not like the outdoors)
 - Build relationships and have one-on-one chats to learn what interests them, offer fun activities, offer control over some outcomes, keep group conversations short.
7. Uninformed
 - Check for understanding, have one-on-one chats to get a sense of what they know, set clear expectations and rules.

In addition to Kagan's seven position, remember that participants may have some unmet physical needs. Before assuming that a participant is holding one of the seven positions, ensure that they are well fed, hydrated, have no pain, do not need to go to the bathroom and have enough energy. For example, it is easy to confuse a tired person for a bored person. Either way, it's probably a good idea to talk to them and offer candy. It might fix both.