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# Lifeguard Leadership: A Review

**Stathis Avramidis**

Drowning is a universal and leading cause of accidental death worldwide (Avramidis, 2003a; Bierens, Knape, & Gelissen, 2002). Some people believe that the solution to preventing drowning is to have lifeguards assigned to all areas where people can swim or enter the water. Several decades ago, some people believed that a key to improved water safety was at hand, merely through the hiring of lifeguards. Eventually, most aquatic agencies realized that another key to improved water safety is the careful training and supervision of these lifeguards (Griffiths, 2000). In fact, this author argues that we also need a “head” or “lead” lifeguard, who will “guard,” or supervise, the lifeguards.

The contention that we need a head guard or supervisor is supported by a number of observations about lifeguarding behaviors that are reported in the literature. First, lifeguard vigilance rarely can be maintained at an optimum level for more than 30 min. At the same time, detection of critical environmental cues while engaged in lifeguarding vigilance tasks is never 100% (Coblentz, Mollard, & Cabon, 2001). The quality of visual scanning also decreases over the day, probably due to personal factors such as fatigue, monotony, stress, heat, and noise (Coblentz, Mollard, & Cabon, 2001; Ellis and Associates & Poseidon Technologies, 2001), the number of people in the aquatic environment (Harrell, 1999), social distractions, schoolwork demands, ancillary maintenance duties, and even the degree of peer acceptance (Griffiths, 1998, 2000; Pia, 1984). Because lifeguarding is the first employment for many young people, it is likely that many young lifeguards may not yet have developed mature behavior reflective of an adequate adult work ethic (Griffiths, Steel, & Vogelsong, 1996, 1999). Second, people tend to blame others for threatening events and a lifeguard may be held responsible for a drowning incident without having been its primary cause (Tenner & Affleck, 1990). In the event of a drowning or other traumatic events, lifeguards need backup from an experienced person who will act as the representative for the aquatic facility (Avramidis, 2003a, b). Third, lifeguards around the world often are not highly paid (Brewster, 2007; Wood, 1999) and required to work for excessively long periods of time. This lack of remuneration may induce some not to work as conscientiously as they should, especially if they believe that the employer does not value them or the service they provide. Finally, lifeguards’ knowledge of safety in the pool area is not as high as desired (Johnson, 2004).

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Taking the above observations together, it seems that a head lifeguard, or in other words, a leader, needs to be present, but what do we really mean when we say “leader” and “leadership”? His or her prime responsibility, leadership, is the process of influencing an organized group (i.e., the lifeguards) in accomplishing its goals (i.e., prevention and rescue; Roach, & Behling, 1984). Some people believe that leadership is primarily dependent on the personality or charisma of a prospective leader and that people are born with or without the ability to lead (Farkas & Wetlaufer, 1998). Although there is no evidence that anyone is genetically programmed to lead others (Georgiades & Macdonell, 1998; Koch, 1999; Kotter, 1998), some people have been labeled as being “natural born leaders” because they demonstrate leadership skills effortlessly, spontaneously, consistently, frequently, and others seem to follow willingly (Blank, 2001). In reality, leadership does not come naturally to most people, but is learned by becoming conscious of leadership qualities and then explicitly improving personal competence through experience (Farkas & Wetlaufer, 1998). Furthermore, in many companies, leadership talent is a scarce commodity (Conger & Benjamin, 1999).

The aim of the present review article is to identify the factors that determine and constitute effective leadership in lifeguarding. According to Daft (1999) and Kotter (1998) the following factors form part of the equation for understanding the components of effective leadership skills:

- Differences between leadership and management
- Followership
- Responsibilities of a leader
- Leadership of the team
- Effective management and leadership
- Leadership decision styles
- Situation
- Judging the effectiveness of a team

## **Components of Effective Leadership Skills**

### **Differences Between Leadership and Management**

Leadership and management are two different terms that require different skills. The separation between leadership and management skills produces confusion and vagueness about the differences in leadership and management (Jacques & Clement, 1994). People frequently refer to leadership skills when they really mean management skills (Kotter, 1998). Managers may be good leaders and leaders may be good managers, but because leadership and management are separate skill sets, it does not mean that all or most managers are adequate leaders or that leaders necessarily are good or even adequate managers (Kotter, 1998). Management techniques are obviously vital in day-to-day functioning, but what matters in lifeguarding emergencies is leadership (Crosby, 1996).

As stated previously, leadership is the process of influencing an organized group in accomplishing its goals (Roach, & Behling, 1984). Leadership skills can

complement management, but it cannot replace it (Kotter, 1998). When 1,500 managers were surveyed to discover what they thought were the three key characteristics that people should possess to be leaders, they mentioned inspiration (55%), strategic thinking (41%), and forward looking (36%; Horne & Jones, 2001). For many people, leadership is associated with such words as risk taking, dynamics, change, creativity, vision (Hughes, Ginnett, & Gurphy, 1996), and coping with changing situations, especially emergencies (Kotter, 1998). The real leaders in organizations may not have titles on their doors (Crosby, 1996).

Management can be defined as the attainment of organizational goals in an effective and efficient manner through planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and controlling the resources of an organization (Crosby, 1996). Management skills include efficiency, procedures, control, and consistency (Hughes, Ginnett, & Gurphy, 1996), and planning and coping with complexity (Kotter, 1998).

## Followership

To need a leader, we must have followers. Followers are the leader's allies or, in other words, the people who make the leader's actions effective. Their role in the leadership equation is not very well appreciated (Hughes, Ginnett, & Gurphy, 1996). The number of followers is the first element that has significant implications for the quality of the services that the team can offer (Hughes, Ginnett, & Gurphy, 1996). The second element that influences the quality of the services of the team is the way that followers see their leader; they expect their leader to be honest, forward thinking, inspiring, competent, and have a vision for the future of the team (Daft, 1999).

In lifeguarding, that means that the quality of the services that a lifeguard team can provide in terms of prevention, rescue, and treatment depends on the number of lifeguards in the team per single head lifeguard. For example, a beach lifeguard team of two people working with a head lifeguard is very different from a water park lifeguard team of 100 people. As shown above, the second element that is likely to influence the quality of the services of the lifeguard team is that the lifeguards expect to see honesty, forward thinking, inspiration, ability to foresee the future of the team, and competence from their head lifeguard.

## Effective Management and Leadership

How well leaders perform their daily duties will depend on how well they understand and respond to the pressures and situations of the job. Those who can be reflective about their work are more likely to handle the tasks effectively. Some characteristics of winning teams that provided services effectively are in the following list. The way the leader handles each of these qualities will make or break the team (Morris, Willcocks, & Knasel, 1995):

- The team needs to know what it is doing and all followers have to agree on the objectives.
- Followers have to have freedom to express their opinion without feeling insecure when they don't understand or disagree with something.
- Each follower brings different abilities and levels of knowledge to the team that must be adapted and accepted.

- Possessing a sense of belonging to the team builds essential support and trust.
- Frequent checks on the “physical and psychological health” of the team ensure the quality of its work.

Taking the above general statements into the lifeguard setting, it appears that all lifeguards have to agree on the objectives of, for example, how many lifeguards will be used for a spinal injury immobilization. Second, they also need to have freedom to express their opinion when, for example, they have been trained by different agencies and, when working in the same aquatic area, may have different ways for rescuing a drowning person; they need to feel free to express their opinions and not be embarrassed or criticized. Third, as long as the combined talents of the whole team cover all the needs that the team might have, the head lifeguard can adapt and accept those individual skills. For example, someone may be good at rescuing casualties with rescue tubes while another is better with the rescue board. Fourth, possessing a sense of belonging to the lifeguard team builds essential support and trust. Finally, checks on the “physical and psychological health” of the lifeguard team ensures the quality of its work (e.g., ensuring that when the lifeguards are on duty they are not thirsty or work unprotected under the sun, they are not working under pressure, or their employer does not have unreasonable expectations of them, like expecting them to supervise big aquatic areas for long periods without breaks).

In life, different people perceive different things in different ways, based on several factors, like their age and experiences. The practices of every profession might be easier if everyone had similar perceptions about the same thing, but because this is not possible, the leader has to understand the nature of the different perceptions and try to avoid misunderstandings (Tozer, 1997). Comprehensive feedback given to the leaders will enable them to have a panoramic view of their work (Chappelow, 1998).

In lifeguarding different perceptions could be, for example, that although all the lifeguards must agree that they know how to treat a spinal injury using a spinal board, they might not agree on whether this will be done using a 2-, 3-, 4- or 5-person spinal injury management technique. Therefore, the head lifeguard has to understand the nature of the different perceptions and try to avoid misunderstandings. One way to achieve this is by maintaining a systematic survey/assessment of opinions about the leader’s performance from all the coworkers, employer, bathers, etc.

## **Responsibilities of Leaders**

As leadership is a vital position (Georgiades & Macdonell, 1998), a set of responsibilities is required for successfully leading a team of followers. First, each leader faces the task of ensuring that the followers change any critical behaviors as necessary for success in dealing with various issues (Heifetz & Laurie, 1998). Second, leaders have to make decisions and act when the followers feel unable to do so. Many people may be able to handle an ethical decision effectively, deciding between right or wrong behavior. Sometimes, however, a critical moment presents a greater-than-expected challenge to a person, asking her/him to choose between two or more ideals in which they may deeply believe. Third, followers need to feel

that their leader will back them up in the workplace. Fourth, the leaders have to learn how to listen to their team. Fifth, leaders have to share power, information, and responsibilities in their team. Finally, leaders must recognize the importance of shared purpose and values (Daft, 1999).

Applying all the above points to the lifeguard setting, the head lifeguard should ensure that the lifeguards provide effective surveillance, have skills for managing complaints or fielding other critical inquiries, serve as the liaison between lifeguards and the manager of the aquatic facility, take responsibility for organizing the lifeguard team to manage any emergency, and provide in-service training to new lifeguards to make sure they possess all the necessary skills, especially for those staff who may have been hired without having the appropriate education and training. The head lifeguard must also ensure that lifeguards change any critical behaviors as necessary for success when responding to emergencies. Head lifeguards have to make decisions when other members of the lifeguard team feel unable to do so. Although the employer expects that the head lifeguard will represent the aquatic facility's rights and ensure that the lifeguards work effectively, a good head lifeguard should also support the rights of the lifeguard team. A head lifeguard who asks the right questions can help the team solve problems and make decisions. He or she must have faith that the team members will make the best decisions at any given time. Finally, for promoting team spirit, head lifeguards should give the lifeguard team a sense of belonging to something important. The use of stories, ceremonies, and other symbolism is very important.

To accomplish their leadership duties within the team more effectively, head lifeguards need to be able to recognize the common characteristics of each individual team member separately. Different staff members have different levels of skill and motivation, and therefore, good head lifeguards should ensure that they use the style that fits with each lifeguard's skills and motivations. Head lifeguards who treat all their lifeguards in the same way, because they rely on personal charisma or charm might find themselves failing at some point. For this reason, three different types of potential team members that require different styles of operation, are presented in Table 1: the irresponsible lifeguard, the talented underachiever lifeguard, and the star performer lifeguard. Head lifeguards have to recognize the individual qualities in each lifeguard and then behave appropriately (Morris, Willcocks, & Knasel, 2000). If the head lifeguard fails to do so, then, it is possible that some team members will lose their motivation and eventually be ineffective.

## **Leadership Decision Styles**

Decision making is part of everybody's life. Everyone makes decisions about what they will do now or later, what clothes they will wear, what they will eat, etc.; however, what characterizes leadership decision making is the level of the team's involvement in the decision and the fact that the final responsibility rests with the leader (Shackleton, 1995). There are five styles that a leader can use in making a decision (Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Differences between the five styles are in the degree to which the leader allows the team's participation to influence the final decision. In all cases, the full responsibility rests with the leader who

**Table 1 Common Characteristics of Lifeguards in the Lifeguard Team and the Recommended Head Lifeguard's Attitude Toward Each (adapted from Morris et al., 2000)**

Team Member behaviors	Related Lifeguard Behaviors	Head Lifeguard Behaviors
Irresponsible: Unwilling or unable to take responsibilities.	Fails to arrive at work on time. Fails to work together with other team members.	They should be fired but if they are employed for reasons such as lack of staff, then be clear and specific when directing and supervising their activities.
Talented under-achievers: Have skills but lack confidence or commitment	Unable to undertake the responsibility of supervising specific types of bathers. Hesitant to discipline swimmers. Slow to start emergency response. Doesn't stand up to team members who are acting inappropriately.	Tell them exactly what to do and how to do it. Don't be too supportive; you might be seen as a "soft touch." This isn't supportive leadership but it can do the trick.
Star performers: Have continuous ability, motivation and commitment to perform highly.	Readily volunteers for extra shifts. Handles criticism from other team members for being over eager. Comes to work first and leaves the workplace last.	Open up a two-way communication and support their efforts. Allow highly able lifeguards to perform properly. Talk together, agree on the goals you want them to achieve. Let them perform highly without your direction. They have the ability, but are unwilling to take responsibility. They are the most difficult people of your team. Give goals, let them do it, watch them achieve, and congratulate. Your job is to let them run their show; they are mature. Remember they are stars so ensure that they don't do too much. They do not need long two-way communication or support. They give you freedom to deal with the other types of lifeguards.

- Decides alone, relying on personal knowledge and abilities;
- Seeks information from one or more followers without necessarily stating the problem; solicits information but not solutions or suggestions, and then decides alone;
- Shares the problem with selected members of the team, individually seeking information and advice, and then decides alone;
- Consults and seeks advice from all the team, but makes the final decision alone; and
- Speaks with the team, and then all mutually decide what to do (Vroom & Yetton, 1973).

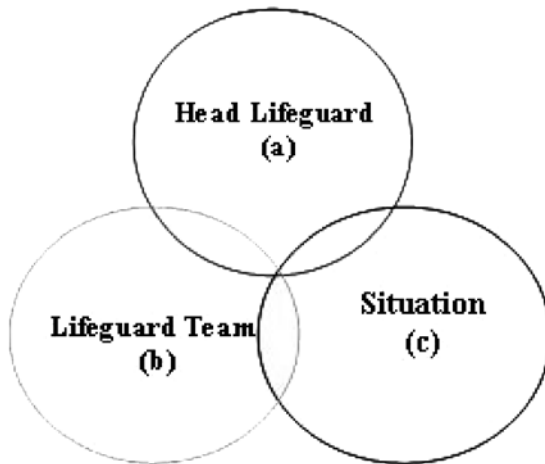
The above general statements about leadership show that what characterizes leadership decision making is the level of the lifeguard team's involvement in the decision and the fact that the final responsibility rests with the head lifeguard. Again, as shown above, the head lifeguard can first of all, decide alone. Second, he or she can seek information from one or more lifeguards without necessarily stating the problem and then decide alone. Third, he or she can share the problem with selected lifeguards, seeking information, and then decide alone. Fourth, he seeks advice from all the team, but makes the final decision alone, and, finally, the team becomes fully aware of the problem, and decides without being influenced by the head lifeguard. The head lifeguard accepts the decision and describes it as "we decided to ..." not "the group decided to ..." or "I decided to ...".

## Situation

Despite the complexities for the leadership and the followers, no factor in the framework of a team is as complex as the situation. Figure 1 shows the relationship between those three factors. A situation can affect the leadership process. In such cases, the followers are expected to look to the leader to identify the problem and then to develop and initiate a solution. Followers who generally face various situations will expect their leaders to be more assertive, directive, and decisive (Mulder & Stemerding, 1963). A leader's job is to estimate the demands and constraints and then the available options in that situation. Demands are the role expectations. Constraints are all those factors that limit a leader's range of actions in a particular aquatic emergency. Choices or options are the leader's discretionary behavior, or in other words, how he will finally decide to act (Steward, 1982).

In terms of lifeguarding, a crisis (i.e., a situation factor) during the daily duties (e.g., a customer has unrealistic expectations from the lifeguard team) or during an emergency (e.g., more lifeguards are needed to handle a mass rescue than the ones currently working) can affect the leadership process. The lifeguards will expect the head lifeguard to identify the problem and then to solve it by finding a solution or performing a rescue. The head lifeguard must be assertive, directive, and decisive, estimating the demands (e.g., regulations and policies for the operation of the aquatic facility), constraints (e.g., bad weather conditions, lack of appropriate equipment, or specialized lifeguards, etc.), and the available options (e.g., prevention, rescue, or treatment).





**Figure 1** — Figure shows an optimal relationship among the (a) head lifeguard (leader), (b) the lifeguards (followers), and (c) the situation (Hughes et al., 1996)

## Judging the Effectiveness of a Team

To evaluate the effectiveness of their team, the leaders should consider the following questions (Jacques & Clement, 1994):

- Was feedback for the performance of the team produced regularly?
- Were the conditions under which the leader acted fairly ordinary, relatively free of unexpected difficulties, or were there messy surrounding difficulties with which followers did or did not cope?
- Could a follower have been expected to have done better or worse under the circumstances?
- How did the followers work with the rest of their team? Did they work cooperatively or did they prefer to work individually? What is their relationship with other members of the team?
- If the followers were in an advisory role, did they take the initiative in offering expert advice?
- Was there any proof that the followers exercised initiative or creativity in achieving continuous improvement?

Bringing these generic leadership questions into the lifeguard team, the head lifeguards as team leaders should be able to ensure that a number of questions are answered. First, it is important to get regular feedback about the performance of the lifeguard team (e.g., At the end of the daily duty the head lifeguard should ask the team if there was any problem and should establish the use of a complaint form, etc.). Second, while they are concerned about the feedback, they need to assess whether the conditions under which each lifeguard acted would make them

unable to cope (e.g., Did the lifeguards have to supervise an unusually high number of bathers within their zone, or very boisterous bathers who distracted their scanning?). Third, a head lifeguard must see if a lifeguard could have been expected to perform better or worse under the circumstances (e.g., inability to spot an unconscious person at the bottom of the pool as the water was not clean due to a high level of chlorine, etc.). Fourth, it is necessary to see if the lifeguards prefer to work within their team cooperatively or individually as well as to identify their relationship with the rest of the lifeguards in the team (e.g., Can two lifeguards scan the same swimming pool together; do lifeguards rotate without delays or do they, for example, pretend that they need to go to the toilet, and in fact hide to smoke a cigarette, etc.; Kolettis & Avramidis, 2007). Fifth, if the lifeguards started to educate the bathers about water safety, did they offer accurate and correct advice? (e.g., Did a lifeguard inform the bather that they should not use a particular water slide because they are heavier than the weight limit permitted for the use of that specific activity). Finally, the head lifeguard who wants to judge the effectiveness of the team should be able to encourage the continuous professional development of their staff by engaging them regularly in staff training, lifeguard or first aid competitions, initiative tests, etc. Although all the evaluation items in the above list are important and should be answered, in practice, the head lifeguard might find it more reasonable to use only some of them (e.g., the most relevant) in a given situation.

## Discussion

Although leadership is important, the existence of the leader alone cannot guarantee the effectiveness of the team. Leaders are role models for others (Kets de Vries, 1989). Leadership at its finest has heroic dimensions because it deals with eternal human challenges and offers no excuse for failure and no escape from responsibilities (Teal, 1998). Although when leaders do something successfully they are praised, when their actions end in failure they are condemned (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1998). But because all leaders can make mistakes, all the team members must play their part and not just rely on their leader. Leadership is not a game where “I will do things and you will follow me” (Jacques & Clement, 1994). The team members carry part of the responsibility for compensating for any leader’s errors and for providing successful services.

In lifeguard settings, a mistake is likely to have much more serious consequences than a mistake in any other type of team. It might cost a human life due to cardiac arrest or drowning or paralysis due to a poorly immobilized spinal injury, and because of that, both head lifeguards and lifeguards should cooperate. Lifeguards, head lifeguards, and the employer have been found to be equally legally responsible (Forsten & Murphy, 1986) and liable (Kozlowski, 1991, 1996; Mone, 1980), and therefore, only when working closely and collaboratively will they be able to avoid implications for involvement in negligence litigation (Fawcett, 2001; Kozlowski, 2000).

To achieve team effectiveness and successful leadership, several ways have been suggested for the leader. First is the willingness to listen, as it builds up colleagues’ commitment to the leader. Time spent listening is time well spent (Morris,

Willcocks & Knasel, 1995). Second, respect for other people's points of view is required, because leaders and followers are partners who depend on one another (Kets de Vries, 1989). In other words, this means that daily discussions at the end of the duty or complaint forms might help the head lifeguard take the necessary information from his subordinate lifeguards. Third, lifeguard leaders should be inspirational, able to think strategically, and able to look forward. They should also be dynamic, creative, and able to cope with changing situations. Fourth, to maintain the unity of the lifeguard team, the lifeguard leader should be able to manage the number of lifeguards that he supervises within the lifeguard team. For example, it is unrealistic to have only one lifeguard leader for a team of 100 lifeguards and expect that the supervision of the team will be effective. Fifth, the lifeguard leader should be able to recognize for each individual lifeguard what type of team member he/she is (e.g., irresponsible lifeguard, the talented underachiever lifeguard, or the star performer lifeguard) and act accordingly. Sixth, lifeguard leaders should be aware of different decision styles and choose the most convenient for the circumstances. Finally, as the situation is the most complicated factor in the rescue, the lifeguard leader should be aware about that and be prepared for the unexpected and unplanned situations that might arise. Regardless of how well designed the normal operating procedures and emergency action plans of an aquatic facility are, there will always be unforeseen incidents.

## Conclusions

The present review proposes that lifeguard leadership is needed for the operation of a lifeguard team to deal with issues of prevention, rescue, and treatment. Lifeguard leadership can be learned and is not the result of an inborn charisma. The factors that determine and constitute effective leadership in lifeguarding are related to the lifeguard leader's personal qualities, the way that the lifeguard team and the daily responsibilities are handled, the leadership decision styles, the type of situation that needs to be addressed, and the quality of judging the effectiveness of the lifeguard team.

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