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THE IMPORTANCE OF ESCORTS AND TRAINING
TO PROGRAM QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Escorts are a very important element in determining program quality. Very little research has been completed to determine the important characteristics of a good escort and the type of training needed to develop leadership quality in these escorts. It was found that perspective and experience were the important dimensions of leadership training for escorts.

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TO PROGRAM QUALITY

INTRODUCTION

Many people who travel today as a leisure/recreational pursuit (i.e., non-work-related travel) choose to do so not on their own but rather as part of a group, under the supervision of an established leader or guide. They may choose this type of travel for the camaraderie of the group, to make new friends, or simply because they prefer to let someone else take on the responsibility of the planning, budgeting, etc. of the trip. Group travel is common whether the travel is an adventure/challenge trip such as cycling cross-country or the more traditional sightseeing "guided tours" of Europe, etc. For these types of organized trips that utilize guides/escorts/leaders, the person in charge may be the single most important factor in determining the success of the trip.(8,9) Some of the other important variables are length of trip, trip location, other participants, and weather/climate conditions.

A competent leader generally fosters an enjoyable, memorable trip while a leader lacking knowledge, skills, and confidence may render an otherwise successful trip a disaster.(5) Therefore, it is important when training trip leaders, tour guides, and escorts, to teach them skills that will be necessary to lead a particular activity and/or give them the

pertinent information to interpret an area/location. This may inspire the confidence in leaders that is requisite to the success of the trio.(6) It is important to sustain this confidence by having regular continuing training for leaders even after they have long become established.

There are three types of training programs for escorts or trip leaders.(7) One type of training provides very little direction and the emphasis is primarily on format and organizational procedures. This type of training does not emphasize content or process, but rather procedures. The second type of training is so structured that the individual is given no freedom to program, but only replicates the programs that they have been taught. They are not encouraged to react spontaneously to situations or to be creative. The emphasis is on program. In the third type of training, the individual is taught programming principles and the processes of planning. Programs are designed and the individual is allowed the creative expression to change the program, based upon situations. The emphasis is on process. This type of training has been found to be directly linked to program effectiveness.(4) This does not suggest that the other types of training do not provide the same types of outcomes. The common problem with training programs is that the type and nature of training varies and has not been analyzed on a component basis to determine the important factor in developing specific competencies.

Because so many organizations have their own special focus regarding the types of trips that they sponsor, many also have their own leadership training which emphasizes and caters to the special offerings of the organization. The focus of this study is one such organization--American Youth Hostels--that offers a worldwide trip program of cycling, hiking, and motorized trips, using leaders that have been trained through the organization. AYH has a process-oriented training that has been evaluated for its quality. This provides an opportunity to examine specific competencies and how best to develop them.

American Youth Hostels is a non-profit organization which has as its focus travel and education through travel for youth and persons of all ages. This focus is promoted through a network of approximately 250 hostels across the United States. A hostel is an inexpensive dormitory-style lodging for overnight guests, with community kitchen and common rooms designed for group interaction. The "hosteling experience" is what AYH encourages and it may be defined as an experience that promotes educational and personal development through travel and intercultural exchange enhanced by the utilization of hostel facilities.

AYH also offers a series of trips called the World Adventure Program. These trips may involve activities such as hiking and cycling, they may be motorized trips, or they may include adventure activities such as horseback riding, river rafting, etc. Trips last anywhere from a minimum of nine days to a maximum of 80 days; locations vary, with trips running in Europe, South America, New Zealand, Iceland, Africa, and Mexico, as well as in the United States and Canada.

As with other organizations that provide leaders for their trips, AYH requires that their leaders successfully complete the AYH Leadership Training Course (LTC) at either the national or local level. The LTCs

are taught on a national level six times a year at different locations across the country and on local levels at discretionary times, decided upon by the individual council (not all councils operate their own LTCs; in fact, few do). The content of the course is pre-established by the national office and emphasizes these aspects of leadership:

- 1) budgeting and handling of group funds
- 2) leadership styles and theories
- 3) group dynamics
- 4) bicycle maintenance/effective cycling tips (or information pertinent to hiking or motorized trips)
- 5) meal planning and preparation
- 6) packing tips and demonstration
- 7) emergencies and health problems on the road
- 8) AYH policies and procedures/hostel customs

The duration of the course is nine days (four to six days at the local level; local training courses are modeled after the national LTC so that all LTCs are standardized) during which time participants take turns in assuming roles of both leader and "tripper" (trip participant). Instruction takes the form of lectures, demonstrations, group discussions, and practical work. Courses usually take place in a hostel and culminate in a bicycle ride, hike, or motorized trip, simulating an actual trip, the final four days of the course. Groups consist of 10 to 20 participants with one instructor and two assistant instructors. Evaluation and assessment of each participant is done by the instructor, the assistant instructors, and by others in the group; however, the ultimate evaluation is left to the head instructor.

Upon successful completion of the LTC a participant may lead an AYH World Adventure trip. No follow-up training is required at any time after the initial training unless a leader is inactive for a period of at least two years. Some follow-up assessment of a leader's competency is done via evaluations completed by "trippers" after each trip. However, no formal evaluation is done by the national staff (unless "trippers" evaluations warrant investigation) to assess leaders' performance post-LTC.

A qualitative assessment was completed of trip evaluations to determine if there was a relationship between quality of trip and leader. It was found that overall quality of AYH trips was very positive. The response was positive enough to create over an 85% desire to take another trip under the auspices of AYH. It cannot be definitively determined in this initial study if this satisfaction was due to leader quality. In three (3) random trips clients were asked specifically what contributed significantly to trip quality. Sixty percent of the respondents indicated that the leader was one of the two most important elements and thirty-five percent indicated that it was the most important element.

People related skills seems to be the leadership element directly related to quality. Much research is needed to establish this relationship and related satisfaction to qualities of leadership.

Considering the many and diverse responsibilities of the trip leaders to participants, it is necessary that the leaders be competent and current in all areas of training. Therefore, ongoing or follow-up training is important. Even when the initial training is effective, not everything can be learned in nine days, nor can everything be remembered over a period of (perhaps) years. The findings from this study may give an indication about the type of follow-up training that is needed.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to determine how well competencies covered in the LTC were transferred to the participants and whether or not this transfer affected confidence levels of the participants. A leader's confidence in his/her abilities has a strong bearing on the success of a trip. Leaders with little self-confidence generally tend to have less successful trips. It has been shown that a leader's confidence level is a good indication of his/her ability.(1, 6) The purpose of this study was to determine the types of variables that are important in developing of leader confidence level in specific competencies.

METHODS

Through a review of travel and leadership-related literature a list of competencies was identified as being necessary for an effective trip leader. (7, 13, 14, 15) These identified competencies--along with those taught at the AYH training course--were incorporated into an instrument designed to effectively assess the transfer value of competencies covered in the AYH leadership training course. The instrument was pilot-tested at a regional leaders' workshop sponsored by AYH. After an evaluation of the pilot test, the final instrument was developed, with corrections and revisions based upon review by content experts (2, 3, 10, 15) (See Table 1 for list of competencies.) In the final analysis, nine competencies were identified. The intent of the instrument was: 1) to identify important competencies for leaders of outdoor adventure activities--on a rating scale of (a) very important, (b) somewhat important, (c) not important; (2) to assess the value of the AYH leadership training course--evaluated on the following scale: (a) competencies covered thoroughly, (b) competencies covered somewhat, (c) competencies not covered at all; (3) to assess the confidence of the leader to use the competencies--evaluated on the following scale: (a) very confident, (b) somewhat confident, (c) not confident. In addition to information about important competencies, the effectiveness of the leadership training course, and the confidence of the leaders, the following information was also collected: where and when the individual had taken the LTC, who the instructor of the course was, how many trips the individual has led to AYH, types of trips the individual has led for AYH, and training other than the AYH training course, age, gender, and education level completed

by the leader.

The questionnaire was sent to all current leaders in the AYH program. A current leader is defined as someone who has completed the leadership training course and has led a trip for AYH in the last two years. Also included in the study were individuals who have completed the training but have not yet led a trip. The return rate for the population was approximately 50 percent. The data were analyzed through the use of factor analysis to discern the important dimensions in training. An index was built to reflect each of the dimensions identified using the method of summated rating. A stepwise regression was used to identify the important variables related to each competence as well as each dimension (soft, hard, and operations). This type of analysis helped to isolate the important variables in the formation process for each competence as well as each dimension (soft, hard, and operational).

RESULTS

When a factor analysis was performed (orthogonal/vermax), three groups of competencies emerged:

Soft skills--judgment and decision-making, interpersonal relations, group dynamics.

Hard skills--budgeting, map-reading and navigation.

Operational skills--safety, environmental awareness.

Activity skills tended to belong to group two (hard skills) while risk analysis and management tended to belong to group three (operational skills) (Table 1).

Soft skills are those that involve process and/or people skills. Hard skills are of a conceptual and/or analytical nature. Operational skills are those that involve the practical elements of trip planning.

A stepwise regression was used to determine which competencies covered in the LTC and which demographic and experience variables were related to the confidence levels of leaders with regards to specific competencies as well as specific dimensions (soft, hard, and operational). The following patterns emerged (Data were reported in terms of Standardized Beta Coefficients to give an indication about the relative importance of variables) (Table 2):

1) Judgment (self-confidence): Budgeting (LTC) ranked highest, indicating that it most influenced confidence levels in judgment skills. Education and experience (expressed as number of years leading trips for AYH) both had negative scores, indicating that they were inversely related. Group dynamics (LTC) and judgment (LTC) were positively related.

2) Safety (self-confidence): Budgeting (LTC) again was the most

influential factor regarding confidence in this skill. Risk analysis/management (LTC) and additional non-AYH training were both inversely related to safety. Interpersonal relations (LTC) and safety (LTC) were positively related.

3) Activity skills (self-confidence): Interpersonal relations (LTC) was the most influencing factor on activity skills. Experience (indicated by the number of trips led for AYH) was inversely related and was the only demographic variable related to activity skills. Activity skills (LTC) were positively related.

4) Interpersonal relations (self-confidence): Gender was the most influential variable on interpersonal relation skills although it was inversely related, as was education. Risk analysis and management (LTC) and interpersonal relations (LTC) were positively related.

5) Group dynamics (self-confidence): Risk analysis/management (LTC) was most influential on group dynamics. Gender and education again were inversely related. Gender was inversely related and age positive.

6) Budgeting (self-confidence): Education again was inversely related and was also the most influential factor on confidence in budgeting skills (LTC). Experience was also inversely related. Age was positively related as was group dynamics (LTC) and budgeting (LTC).

7) Map-reading/navigation (self-confidence): Gender scored highest and was the first demographic variable to most influence confidence levels in a specific competency. Experience was once again inversely related. Group dynamics (LTC) and risk analysis and management (LTC) were positively related.

8) Environmental awareness (self-confidence): Risk analysis and management (LTC) was the most influential regarding confidence levels in environmental awareness. Education and experience were inversely related. Activity skills (LTC) were positively related.

9) Risk analysis and management (self-confidence): Group dynamics (LTC) was the most influential factor for this competency. Experience, education, additional non-AYH training, and interpersonal relations (LTC) were all inversely related. This competency had the largest number of influencing factors (evenly distributed between demographic variables and LTC training) and was the only category in which a competency--judgment--was removed after it had been added.

A stepwise regression was also performed to determine which competencies covered in the LTC and which demographic and experience variables were related to the confidence levels of competencies once they had been categorized as hard, soft, or operational skills (Table 3). The results showed that with regards to the soft skills, map-reading/navigation (LTC) proved to be most influential on confidence levels, although it was inversely related. Also inversely related to confidence in soft skills was additional non-AYH training. Interpersonal relations (LTC), budgeting (LTC), and group dynamics were positively related.

Relative to the hard skills, budgeting (LTC) ranked highest and gender and age were both inversely related to hard skills. Group dynamics (LTC), education, and risk analysis and management were positively related.

Confidence in operational skills proved to be most influential by gender, although it was an inverse relationship. Risk analysis and management (LTC), budgeting (LTC), and experience were directly related.

Budgeting was the only skill common to all three categories of competencies (Table 2).

CONCLUSIONS

A combination of demographic and experience variables and the LTC training influenced confidence in the nine competencies equally (though each was predominant with regards to specific competencies). This indicates that such things as age, gender, education level are just as significant in attaining confidence as is the training, AYH or otherwise. Each competency must be viewed separately in terms of the important factors in their formations. As for the competencies covered in the LTC, no one group of skills (hard, soft, or conceptual) appeared to transfer better than any other group, although budgeting was the most influential skill overall. This may be because there is a tangible product or outcome associated with this element. This may indicate that it was transferred most completely of all the competencies covered and therefore contributed most to confidence levels. Budgeting was also the only variable common to all three groups of competencies which indicates that having a skill in budgeting inspires confidence in all areas of leadership--hard, soft, and conceptual skills. This is logical as budgeting is a skill that has characteristics of all three groups--i.e., in budgeting one uses judgment (a soft skill), technical (hard) skills such as math, and operational skills such as anticipating expenses, revenue, etc. Budgeting, then, should be a skill that is strongly emphasized in training.

When dealing with demographic and experience variables, education and experience (defined by the number of trips led and/or the number of years leading trips for AYH) were almost always inversely related to the competency. This may indicate that those with more knowledge see leadership in a more complex light. As a result, these individuals need a different type of training. The complexity gives some types of feelings of insecurity based upon a better understanding of tripping and the need for a different type of information and understanding. This indicates that continued education/training may be beneficial to reorient and update those with a deeper understanding of leadership.

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Table 1
 Division of Competencies into Three Categories
 (Using Factor Analysis)

Categories	Factor Loading
Soft Skills	
Judgment/Decision Making	.78
Interpersonal relations	.84
Group dynamics	.69
Hard Skills	
Budgeting	.79
Map-reading/navigation	.79
Activity skills	.56
Operational Skills	
Safety skills	.77
Environmental awareness	.73
Risk analysis and management	.43

Table 2

Relationships between LTC Training, Demographic Variables and Confidence Levels of Individual Competencies (Using Stepwise Regression)

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Standardized Beta Coefficient
judgment	* budgeting	.15
	education	-.08
	group dynamics	.07
	number years leading (AYH)	-.10
	judgment	.07
safety skills	* budgeting	.17
	interpersonal relations	.14
	risk analysis and management	-.10
	safety skills	.12
	additional training (non-AYH)	-.01
activity skills	* interpersonal relations	.16
	number trips led (AYH)	-.06
	activity skills	.09
interpersonal relations	risk analysis and management	.13
	* gender	-.18
	age	.08
	education	-.09
	interpersonal relations	.11
group dynamics	risk analysis and management	.20
	education	-.14
	* gender	-.18
	age	.06
budgeting	group dynamics	.11
	* education	-.13
	judgment	.11
	number years leading (AYH)	-.01
	age	.05
	budgeting	.10
map-reading and navigation	* group dynamics	.10
	gender	.12
	number trips led (AYH)	-.05
	risk analysis and management	.07
environmental awareness	* risk analysis and management	.12
	education	-.09

	activity skills	.11
	number trips led (AYH)	-.05
risk analysis and management	risk analysis and management	.19
	number trips led (AYH)	-.15
	judgment	.11
	education	-.09
	* group dynamics	.20
	number years leading (AYH)	.02
	additional training (non-AYH)	-.02
	budgeting	.12
	interpersonal relations	-.13
	++ judgment removed	.11

* indicates variable with highest coefficient/most influential on confidence levels

Table 3

Relationships between LTC Training, Demographic Variables and
Confidence Levels of Grouped Competencies
(Using Stepwise Regression)

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Standardized Beta Coefficient
soft skills	interpersonal relations	.23
	* map-reading/navigation	-.37
	budgeting	.28
	group dynamics	.28
	additional training (non AYH)	-.02
hard skills	* budgeting	.46
	group dynamics	.27
	gender	-.33
	education	.22
	age	-.13
	risk analysis and management	.13
operational skills	* gender	-.28
	risk analysis and management	.15
	budgeting	.22
	number trips led (AYH)	.09

* indicates variable with highest coefficient/most influential on confidence levels