

Backcountry Problems – Teamwork

By Rich McAdams, January 2008

Teamwork is more than a group of people pulling on a rope in an orchestrated fashion. Although working in a coordinated and unified manner is an important aspect of teamwork, other components can equally make or break an outdoor adventure. How members of the trip behave and interact with each other can have a profound effect on teamwork. Although there are no guarantees that the team will reach the trip objective, communicating well, respecting one another, and each member pulling their (metaphorical) own weight, can only have a positive impact on teamwork.

Good Karma... Bad Karma... No Karma...

There are countless stories in mountaineering lore where the trip consisted of difficult, almost insurmountable technical challenges, yet, the team realized success. These are the amazing sagas where teamwork, good communication, participants taking the initiative, all acting respectful, and all working together as a team surmounted the apparent insurmountable. Let's call this an example of good karma.

There are also countless stories where a somewhat ordinary outing, devoid of any serious technical aspects, still came crashing down in flames. Gee, what happened here? Although there are many variables that can come into play (weather, injury, bear attack), often the group meets the real enemy, and it is them. Let's call this scenario an example of bad karma.

Since I really don't have any examples of no karma, let's instead move on.

The Trip Leader

The trip leader is the focal point for the team and can make or break teamwork. This person is central to the group's communication, and, by definition, assumes responsibility for the overall success of the outing. Bear in mind that how the trip leader dispenses authority is important. If the trip consists of experienced members, these members will want some say in how things are done, and they need to feel that they are heard. To deny them a voice in the process will certainly prove problematic. Leadership is still necessary, but maintaining teamwork for this group requires a heightened level of leadership flexibility.

For a less experienced group the trip leader may need to establish an environment where the decisions are made in a more traditional and centralized manner. It is not always advisable that inexperienced hikers make team-critical decisions. These folks should use this opportunity to observe and learn how the more experienced hikers make those decisions, and how to facilitate teamwork.

Years ago, on some big mountain far, far away, my trip leader called an evening powwow. A decision needed to be made whether the team should move camp one more time (from 18,000 feet to 19,500), or attempt to summit from here. Although outvoted, the experienced climbers preferred

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to move camp, since that would increase the probability of success, even though it would require another day on the mountain. The majority, consisting of lesser-experienced climbers, opted to make the summit bid from the 18,000-foot point. Although this would result in a 5,000-foot summit day, culminating at 23,000 feet, their rationale was “We do 5,000-foot summit days all the time in Colorado, so we should be able to do this.” The next day, all the experienced climbers summited, but only two of the four inexperienced climbers made the top.

When organizing your trip, give some thought to the make-up of the group. Does the party consist of individuals with considerable experience or is this group considered relatively new to the sport? Is the group physically strong or weak with respect to strength, stamina, and endurance? Do you have a wide variety of personalities, or is everyone – sort of – like you?

Usually, and more typical, the group has an assortment of skills, abilities, and relevant experiences, as well as a broader range of strength and endurance. Ironically, this is really the most rewarding scenario – having a mix of participants. Does that sound paradoxical?

Well, we do live in a less than perfect world, but it is the world we live in. Looking at the glass half-full, you have the option to utilize and employ the best skills from each individual. This is so important for teamwork. To illustrate the point, you might consider:

- The strong hiker who can carry more of the group equipment
- The very organized person who can help with developing itineraries and trip finances
- The climber who can organize the food menu by person, by calories, and by day
- The individual who will spend endless hours e-mailing remote outfitters or guides
- The person who is always positive, upbeat, cheery, and amicable
- The climber who always volunteers to complete the least desirable camp chores
- The hiker who has excellent map, compass, and route finding skills
- The climber with more expertise with ropes, knots, and climbing protection

Teamwork is always enhanced when individuals are recognized for their contribution to the potential success of the journey. A savvy leader looks for ways to appropriately delegate important roles and responsibilities so team members can contribute from their strengths. The trip then succeeds or fails as a team effort.

Over the years, I have had opportunities to lead, and be led by, an assortment of individuals. One leader I particularly liked tended to hike at a pace much slower than the stronger climbers within the group did. Often the stronger hikers would grumble about getting cold while having to wait... that they were losing daylight... and how would our leader lead the summit pitch from behind? Their apparent selfishness lost sight of the huge amount of work this leader invested over the last few months just to get them to this spot. Although the leader was a superb planner and organizer, someone else might have better handled the on-mountain leadership role.

The Trip Participant

When you sign up, volunteer, or otherwise agree to participate on an outing, you are acknowledging that the trip leader is more than a de facto leader. He or she **is** the leader. With that said, there is now an obligation on your part to support this person and to try to make this person successful. Obviously, a successful leader will result in a more successful team effort. So much hinges on the actions and behaviors of each individual, regardless of whether they are a trip participant or the actual trip leader.

As discussed in the WTS Student Manual, to promote teamwork there are some fundamental expectations of each individual:

➤ **Be prepared**

Preparation not only includes what you carry in your pack, it also includes all the requisite technical skills you may have to utilize. Refreshing your map and compass skills, knot-tying skills, rock-climbing skills, and self-arrest skills are your responsibility. If necessary, take the initiative to organize a practice day. Yes, you may be quite skilled in how to implement a technical skill, but during the trip it may be important that all members do the skill in a substantially similar fashion.

➤ **Be on time**

Universally, this is considered a respectful trait. It tends to go well beyond meeting at the car pool lot or the trailhead. When out on the hike there will be opportunities to stop and rest, eat and drink, potty and.... During the break, there is much casual conversation and occasionally our minds begin to wander. After awhile, when the leader announces that it is getting cold and that the group probably needs to get going to warm up, try not to be the one that says, “But I still need to eat, go potty, do a clothing adjustment, etc.”

➤ **Contribute to orderly conduct**

We all experience occasional frustration while hiking or climbing. Sometimes it’s too hot and sometimes it’s too cold. Sometimes the group moves too fast and sometimes the group moves too slow. There is just no pleasing some of us. So, how do you deal with your frustration? Good (diplomatic) communication is important and can be quite useful to reduce everyone’s anxiety. What you don’t want to do is dump your bucket when someone makes a silly and superficial suggestion (“Just hike faster”). A better approach would be to announce what concerns you to the group, or the leader in private. This allows the leader the chance to do something. They may slow the pace, get out a rope, or take longer breaks. In general, people like to help and will typically agree what needs to be done. People don’t necessarily like dumped buckets.

➤ **Stay involved**

Participation is rewarding on several levels. First, your contribution may make the difference between success and failure for the trip. Second, others may benefit from your experience, observations, insight, and judgment. Third, it can be so boring and unrewarding just to sit back and watch the sun cross the sky.

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Involvement can be thrilling even when we don't win the discussion; and if and when we do provide that influence, it can be a highly energizing experience.

➤ **Refrain for judging others**

As mentioned in the WTS Student Manual, everyone is at a different place on the technical learning curve. Occasionally, because of their experience, or lack thereof, individuals may offer a rigid or apparently inflexible point of view. Taking a stand may be fine if your position is irrefutable and/or there is only one way to do something. But, on the other hand, if you would like to add more techniques and skills to your hiking bag-of-tricks, it may make sense to maintain more of an open mind. As always, now may be a good time to listen.

From a behavioral point of view, the rules change just a bit. The trip leader, or the WTS instructor, must take the lead in resolving this sort of problem. In their role as leader, they should have had more experience dealing with this.

➤ **Provide feedback**

Feedback is part and parcel of good communication. Good communication can head off or prevent breakdowns in teamwork. Even though there are no guarantees that your issue or concern will be resolved, not communicating gives no one an opportunity to help.

The other side of the feedback equation is that positive and complementary feedback is always welcome. Your instructor or trip leader often works hard to make a successful trip or field day. Many times, they look out upon a sea of blank complacency. Providing active encouragement and support gives them insight into what they are doing right.

➤ **Carry out agreed-upon actions**

If there is anything that tends to negatively impact teamwork, it would be missed commitments on the part of the individual. It is essential that you do what you say you will do, when you said you would do it. Now, life happens. Family, job, health, financial, and other personal things come up. This is neither unusual nor unexpected. Please let someone know if you suspect that you may not be able to accomplish your assignment. The group can develop contingencies once the concern is known.

➤ **Practice the Golden Rule**

As mentioned before, this concept is self-explanatory. The real essence is that each of us thinks about how we would like to be treated by others, then turns that around, and applies it in real-world practice.

Serious climbing and mountaineering seems to consist of a long string of frustrations and exasperating situations. How you manage these frustrations says a lot about you as an individual and you as a team member. As you gain experience, each frustration, predicament, quandary, and conundrum will become easier to deal with and more business-as-usual. Yes, initially it may feel overwhelming, but you will learn and conquer in the end.

In the late 1980s, climbing Denali Peak in Alaska, Dave, ordinarily one of the stronger climbers, indicated his remorse for experiencing several days of serious fatigue. Because of this, he was not able to carry his full share of the load from camp to camp. Someone pointed out that we all have good days and bad days, and that, perhaps, in the near future we might look to him for help.

Sure enough, by the middle of the week the tables were turned. The never-ending squalid weather had frustrated and mentally drained some of us. The next morning, it was magnificent watching Dave hoist two packs, one in front and one on his back, then head up. He was so proud to be able to finally pitch in and significantly return the favor.