

# BACKCOUNTRY PROBLEMS – WHO’S IN CHARGE?

---

*By Rich McAdams, March 2008*

During the course of a backcountry emergency, there can be, and often are, several team members that play important leadership roles. It is ok to have multiple people in charge if they each have a different and defined role. Although the titles given to these individuals may vary from group to group, accident to accident, or even agency to agency, the role they play for the function they serve remains the same. Within WTS, we have a naming scheme simply to minimize the confusion. Everyone needs a name.

First, it is important that, in some fashion, the team determine their leadership. This can be decided before reaching the trailhead, or in real-time as the emergency unfolds. In the absence of available personnel, an individual may even need to fulfill several functions.

**Stay flexible. Develop a plan. Remain flexible.**

## INCIDENT MANAGER (IM)

---

This individual oversees the end-to-end **Emergency Situation Process** by acting as the primary focal point for communication and coordination. Providing specific advice and direction, although important, is secondary. Acting as the focal point, the IM will be the one individual that clearly understands what the left hand and the right hand are doing. Unless the requirements of the emergency dictate otherwise, the IM should refrain from being a **key worker bee**.

Determining who will be the IM can take several forms. This person may already be the officially designated trip leader, may have relevant experience or skills making him/her better suited, or perhaps, is simply an individual who steps up to the plate and volunteers. The latter seems to be more the norm.

- The focus of the IM is a supervisory role. The IM needs to provide coordination between the First Aid Leader, the Go-For-Help Leader, and the Bivy Leader.
- The IM needs to be constantly monitoring the overall welfare of the team. For example, is the first aid team so focused that they do not realize they are getting cold and wet? You don't want to start with one victim, and then end up with two.
- The IM needs to ensure that the four ESP steps are considered, starting with **Securing the Accident Site**.

Before treating the victim, the IM needs to ensure the victim and the team are not susceptible to further accident or injury. He or she must assess the potential for follow-on avalanche, rock fall, and lightening, and assure that the team extracts the victim from any further danger before treatment can begin.

## FIRST AID LEADER

---

The First Aid Leader should be the one with the most **appropriate** medical experience. A certified Wilderness First Responder (Woofers), or even a Wilderness First Aider (Woofa) may be better suited to apply emergency first aid than a licensed General Practitioner. It depends. Stay flexible. As a reality check, although we are looking for the appropriate first aid skills, we are also looking for someone who will expeditiously jump in and begin the assessment and treatment. Once things begin to settle down, it would be acceptable to transition the First Aid Leader role to someone else, especially if the initial First Aid Leader needs relief, food, potty, warmth, or a bit of downtime to recharge mentally.

**Important** – An initial immediate response to tend to the victim is always better than a drawn out debate trying to determine who has the most training. Debates are very unprofessional.

The focus for this leader is to quickly assess and begin treatment of the victim. It is also very desirable to identify a first aid helper (one who will retain that role and not wander off). The first aid team will always need something; they are very needy. The First Aid Leader may need a tarp, ground insulation, water, more bandages, and/or someone to record the vital signs. The first aid helper provides critical support to the First Aid Leader.

Some elements to consider during your first aid treatment (in a preferred order):

- Is the victim breathing and is there a heartbeat?
- Do you suspect that there are injuries affecting your ability to move the victim?
- Is there any significant bleeding?
- Is there anything unusual discovered during the body survey?
- Is the victim protected from the elements?
- While monitoring the victim, is his/her condition getting better or worse?

## GO-FOR-HELP LEADER

---

Obviously, this person should be an individual that still has the requisite strength, stamina, and endurance to make the journey back to the trailhead. Secondly, does the candidate for this role have the IM's confidence that he/she can orient, navigate, and find the route back for help?

**Important** – Unless there is no other choice, a go-for-help team consisting of only one individual is problematic in itself. For this important activity, two brains are always better than one.

The focus for the Go-For-Help Leader is to first identify a team of one or two assistants, understand the nature of the victim's injuries, discuss and decide on the go-for-help plan, receive plan approval from the IM, then execute that plan.

The plan should consist of many of the following elements:

- Do you know the exact location of the victim on your map?
- Will you mark or flag the route on your way out?
- Will you escort the rescue team back to the victim, or will they be on their own?
- Do you understand the nature of the victim’s injuries?
- Is the victim getting better, stabilizing, or getting worse?
- What will you do when you reach the trailhead?

Comments, opinions, and the sense of urgency made by the Go-For-Help Leader will help the rescue team determine its actions. Depending on weather conditions, time of day, and the nature of the victim’s injuries, the rescue team may decide (for example) to wait until morning to go in or to risk their personnel by sending in a “bash team” immediately.

## **BIVY LEADER**

---

Since the First Aid Leader has specific skills as does, to a lesser degree, the Go-For-Help Leader, there is more wiggle room in determining the Bivy Leader. This individual might have good organizational skills, or perhaps they have the best bivy gear.

- An initial inventory of team equipment may provide additional bivy options not apparent at first glance.
- The Bivy Leader will also want to verify that the go-for-help team will not depart with some essential item needed for the team or the victim’s well-being.
- The bivy team also needs to discuss, agree, and coordinate the need for signaling help.

The focus for the Bivy Leader is to first identify the bivy team, which typically consists of the remaining trip participants. Next are organizing the set up of a shelter (primarily for the victim and first aid team and secondarily for the remaining trip participants), determining a location to build a fire, and doing a more detailed assessment of available resources (equipment, food, signaling devices).

Although the Bivy Leader has important work to do, he/she also needs to respond to any requests from the IM. The IM, for example, may ask for assistance transporting the victim to a more protected location and this typically requires everyone to participate with the carry.

Some elements to consider for the bivy:

- What materials do you have, and how will you quickly set up your shelter?
- How will you get the victim into the shelter?
- Will there be room in the shelter for victim and the first aid team?
- Will you need a secondary shelter for the other trip participants?

## Emergency Situations

- Where will you build your fire – upwind or downwind? Protected from the elements or convenient to the shelter?
- Who will monitor the fire and continue to gather wood?
- How will you collect and heat your water?
- What extra food is available for the team?
- What materials are available for signaling for help? Are they handy? Who is responsible?

## IN REALITY...

---

Please refrain from getting your feelings hurt if you are not identified as one of the leaders. As a participant, you have a critical responsibility to support the team through your actions and initiative. No one wins with the demise of the victim; no one wins if there are additional follow-on injuries to the team.

During the course of an emergency, leaders sometimes snap orders to their teammates. Please do not take offense. Emergencies are stressful situations, and most leaders have little to no experience providing this form of aid. Everyone is trying to do the best they can. Develop some thick skin; the apologies will come later.

Typically, each individual tends to his or her responsibilities in a different fashion. Unless there appears to be an immediate danger to the team, or the treatment provided to the victim seems risky, it behooves everyone keep the intensity level minimal by not being verbally critical. When overheard, criticism and second-guessing are distressful to the victim. Please channel any concerns or suggestions through the IM.

**Stay flexible. Develop a plan. Remain flexible.**