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208

The power of outdoor management development

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Introduction

> An unbelievable and terribly powerful program. It is without doubt the most memorable training I've done yet.

> Simply put, this is the most extraordinary experience I've ever had in my life.

> These days have been the most revealing, satisfying and exhilarating days in my life.

> I doubt I'll remember a great deal from other programs I've attended. But I know I will carry the memories of this program for as long as I live. Extremely valuable. It is an experience all managers should have.

These are all written reactions we have received from outdoor management development (OMD) programmes. They reflect a level of impact we have not seen duplicated in other training formats or approaches. It is the contention of this paper that well-run OMD programmes can be very powerful tools for achieving organizational training objectives. Empirical data to support this contention are scarce, but some well-constructed research is beginning to appear (see e.g. Bronson *et al*., 1992; McEvoy, 1995). We believe there are several features of the outdoor environment that explain OMD's unique power. The purpose of this article is to articulate these features so that both designers and consumers of OMD programmes can assure themselves of maximum programme impact.

We draw our conclusions from years of direct experience, as well as from a review of relevant literature. Both authors have had approximately ten years experience in OMD, first as participants, then as facilitators, programme designers, and programme evaluators. As programme participants, we have had opportunities to experience the power of OMD for ourselves and to assess its impact in our personal and professional lives. As programme designers and facilitators, we have been able to experiment with a wide range of OMD options and to gauge their effectiveness. As programme evaluators, we have interviewed hundreds of programme participants, some immediately after an OMD experience, others after a passage of time (up to three years). We have spoken with the bosses, co-workers, subordinates, secretaries, spouses and even the children of some of these participants. Most of our experience comes from programmes conducted at the Outdoor Learning Center associated with Utah State University in Logan, Utah.

What is OMD?

OMD is a set of carefully sequenced and integrated experiential learning activities conducted (primarily) in the outdoors and designed to facilitate participant behaviour change. Various experiential learning activities are used in OMD programmes, from river rafting and rock climbing to solving problems in teams with a variety of challenges (e.g. with all team members blindfolded). The activities are important only in the sense that they provide the vehicle for learning. The design, facilitation and debriefing of activities are the critical parts of the programme. Numerous good sources exist for those desiring more information on the details of OMD (see e.g. Bank, 1985; Cacioppe and Adamson, 1988; Gall, 1987).

OMD is sometimes used with intact work teams, at other times with "stranger" groups of individuals from various parts of an organization. The choice depends on the goals of the programme. There are multiple possible objectives in OMD programmes, including:

- personal development;
- manager development;
- team development;
- organization development.

The use of OMD seems to be increasing in step with the rapid introduction of team-oriented approaches to total quality and re-engineering initiatives in organizations (Filipczak, 1995).

Characteristics of effective programmes

As noted above, it is the contention of this article that well-run OMD programmes are powerful, and that specific features of OMD contribute to this power. Before we discuss these features, we must quickly outline what we mean by a "well-run" OMD programme (see e.g. Buller *et al.*, 1991). It is one:

- that is based on a thorough needs analysis and custom designed to meet the unique needs of the client (and tied clearly to the vision and business strategy of the organization);
- that possesses clearly articulated, overarching learning/development goals, combined with an opportunity for individuals to set personal goals for themselves;
- where adequate preparation ensures that participants show up with realistic expectations and an understanding of why they are there (this includes an understanding of conceptual frameworks underlying the skills to be developed);
- with a clear emphasis on the safety of the participants, both their physical safety and their psychological safety;

210

- where outdoor events are carefully chosen and sequenced, each event being followed by a thorough debriefing discussion;

- where facilitators have the breadth of experience required to design and implement a programme consistent with adult learning theory (Knowles, 1990), and then lead debriefings which simultaneously keep participants focused on the applicable learning achieved in each event, distinguish and reinforce valuable participant contributions, and model the key attributes of effective interpersonal behaviour taught in the programme; and

- where multiple arrangements are made for the transference of learning back to the workplace (this includes learning contracts and follow-up).

What makes OMD so powerful?

Below we discuss ten features of OMD which we believe result in superior learning outcomes. Other development approaches may include several of these elements but, in our experience, OMD potentially incorporates all of them. These ten features are:

(1) emotional intensity;

(2) psychological safety;

(3) consequentiality;

(4) enhanced self-confidence;

(5) use of metaphors;

(6) unpredictability;

(7) experiencing peak performance;

(8) multiple knowledge/skill types;

(9) developing the whole person; and

(10) focus on transfer.

Emotional intensity

It is well known that trainee attention and motivation are prerequisites to effective development activities (Goldstein, 1986). A wide range of intense emotions – from fear and anxiety to frustration and anger, to concern and caring – is evoked in the outdoor experience. Due to the nature of the outdoor activities – some of which are perceived to involve considerable physical and/or psychological risk – participants tend to be focused and highly attentive.

Some outdoor activities, such as rock climbing and "high ropes" courses, are particularly stressful for many participants. The degree of stress and fear is such that it is nearly impossible for participants to distance themselves from the experience. The strength of the feeling engendered is generally enough to keep a person focused on the "here and now".

However, the stress in OMD events is due not only to physical risk but also to the emotional vulnerability that is present when someone *fails* to perform at a certain level in front of a group of peers, supervisors or subordinates. Outdoor activities elicit a range of personal and interpersonal behaviours which are open for all to observe and discuss, and either to model or to avoid.

Psychological safety
While the emotional intensity of OMD stretches participants, real learning cannot occur in an environment where perceived risk is too high and fear of failure paralyses action. OMD participants can encounter a wide range of fears – fear of looking incompetent, of losing control, of revealing too much of themselves, of not being accepted for what they are, and so forth.

The psychologist Carl Rogers has pointed out that people *really* learn only those things which they perceive to be involved in the maintenance, or enhancement, of the "structure of self" (see Knowles, 1990). Further, the "structure of self" becomes more rigid under threat (resulting in denial, defensiveness, projection, etc.), and relaxes its boundaries in situations free from threat.

For this reason, when facilitators build a supportive psychological climate during the early stages of OMD, a trusting relationship among participants and with facilitators is established. Such a relationship builds the foundation for taking risks, enhancing self-disclosure and feedback, and developing other key interpersonal skills during the programme. Considerable time is spent in building a supportive atmosphere in OMD programmes, in contrast to other types of training programmes where this issue typically is given little attention.

Consequentiality
Knowledge of results is another well-known attribute of effective training designs (Goldstein, 1986). Due to the real-time environment of OMD, positive and negative outcomes result directly from individual and team behaviours. Individuals and teams are faced with varying degrees of success and failure. With some events, failure could result in a plunge for everyone in a cold lake or stream. With others, failure may result in a breakdown in team morale and commitment. Thus, consequences occur at both task and maintenance levels. For example, a team could be successful at accomplishing a particular task, but the group's process could be so dysfunctional that the results are frustration, conflict or other emotional fallout within the team. Thus, individuals and teams are continually in a position of dealing with the consequences of their behaviours.

It is important to note that in OMD the feedback comes primarily from the task itself and from peer participants, not from the facilitator or the "boss". Research shows that feedback of the former type is much more potent for behaviour change than is the latter (Greller, 1980).

We believe this is another reason – along with emotional intensity – why motivation is generally heightened in OMD programmes: outdoor initiatives

212

essentially force individuals and groups to rely on their own resources and to make maximum use of those resources. Learning to see both physical items and other team members as under-utilized resources is frequently a potent way of breaking paradigms in present ways of thinking, allowing teams and organizations to achieve new levels of performance. Achieving success in outdoor events through greater self-reliance and greater reliance on others builds a sense of personal and organizational efficacy (Bandura, 1986) that is difficult to replicate in other management development approaches.

One of the most frequently made comments after an OMD programme is something to the effect that "after what I've (we've) accomplished this week, no challenge at the office is going to seem too great".

Enhanced self-confidence

A related issue is the degree to which OMD programmes enhance self-confidence and a "can do" attitude. Self-confidence forms the bridge between capabilities and action (Hollenbeck, 1991). Frequently, training programme participants know what needs to be done in a particular instance, but lack the self-confidence to do it. Self-confidence is particularly important for managers because most management problems have no "right answer". Rather, they are solved through sustained and reasoned efforts. The higher the self-confidence, the longer one will keep working on a problem until it is satisfactorily resolved.

OMD programmes expose participants to a problem setting very different from their usual experience. Participants are stripped of titles and privileges (no ties, no different-coloured employee badges, no corner offices), and function in roles and structures much different from those to which they are accustomed. This forces them to think and behave differently. They have to become listeners rather than salespeople, and problem solvers rather than order givers. The events tend also to focus attention on team accountability rather than individual accomplishments. As participants assume new roles and experiment with new behaviours – and as they experience success with these roles and behaviours – they develop an enhanced feeling of mastery over their environment.

For most participants, OMD stimulates deep reflection by immersing them in a context much different from those they are used to. We believe that such deep reflection leads to insight and even intuition. While the insights developed in one context do not necessarily reveal generalizable "truths", they do expand perspectives, provide examples of alternative problem solutions, and enhance participants' general feelings of self-confidence.

Use of metaphors

In our experience, the participants who derive most from OMD programmes are those who think metaphorically. A few will fail to see the similarities between the planning, goal-setting, organization and teamwork involved in scaling a 14-foot wall with OMD colleagues and the launching of a new product for their company. In such cases, the "wall" event is likely to be seen as simply a physical challenge to be overcome with no relevance to the workplace. A well-understood

and vivid metaphor can facilitate personal and organizational change. Researchers have suggested that metaphors can be transformative, providing a steering function for action and inviting active experimentation (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990).

We remember well one participant in an OMD programme event called the "triangular partnership". This event requires that two people negotiate their way from the point of a rope triangle to the much broader base of the same triangle. The rope triangle is strung four feet off the ground between three trees. The only way to succeed is for one partner to shuffle down one leg of the rope triangle while the other shuffles down the second leg, all the while leaning on each other for support.

During the debriefing of this event, the participant said she had learned that to form a successful partnership, you had to "let go of your own rope". In other words, she had to trust her partner by placing her weight against his rather than trying to position it over the security of the rope on which she was standing. She observed that so long as the partners remained positioned over their own ropes, they were still addressing only their own personal agendas.

Furthermore, this participant said the triangular partnership event had taught her even what needed to be done to build the trust necessary to accomplish success: constant communication and feedback, along with experimentation in trusting each other at the point of the triangle when they were taking "baby steps" and the risk was not as great as it was later in the event.

Some refer to such intense insights as "aha" experiences. Others call them "breaking the frame". In either case, metaphorical thinking is the key. The participant referred to above left the programme with a picture in her mind of what an effective partnership "looks like" (both partners leaning on each other) and even what it "feels like" (to depend on one another, to not be let down, and to experience success). Such a powerful picture in the mind is not likely to be forgotten quickly.

Unpredictability
Although not often thought of as an asset in training, we have found the unpredictability of OMD work to be a source of power in the design. This lack of predictability can show up in anything from weather to meals (timeliness and quality!) to the outcomes of the events. In addition, due to the complexity and dynamism inherent in individual and group behaviour, the process and results of activities often yield surprises.

These outcome uncertainties – both task and maintenance – mirror quite nicely the unpredictability facing many organizations in an increasingly turbulent marketplace. Further, while this challenge suggests the need for more skilful facilitators than might otherwise be necessary, participants can learn to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty and to remain flexible and open to changing signals from the environment. Both are important skills in today's business environment.

214

Experiencing peak performance
Very few employees or managers experience moments of genuine peak performance in the workplace. This is true despite the fact that many have had such experiences in other settings (e.g. as members of sports teams). Most OMD programmes create moments of peak performance for both individuals and groups. These experiences are characterized by high task and process effectiveness, emotional intensity and high personal satisfaction. OMD programmes typically engage participants in an exploration of the circumstances surrounding such peak performance episodes and attempt to discover ways in which the circumstances can be replicated in the work place.

We recall the experience of one middle manager at a "high ropes" event. He had an almost paralysing fear of heights and thus had decided not to participate in the event at all. After a period of watching his team-mates on the ropes, he began to feel some unspoken peer pressure to perform. But rather than respond to that pressure, he chose instead to become a coach and cheerleader for the rest of his team. Over the next two hours, he verbally encouraged others from his spot on the ground and cheered their successes. During the debrief of the event, he revealed that he had never realized how much personal satisfaction could be achieved by coaching, encouraging, and cheerleading the activities of others. It had been a "peak experience" for him without ever leaving the ground. Several of his team-mates reported that they would probably not have achieved their individual goals on the high ropes that day without his encouragement and support. It was a powerful lesson for all in the variety of roles that can be played in organizational goal accomplishment.

Multiple knowledge/skill types
Learning is enhanced if different types of knowledge and skill are acquired simultaneously. Learning theorists talk about four types of knowledge. For example, Ackerman and Kyllonen (1991) posit the following:

(1) declarative knowledge – knowledge about facts and things, of "what to do";

(2) compilation knowledge – integration of facts;

(3) procedural knowledge – knowledge about "how to do things";

(4) tacit knowledge – knowledge about when and why to do things.

OMD programmes tend to focus on the latter two or three categories. Few "facts and things" are taught. Rather, the focus is on gaining insights and building on knowledge and skills already acquired. Tacit knowledge may be a particularly powerful take-away from OMD programmes, and one that is frequently overlooked in the design of other types of training programmes. Participants in OMD can gain skills by modelling the behaviours of the facilitators and others. Then, tacit knowledge allows the formation of opinions about the circumstances under which the use of these acquired skills is appropriate and desirable.

Helping participants develop accurate and efficient mental models is fundamental to training success and transfer. Our example, of the woman at the triangular partnership, who developed a picture in her mind of the characteristics of effective partnerships, illustrates how this process works in OMD programmes.

Developing the whole person

Training scholars have begun to talk about "whole person development" (Scott and Hughes, 1991). Aliveness, or fitness, on four levels – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual – is the essence of this approach. Clearly, OMD offers activities that awaken and tap energies at all four of these levels. Much traditional training is focused on the mental level, occasionally overlapping on the emotional. But physical and spiritual levels are rarely tapped for their energy potential.

Many OMD activities involve a physical component, some more than others. Lengthy hikes, rock climbs and grappling can be physically taxing, but are often exhilarating at the same time. They can provide also a very effective form of stress release. Having experienced together something which is physically taxing helps to bond a team and to break down barriers to effective interaction. As one participant said:

> At the end of three days in the mountains, I came home exhausted yet exhilarated. I learned more about myself and about group dynamics than ever before. I consider these three days an 'Aha' experience, a watershed of ideas making sense all at once.

Spiritual energies are tapped when participants relate to the larger whole and/or access inner wisdom that lies hidden beneath the surface. OMD programmes typically provide participants with the opportunity to reflect on their own purposes and values. What makes for a meaningful life and for a meaningful working life as part of that reflection? The development of group vision allows participants to connect with a larger purpose. Also, participants frequently uncover talents they were either unaware of, or else seldom used. Some overcome a fear of heights. Others discover the confidence to be more assertive in groups. Either instance can be a liberating and spiritual experience.

We recall one participant – a senior manager – who announced during a debriefing that he had made a list of 20 people he needed to apologize to when he returned to work on Monday. The facilitator invited him to explain. He said that he had experienced real terror on the high ropes, but that he had seen how a supportive environment could help him succeed despite this fear. Further, he believed that for the first time he could really empathize with subordinates to whom he assigned extremely challenging tasks. They probably felt the same fear as he had experienced on the high ropes, but they did not have the benefit of a "safety system" such as he had experienced. He intended to apologize and to delegate tasks in a more supportive manner in the future.

216

Focus on transfer
Well-run OMD programmes are "begun with the end in mind" (Covey, 1991): and the end is effective transfer of new knowledge, skills and attitudes back to the workplace. There are many useful techniques that can be built into OMD to facilitate transfer: learning contracts; arrangements for a back-home mentor; a network of programme "alumni"; letters to self; follow-up assignments, and so forth. However, none of these is unique to OMD.

If skilfully articulated, the entire OMD learning approach can form the basis for an effective transfer vehicle. Specifically, the metaphor of the "outdoor initiative" can be seen to simulate a learning organization. During the programme, each event or initiative begins with a problem to be solved or a challenge to be met; the group grapples with the issue; results are tallied; and then a debriefing is conducted. The focus of the debriefing is not to assign either credit for success or blame for failure, but rather to distill what the group has learned about its own processes and which can be useful in the future. In other words, the goal is to learn from each event and continuously improve. Thus, the "metaphor of the debrief" can be extended for application in almost any situation back in the workplace, and can assist participants in general in transferring to work what they have learned in the seemingly much different outdoor environment.

Conclusion
Experiential learning in general, and OMD in particular, is consistent with what we know about how adults learn and develop. As Knowles has argued, we "learn what we do" (Knowles, 1990). OMD takes adult learners where they are, confronts them with problems to be resolved, allows them the space and resources to be self-directed, and then provides immediate feedback on the success or failure of their actions. This cycle of experiential or action learning has proved effective in many types of training. It teaches not only skills, but also innovative thinking and how to learn, too.

As any good trainer knows, you cannot teach anybody anything; you can only establish an environment under which they are most likely to learn for themselves. OMD establishes such an environment. It begins by building a trusting and supportive climate. It engages trainees in acts of discovery, significant opportunities for frame breaking, and "aha" learning. It also builds skills through modelling of behaviours seen to be successful. But most importantly, OMD sustains the interest, attention, and motivation of participants. In the end, this may be the single best predictor of training success for adult learners.

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