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MANAGING YOURSELF

Wilderness Leadership— On the Job

Five principles from outdoor exploration that will make you a better manager *by John Kanengieter and Aparna Rajagopal-Durbin*



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LEADERSHIP

Wilderness Leadership— On the Job

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Tori Murden McClure was the first woman to row solo across the Atlantic Ocean and the first American to ski overland to the South Pole. She has led expeditions up Mount Rainier and the Andes, and through Kenya and Alaska.

She has law and divinity degrees and now serves as the president of Spalding University, in Louisville, Kentucky.

But before McClure could do all that, she had to learn how to lead. Her first attempt to cross the Atlantic was scuttled by planning hiccups, an inadequate communications system, and Hurricane Danielle. She was disappointed but recognized the silver lining: She'd had a great practice run, full of lessons—including important ones about delegating and thoughtful decision making—for her next attempt. The following year she tried again, and this time she relied more heavily on her support team

for advice on boat materials and technology. When Hurricane Lenny hit near the end of her journey, causing her boat to repeatedly flip over, McClure stayed calm, set off her distress beacon only after the storm had passed, and then changed course. On December 3, 1999, she rowed ashore at Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, making her mark on history.

What can managers learn from McClure and adventurers like her? At the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), we take 15,000 executives, students, and armed services members into the wilderness each year to help them develop the same leadership skills that McClure has honed on her expeditions. And we believe that in the unpredictable, challenging, and dynamic wilderness environment, our participants learn five key principles—practice leadership, lead from everywhere, behave well, keep calm, and disconnect to connect—that apply directly to today’s business world.

McClure, a 1985 NOLS graduate and now chairman of our board, views leadership as finding a path, for herself and others, all day every day. You have to think about the consequences of your actions, she believes, and remember that you don’t always lead from the front or follow from behind. You have to make sure that what you expect of other people is in harmony with how you behave. And when the boat flips and fills with water, you have to stay calm and remember which way is up.

Not everyone will have the opportunity to personally experience NOLS training, of course, but all managers can benefit from the lessons of outdoor exploration. Here are the principles of our philosophy and how to apply them in your work life.

Practice Leadership

The fundamental philosophy of NOLS is that leadership can be learned—even by those who don’t think they have a natural ability to lead. The key is practice. Using an experiential learning model developed by David Kolb, a professor at the Weatherhead School of Management, NOLS gives

expedition participants more responsibility each day so that they get comfortable making decisions, acting upon them, and reflecting on their outcomes. Participants might start with small choices, such as when and for how long the hiking group will take a break, and end with big decisions, like mapping out and executing an unsupervised off-trail excursion. Our participants work up to consequential leadership, building knowledge and skills step by step. And they are forced to learn from their inevitable mistakes. “We let them fail early and often,” explains Joseph Thomas, the U.S. Naval Academy’s Lakefield Family Foundation Distinguished Military Professor of Leadership and a NOLS instructor. “The more times they fail, the more long-lasting the lessons.”

Marc Randolph, a cofounder of Netflix and a NOLS graduate, strongly believes in stepping up to leadership this way. “On a hike, it’s a constant process of not being sure, taking a shot, and finding out one, 10, or 100 minutes later whether your decision was a good or bad one,” he says. “That’s what you face in the business world, especially as an entrepreneur.” Making decisions on the basis of incomplete, inconclusive, or contradictory information is a skill that managers at every level must master. Randolph dismisses the notion that the only way to learn to be a CEO is by being a CEO. “The learning comes from making thousands of small choices on the way there,” he says.

To practice leadership in your life, seize opportunities to make and learn from decisions, whenever and wherever they arise.

Lead from Everywhere

As organizations move away from traditional command-and-control structures toward flatter hierarchies, such opportunities should come more frequently. Today the person spearheading a project may have the “manager” title, but often she does not.

NOLS participants are taught to lead in four ways during an expedition and to take different approaches depending

on the circumstances. The *designated leader* takes responsibility for the group and determines how it will achieve its goals. That person is supported by *active followers*, who participate in group decision making by seeking clarity and giving input. All team members are encouraged to be *peer leaders*, taking action to help one another. They are also expected to exercise *self-leadership* by being organized and motivated and by caring for themselves so that they can effectively take on the other three roles. In the wilderness, “today’s leader is tomorrow’s follower, and yesterday’s follower is today’s leader,” explains Bob Schoultz, the director of the Global Leadership program at the University of San Diego, a former U.S. Naval Academy director, and a NOLS instructor. “People have to step outside titles like CEO to meet the challenges of the environment, such as crossing a fast-moving river or setting up a tent in high winds.”

Lesley Mottla, the vice president of member experience at Zipcar, learned the benefits of shifting leadership roles during her NOLS expedition in the East African Rift Valley. Hikers in one group mistakenly assumed that their confident and commanding designated leader was also the best navigator, and they lost their way. The designated leader in Mottla’s group, by contrast, identified the team member with the best navigational skills and allowed her to take the lead, following her straight to their destination.

Mottla takes a similar approach with her cross-functional team at Zipcar. “We’ve built a culture where it’s not unusual for midlevel people who are driven and have displayed leadership skills to manage major initiatives,” she says. After the company launched its iPhone app for reserving cars, a newly hired associate product manager undertook a study that confirmed that customers were also using Android phones in significant numbers. Within a week, another new hire—a young product engineer—developed a prototype Android app. Mottla might have then passed the initiative to more-seasoned managers, but

instead she let the junior employees run with it, leading from behind with guidance and encouragement.

Kevin Thompson, an IBM executive and a NOLS graduate, also embraces the “lead from everywhere” mantra at work. As a 34-year-old junior manager, he had a radical idea for “a business version of the Peace Corps” that would send employees to work on societal problems in the company’s key emerging markets. His suggestion met with instant skepticism, but Thompson remembered his active-

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follower training and worked to persuade his boss—the senior program manager for corporate citizenship—and other department managers that his idea could help them meet their goals for both leadership development and market intelligence. He encouraged them to help shape the program so that they would feel invested in it, and in doing so turned his critics into supporters. Today more than 1,000 IBMers have been deployed through the Corporate Service Corps.

The lesson is simple: You can make a difference no matter what your formal role on a team. And as a manager, your best move might be to step out of the way and let someone else take charge.

Behave Well

For a team to succeed in the wilderness, expedition behavior (EB) is crucial. This means getting along in a diverse group, cooperating with teammates, effectively resolving conflict, and keeping yourself and others motivated. For instance, a team member might wake up early to cook breakfast in subzero temperatures without complaint or might carry the

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Lessons on the Trail

During our expeditions, we occasionally take time out for leadership exercises. Here's an abbreviated version of one. The goal is to make participants more aware of their default leadership styles—and how others perceive them.

STEP 1 The instructor lays a climbing rope on the ground to represent a continuum. One end is defined by the statement “I express my opinions freely” and the other by “I keep my own counsel.” Participants then choose where they should stand on that line.

STEP 2 The instructor uses another climbing rope to create a second axis, one end defined by “I am calm and rational” and the other by “My emotions are very active.” Participants move forward or backward from their initial spot, positioning themselves in one of four quadrants, each of which represents a leadership style.

STEP 3 The instructor asks who is willing to give and receive feedback. Those who agree each take a turn repositioning others according to how they perceive their teammates' leadership styles—no explanation needed.

STEP 4 Everyone returns to his or her chosen spot. The instructor leads a discussion about the strengths, weaknesses, and functions of each quadrant, using some of the questions below.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is it like to lead from your quadrant?
- In which situations does your leadership style work best?
- Which styles are easiest and hardest for others to follow?
- In which quadrants would you feel uncomfortable?
- What happens in a group if one quadrant is empty?

pack of a fatigued comrade. Too often, people focus on “getting it done” regardless of the fallout. That attitude can erode team cohesion, putting you even further from your goal. As Schoultz says, in the wilderness, “there’s nowhere to hide from ill-chosen words or selfishly taken actions.”

That’s true in the business world, too. Peter Roy, a former president of Whole Foods Market and a graduate of NOLS, attributes the success of the grocery chain in part to EB principles. For example, he built personal relationships with many of his employees by mopping floors and bagging groceries alongside them or covering their shifts when they had sick children to tend to.

Empathy and communication are core to EB, as the executive team of Timbuk2, a messenger-bag company, learned on a seven-day NOLS course in 2007. Team members used their experience to defuse two tense situations at work. Timbuk2’s CEO, Perry Klebahn, and the director of operations, Nancy Spector, had been fighting over the pace of the company’s restructuring. After the course, they openly discussed each other’s perspective on—and feelings about—the issue. Klebahn explained the reasons for his urgency, which made Spector more willing to follow him. Her candid feedback about the negative effect his approach was having on her and other staff members—combined with his own reflection—persuaded him to change some behaviors.

EB also helped Timbuk2’s sales chief and its e-commerce and marketing director avoid a looming battle over a catalog redesign. After listening—without defensiveness—to each other’s opinions, they were able to reach common ground. Looking back, Klebahn says the turning point came when team members began to treat one another not just as coworkers but as friends and to understand each individual’s motivations, stress points, and even sense of humor.

Expedition behavior is essential to teamwork, on the trail or in the office.

Keep Calm

Tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, or TFAU, is another crucial leadership skill. On expeditions, we arm participants with topographical maps showing detailed routes, campsites, and resupply locations. But many factors cannot be known in advance: weather, terrain conditions, snowpack, and so on. In the course of an expedition, participants often end up scrapping not only Plan A but also Plan B. We tell them to plan for things they can control, let go of things they can't, expect the unexpected, and maintain composure when it arrives. Problems get solved only with calm deliberation.

John Grunsfeld, a scientist with the Hubble space telescope program and a NOLS graduate, displayed TFAU when he learned that NASA was abandoning manned missions to the telescope—effective immediately. “I wanted to throw my badge on the table and make a big scene,” he says. Instead, he weighed his options. If he were to leave NASA, Hubble science would be without an advocate. He decided to stay on and find a way to keep the program going without astronauts. The result was the Hubble Robotic Servicing and Deorbit Mission.

Peter Roy describes TFAU as learning to extend your comfort zone. One Sunday morning in the 1990s, he received word that a wildfire in the Berkeley Hills was creeping down toward California's second Whole Foods store. He wasn't fazed. “Most of my team members were totally freaked out and worried about their homes and pets, but I came in and calmly told everyone that I was closing the store and made sure everybody had rides home,” he remembers. His wilderness experience had taught him to look past danger and distraction and focus on the most important tasks at hand. “When other people are panicking,” he says, “leaders need to really step up, and so, by definition, their comfort zone needs to be more expansive.”

Marc Randolph thinks that being able to handle uncertainty is equally important for entrepreneurs. “Starting a company is very

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tricky; there is no blueprint, no road map, no well-established track you follow,” he says. “A lot of people get paralyzed—they don't know whether to go left or right, and so they freeze.”

That doesn't get you anywhere in the backcountry, and it certainly won't help you achieve your goals at work. So when things go wrong, a little TFAU goes a long way.

Disconnect to Connect

Many scholars argue that the fast-paced, high-tech world of work wreaks havoc on leaders' ability to engage in the careful strategic thinking required of them. We agree; executives in particular need to occasionally abandon their modern-day trappings and recharge. This means disconnecting not just from laptops and smartphones but also from devices that purportedly promote relaxation, such as iPads and TVs. We believe that getting out into nature achieves what the environmental psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan call “attention restoration.” Being in the outdoors effectively resets our brains, allowing us to analyze problems, map strategies, and dream big.

It's no coincidence that many company founders owe their “lightbulb moments” to having been away from the lightbulb on a wilderness expedition. Tom Scott, a co-founder of Nantucket Nectars, spent a winter semester of college on a NOLS course in the Wind River Mountains, towing a sled through snowdrifts every day with teammates who couldn't pull their weight. At the time, he was feeling pressure to be a doctor, a lawyer, or a banker, but on that trip he thought hard about what would make him happy and saw a different future for himself: working on a boat and selling muffins, coffee, and juice. “I realized that picking a passion and going for it—in my


case starting a ‘floating 7-Eleven’—could be entrepreneurship,” he recalls. “The immersion in nature and lack of distraction had me in a mind frame where I could make decisions for the right reasons.” Now he refers to this as “the pause”—a time when he was able to “disconnect from the chaos to find the truth.”

Scott employed the same strategy in the winter of 1993, when he learned that Nantucket Nectars would lose its financing if it failed to turn a profit within three months. Rather than seek counsel from advisers or call his managers into a meeting, he took a solitary walk along the frozen Charles River outside his Cambridge, Massachusetts, office to gather his wits and formulate a plan. The power of his company was in its people, he realized, not its product. Reengaging employees was essential. Back at the office, he mapped out a strategy for giving demoralized staff members more decision-making responsibility, which motivated them to work even harder to turn the ship around.

Not everyone has a river outside the office or the opportunity to take a wilderness break. But most of us can find time to leave technology behind, take a walk, and let the natural world work its restorative magic.

WE WOULD be thrilled, of course, if every person reading this decided to take a crash course in expedition leadership. That's not possible—but these skills can be honed in the real world, too. Just think about people like [Tori Murden McClure](#) and do your best to follow their, and our, rules: Practice leadership. Lead from everywhere. Be-have well. Keep calm. And disconnect to connect. ♥

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