

Expedition Behavior

Outdoor trips force people to live in close quarters for extended periods of time. On a backpacking or a mountaineering trip, you can't just go home at the end of the day and relax in the confines of your own house. At the end of a day on an outdoor expedition, you still have to work as a team setting up camp, making dinner, and keeping the tent in good shape. Nearly every aspect of camping is communal, from the sharing of food to the battle for room in a small tent. At its best, this shared living brings people together in a spirit of camaraderie seldom found in their normal lives. At its worst, the demands of outdoor living can bring people to blows.

There are lots of words and terms to describe the human interactions on an outdoor expedition: process skills, soft skills, people skills, etc. Paul Petzoldt, legendary mountaineer, environmentalist and founder of the National Outdoor Leadership School, coined the term "expedition behavior" to describe it. After years of mountaineering experience, training soldiers and outdoor leaders, and completing major alpine expeditions, Petzoldt concluded that good or bad expedition behavior often determined a group's destiny even more than technical skills and physical strength. Expeditions with moderate talent but good expedition behavior can achieve greater things than bilious expeditions with all the talent in the world.

Sometimes when the entire group is tired, hungry, and dehydrated, simple decisions or camp chores take on a certain volatility. At the end of long days, be on guard for your own and others' irritability and take countermeasures to prevent reaching that point by eating and drinking all day. The solution can be as simple as having a snack or a bottle of water.

After the basic needs of the human organism are met, good expedition behavior springs from all the most decent of human traits: respectfulness, flexibility, tolerance of others, courtesy, politeness, direct communication, self-awareness, open-heartedness, teamwork, sharing, and selflessness. That's quite a laundry list of traits, but what they describe is really just simple decency along with thoughtfulness.

Living and working with others is one of the delights of the outdoors, but the very word "other" reminds us that being thrown into the mix with several people whom we may or may not know well requires a real tolerance of differences, quirks, and even weaknesses. In the argot of today's psychology, a better term might be "mutual adaptation." The term describes a mind-set of not just suffering one another's differences but of respecting, enjoying, and learning from differences. On long expeditions mere tolerance may wear thin and make for brittle relationships and a frosty atmosphere. Fully adapting to other party members and their ways is what gives a group cohesion.

Expedition behavior requires flexibility because the outdoors always has a surprise or two waiting. If you're rigidly set on scaling a peak and seeing its summit, what happens if a teammate is injured, the clouds roll in with a violent storm, or the rest of the group is too exhausted to make the peak? Without flexibility, you may charge ahead despite the weather or despite the fact that you're alone. People intent on achieving their agenda no matter the environmental conditions or the condition of the group can alienate the rest of the team. At worst, the inflexible person can put himself and the others in harm's way with his dogged approach.

Courtesy and politeness smooth the edges of group dynamics. The opportunity to practice courtesy on an expedition can be found at every turn in the trail and at every camp. The courtesies can be as basic as practicing good hygiene, washing your hands before you cook dinner, not strewing your gear all over the tent, and helping someone over a log in the trail. Those are basic courtesies that every person on an expedition should practice. Bringing your friend coffee in the morning, stuffing his sleeping bag, treating a bottle of water—all these acts are nice touches that bring up group morale and, more often than not, are paid back with interest.

Self-awareness gives us the necessary information to change bad habits and to reinforce good ones. Self-awareness comes from reflection and the humility to admit and change your

imperfections. An old saying goes, if ten people say you're drunk, you'd better sit down. If your habits and behavior have the same aggravating effect on all of your campmates, you likely need to reflect and make changes.

The concept of team and teamwork on outdoor expeditions should be reinforced here. We don't do it alone out there unless we're traveling solo. In the backcountry, a group of disparate personalities, bodies of different sizes and shapes, varying hopes, fears, and expectations, join up to form an organism called the group or the team. The individual never completely loses his singular qualities - and shouldn't - but he does have to adapt his behavior for the good of the group, and his thinking should go from "Is this best for me?" to "Is this best for us?" Putting others first and acting selflessly - it may sound like the stuff of Sunday school, but this all has more to do with practicality than morality. As Paul Petzoldt has said:

Simply, poor expedition behavior is a breakdown in human relations caused by selfishness, rationalization, ignorance of personal faults, dodging blame or responsibility, physical weakness, and, in extreme cases, not being able to risk one's own survival to insure that of a companion.

The success, health, and morale of the team matter so much on expeditions that putting the group before your own needs and acting selflessly is a way to ensure the success of the trip.

Expedition Behavior Defined

- Serve the mission and goals of the group.
- Take responsibility for yourself and your own learning.
- Do your share and stay organized.
- If it needs doing, do it.
- If you don't understand, ask.
- Risk saying what you think.
- Own what you say.
- Push yourself.
- Model integrity by being honest and accountable.
- Be as concerned for others as you are for yourself.
- Treat everyone with dignity and respect.
- Support leadership and growth in everyone.
- Respect the cultures you contact.
- Be kind and open-hearted.
- Help others, but don't routinely do their work.
- Admit, correct and learn from your mistakes.
- Enjoy your surroundings and maintain a sense of humor.

Works Cited

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