Thoughts of Facilitation: An Overview

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**Purpose:** Adventure programming has become an increasingly important movement within the recreation field in the last thirty years. The tremendous rise in the building and programming of ropes courses is a part of this larger trend. The new mobile initiatives ropes course at your facility provides an excellent adventure programming resource to be used by groups of many ages and abilities.

**Challenge:** Common to all the events at a adventure learning experience is the factor of challenge. Some elements at a ropes course focus the challenge to the individual whereas other elements shift the challenge and responsibility to a small group. At one element the challenge may be largely physical requiring a certain level of strength or coordination. Another element may not require more physical prowess than is present in a five-year old, yet emotionally the challenge may seem overwhelming (e.g., to command one’s fear). Still other elements will focus on a mental challenge which necessitates utilizing a creative problem solving process. The various elements at the ropes course cannot be classified rigidly as challenging only one domain but inherently involve all of them. But whatever domain seems to be emphasized the presence of a challenge will always be the common denominator across different initiatives and challenge course components.

There is an assumption operating here, that confronting a challenge is a worthwhile and valuable experience. Through confronting and mastering a series of progressive challenges, it is believed that an individual can gain an increased sense of personal competence. Confronting a challenge as a group can lead that group to increase their understanding of one another and create a more cohesive and functional team.

**The Challenge Course Toolbox**
One of the helpful metaphors about the purpose of ropes courses is to think of a toolbox and assume that you, the leader, are a carpenter. The first step is to know what you want to build or repair. Knowing clearly your goals for a group or an individual is the most important step.

There are a variety of goals that can be pursued with a challenge course program. Common ropes course goals might include:

- To create an effective team which could include objectives such as
  increasing positive regard for one another within a group;
  increasing problem solving ability as a group
  increasing the level of care and kindness in a group
  increasing the effectiveness of the role of leadership in a group
  increasing the level of cooperation in a group

- To develop an increased level of fitness within a group including dimensions of agility and physical coordination and strength;

- To develop an increased sense of confidence in one’s physical and emotional self;

- To develop an increased awareness of our personal interactions with others;

- To develop friendship and respect of others, particularly with those from different cultural contexts

- To develop an increased appreciation and identification with the natural world.

Additional goals and objectives can be created for specific programs using the ropes course elements.

So the first goal in our toolbox metaphor is understanding what your project (goal) is about.
The second part of the metaphor is that the right tool needs to be used for the right job. If my project is to repair a water pipe and I use a pipe wrench, the project will go much easier than if I try to approach to repair with only a hammer and a screwdriver. The skilled leader of adventure learning experiences recognizes she has a toolbox full of tools and is always trying to select the right tool for the job. Some group initiatives are much more suited to focus on a communication issue than others and some challenges are better at achieving a sense of newly discovered confidence.

Challenge courses are not to be viewed as some start to finish obstacle course that cures all the woes of person or group. Rather, the skilled craftsman assesses exactly what the goal is and achieves that goal effectively by using the right set of designed challenge experiences.

Training Manual Purpose

This training manual is focused on those challenge course components known as ‘group initiatives’. A group initiative creates a ‘problem’ to be solved by a small group. In the process of solving the problem the group will be called upon to think creatively, act cooperatively, and act out all the behaviors that groups perform when working together.

The training has two parts: identifying and practicing the skills of leading a group through an initiative. These skills and behaviors are commonly referred to as facilitation or coaching skills. The second part of the training is to provide an introduction to 30 different initiatives that can be used with groups. The actual events or initiatives used by facilitators is sometimes referred to as the ‘bag of tricks’. So simply put, we hope to give you a bag of tricks and some skills in how to use them.
Roles of the Learning Facilitator or Coach

Leadership Style

The issues revolving around the manner in which a ropes course leader presents him/herself to a group are virtually endless. The following comments are intended to be suggestive of some of the issues, not to be an exhaustive treatment of all the issues. Come to the Leadership Training Seminars prepared to share your ideas and suggestions.

Establishing rapport between a leader and a group is a critical factor for effective leadership. There is no magic formula for creating this rapport but the following ingredients seem important. Be yourself. Don’t play a role or copy somebody else’s style if it doesn’t fit you. Secondly, be open. Take a risk in how you present yourself. A person demonstrating vulnerability and openness is more likely to motivate people to take that extra try or new risk on the course. Third, give plenty of support and encouragement. People need to hear that they have done a good job. On the other hand, talk is cheap and excessive praise for insignificant accomplishments soon makes the praise itself insignificant.

Clear communication is a necessity for the ropes course leader. Safety is both a thinking issue and a communication issue. Safety is something that must be talked about. The responsibility for communicating safety procedures at the ropes course clearly falls on the leader’s shoulders. Every group should expect to hear a safety briefing at the beginning at each relevant new event.

Although safety is our primary concern, a word of warning must be given to the overzealous ropes course leader. If participation at the ropes course seems to be controlled by "rules" then the fun will soon disappear and so will the quality of the participant’s experience. There are relatively few rules and the manner in which they are presented by the leader will make all the difference. Safety and fun and challenge are not incompatible concepts.
Communication involves more than just safety. Communication is the base skill for facilitation and coaching if we understand communication to include listening to messages from others as well as sending messages to others.

The facilitator must structure a teaching progression when working with a group. More will be said later about facilitating the group process through use of contracts and other diagnostic tools. Beyond establishing a working process for the group, the facilitator should be designing a sequence of events that encourage the group to be successful and maintain high energy. Build confidence through graduated challenges. The difficulty of the challenge should be matched with the experience and skills already acquired by the individual or group. One does not begin the high elements with the Trapeze Leap (aka Pamper Pole) nor a group development series with the 14 Foot Wall.

Facilitation of Group Initiatives

Facilitation is a leadership skill that guides a group’s internal process. We would suggest two approaches to understanding this key facilitation role in working with groups. One approach is to focus on the role of the leader as an implementor of a guided process: briefing, interventions, debriefing. A second approach is to view facilitation within the effective teams model as a monitor and coach of contract, power shared (the stick), positive feelings (the heart), vitality (the water), and the problem-solving process (the rock). Each of these approaches will be briefly discussed to provide a framework for developing ones facilitation skills.

Briefing

The briefing is the introduction of the activity. The most significant part of the briefing is the safety briefing. Any relevant safety concern should be presented to the group so that they will have the proper level of knowledge or skill to participate safely. For example, at the start of the program the facilitator may include a comment about the importance of keeping well hydrated and
U.V. protected during the days program as drinking water and using sunscreen are important to maintaining a safe experience. At the start of a 'high loop' ropes experience the safety briefing may take 15-20 minutes as the facilitator shows the group how to fit harness, helmets, and practice belaying systems. A simple initiative may include a note that stacking people on shoulders is not allowed due to safety concerns.

In addition to safety concerns the BRIEFING includes the ground rules or parameters for completing the event. Group initiatives can be presented in a variety of ways. Some leaders present the problem in a straightforward, no frills manner whereas others will create a fanciful tale and elaborately create the setting for the problem with trolls, poison peanut butter, and the like. Regardless of the introduction style, the instructor should clearly explain all the rules operating in the initiative. A leader may begin to lose credibility if he must constantly interject rules during the problem-solving process.

Review the slide presentation about the role of briefing for other suggestions (see Appendix).

**Interventions**

Intervention is considered that period of time between the briefing and the debriefing and is the most complex of the facilitator or coaching roles. One of the ways to structure the facilitator role is to see oneself in the role of 'stand back', 'safety monitor', 'referee', and 'diagnosis doc'.

**Stand Back:** Perhaps the most difficult role for those not familiar with experiential learning is to 'stand back'. Once a group has been presented with an initiative, the leader must resist giving suggestions and solutions to her struggling group. The instructor is detracting from the experience by being too helpful. The first role of intervention is not to intervene too much and this may be difficult for those with 'super mom' roles or 'savior complexes'.

**Safety Monitor:** Just as the safety briefing is the key duty in the Briefing stage, the safety monitor is the key role in the Intervention stage. As safety monitor the facilitator insists that
procedures outlined in the safety briefing are maintained. The safety monitor also anticipates accidents by observing the behaviors of the group and steps in to stop any hazardous ideas the group is about to implement. The training program will review a number of classic 'unsafe practices' that groups will attempt to solve certain initiatives.

**The Referee:** When a group is attempting to accomplish an initiative, someone may unintentionally break one of the rules laid own in the beginning for successful completion of the initiative. The instructor must decide whether or not to apply a penalty to the group and the severity of the penalty. If the event has been introduced with a time constraint, then other infractions may result in time penalties. In other cases, the penalty will be having to start over again. The instructor should remember that with compromising his standards on the rules he runs the risk of compromising the feeling of success in mastering the problem.

**Diagnosis Doc:** Just as a skilled doctor identifies the illness of the patient, the skilled coach diagnoses the effective and ineffective behaviors of the group. The diagnosis and evaluation of the group is perhaps the most significant role of the facilitator. The nondirective leadership style being discussed above should not be interpreted as a completely hands-off approach. There is a place for timely intervention by the instructor such as calling a halt to a completely stalled process and providing the opportunity for a fresh start or suggesting they rethink a certain part of the problem. Ken Kalisch in *The Role of the Instructor in the Outward Bound Educational Process* gives some examples of the variety of intervention options available to the instructor. Some of the intervention responses have been modified by this author.

**Types of Intervention.** Given the concept of democratic or nondirective leadership it would seem beneficial to be a little more explicit as to how an instructor exercises flexibility in his interventions. What follows are some examples of various types of interventions as applied to a single group situation. Keep in mind that the instructor’s goal is to facilitate the development of the group. Notice the difference between the responses, and consider the effectiveness of alternative interventions.
SITUATION: Members of a group have been long discussing how to get across the tire traverse. Suggestions have been thrown out at random, but those were quickly criticized and rejected. Two members have come to dominate the problem-solving, each vying for a greater share of power. The group is frustrated; many members are beginning to withdraw. The instructor who has been standing by senses that the situation is fast deteriorating and that an intervention may be helpful.

INTERVENTION ONE. (Goal: to attempt a diagnosis of the group’s failure). "There may be several reasons why this group is so frustrated right now. One is that everyone hasn’t been included in on the discussion of the problem . . . . Joe (dominant one), can you think of any other reason?"

INTERVENTION TWO. (Goal: to focus attention on process). "What have you noticed about every suggestion that has been offered here?” (each has been immediately criticized)

INTERVENTION THREE. (Goal: to bring out unexpressed feelings). "Sarah, how did you feel when your suggestion was laughed at a few minutes ago?"

INTERVENTION FOUR. (Goal: to perform a needed role in the group). "Let’s stop for few minutes and review all the suggestions which have been made up to now” (act of summarizing to clarify progress and refocus group).

INTERVENTION FIVE. (Goal: to give direct feedback). "Joe, do you realize how much you have been dominating this situation? What would it look like if voices in the group were more evenly shared."

INTERVENTION SIX. (Goal: to teach by means of additional content). “One of the keys to effective problem-solving is generating a large number of alternative solutions. I would
like you to try something with me as a group for a few minutes. It’s called brainstorming."

INTERVENTION SEVEN. (Goal: to protect a group member). "Joe! . . . I hate to interrupt, but I really think Sarah has heard enough from you for now."

INTERVENTION EIGHT. (Goal: to state some personal feelings). "I have been standing here for the last forty minutes watching and waiting for you people to get your act together. You are such a talented group and I’m growing increasingly frustrated that the progress is so slow after all we’ve been doing to develop the skills of problem-solving."

INTERVENTION NINE. (Goal: to restructure the situation). "I would like you all to get back together and begin a discussion of this problem. It’s too soon to give up. Let’s really work at communicating with each other. And Joe, since you’ve had so much to say up to this point, I would like you to just hang back for awhile and refrain from sharing any more."

INTERVENTION TEN. (Goal: to reflect others feelings back to them). "It’s really disheartening to try to solve a problem and end up nowhere. Sort of like spinning your wheels. Even downright frustrating, isn’t it?"

Facilitation is the art of knowing when and how to intervene into a group’s interaction. It is not an easy job. The instructor will experience a good degree of tension in making some of these decisions. The spacing and timing of them is often of great importance. Yet, this need not deter the inexperienced instructor from involving himself. Surely mistakes will be made; but the art of facilitation can be learned with practice.

There are differences in opinion as to the whether or not to place time constraints on group initiatives. Limiting a group to 20 minutes to solve an initiative may give the group additional motivation to be efficient in their development of action plans. On the other hand, the leader runs the risk of setting up an unrealistic or impossible initiative by giving that kind of time
limitation. The leader may also interject a statement such as "I’ll give you five more minutes for a final attempt." Here the clock can be used as a motivation tool to revitalize a wary group that is still capable of achieving success. Group behaviors also change with a time limitation and this can be a useful tool as many groups work with specific time pressures.

Finally, it should be mentioned that although time competition between groups on an initiative is a program design option the more significant competition is comparing the group’s own standards of decreasing time on initiatives like Key Punch or Warp Speed. Given the overemphasis on competition in our society, think twice before using group initiatives in a between group competitive framework.

**Debriefing**

The instructor is responsible for making the group initiatives (or any part of the ropes course) a learning experience. Learning about oneself does not happen directly from one’s experience but by one’s reflection on that experience. The leader should provide opportunity for the students to think about and then share their thoughts and feelings. A brief group huddle immediately following the activity is a good format to summarize and clarify the discoveries being made by the group members.

The facilitator or coach can craft key questions to help focus the group’s reflections.