CHAPTER ONE
Foundations

In this chapter you will learn:

- The four fundamental responsibilities of outdoor leaders.
- The three types of foundational skills—technical, interpersonal, and judgment—upon which effective outdoor leadership relies.
- The importance of motivation to outdoor leaders.
I met Erin Lotz when we were both working in Arizona and New Mexico as instructors for the Voyageur Outward Bound School. Lotz, one of the most naturally gifted climbers I’ve met, is a talented educator who has worked with a wide variety of participant groups. Today, she’s a faculty member in the Adventure Education Program at Arizona’s Prescott College. Her story of outdoor leadership involves a mountaineering course she co-instructed in Wyoming’s Wind River Range.

The Winds offer some of the finest wilderness hiking and climbing in the lower 48 states. Nine students accompanied Lotz and her co-instructor as they ventured into the range. After a few days of hiking, the group set up camp near an unnamed lake marked only by its elevation—10,831 feet—on their topographic map.

Following several days of unstable weather that thwarted much of their climbing, the group arose to find clear skies. Lotz and four students set out for a rock climb a short distance from camp. Their destination was a route that another small team from their larger group had climbed the day before. The previous group had reached the summit just as a storm marched in. Alternating rain and snow made the descent treacherous and slippery. They watched as lightning struck the summit they had just left.

Lotz’s group reached the base of the soaring granite under relatively clear skies, and everyone was optimistic that the weather would remain stable for the day. Two of the students accompanying Lotz were strong climbers and had climbed the route the day before, so they took turns leading the group up the rock pitches.

The first significant clouds began to move in when the team was still relatively close to the ground. As they climbed, the clouds became thicker, although their view of the incoming weather was partially blocked. The five climbers gathered on a small ledge to decide what to do. From their location on the cliff, the group could use existing anchors to make the rappels necessary to reach the ground. Those who had been on the climb before knew that if they progressed upward, there would be no more existing anchors they could rappel from. Up or down? To Lotz the answer seemed fairly obvious: down.

For two students, rappelling was the easy choice—and they did just that. While watching the two descend, Erin and the remaining two students discussed the situation and it became clear that the students wanted to continue climbing. They were both excited to be leading a long climb in the mountains. Because they had done the climb before, both students felt they could move quickly and be off the summit before conditions deteriorated. Lotz believed that the clouds were moving rapidly and they should descend to avoid being caught in a storm. The three discussed their points of view briefly. Unconvinced of the safety of continuing in the face of a potential storm, Lotz unilaterally decided the group would rappel down.

Both students were disappointed with Lotz’s choice—though they did spect it. They rigged the ropes for the rappels in silence. By the time they reached the bottom rappel, the wind had picked up with intense gusts. Indeed, it was intense that it whipped the rope into a crack, forcing Lotz to climb back up free it. As she did so, snow began to fall heavily, making the now significant delay hike down across wet talus tricky. They headed back to the security of their camp, hoping that the weather would give them a break and they’d have the opportunity to climb more in the days to come.

**Fundamental Responsibilities of Outdoor Leaders**

In evaluating Lotz’s experience with her students in the Winds, it helps to understand the four fundamental responsibilities of outdoor leaders. The first two of these—to minimize risk and to minimize impact—are fundamental to leadership. The second set of responsibilities—to maximize learning and maximize enjoyment—are important aspects of leadership, though they may, depend on where you are going, take a backseat to the first two or possibly to other priorities.

**Minimize Risk.** A leader’s most important responsibility is to manage participants’ risk of injury, death, or psychological harm during a program. Risk of harm cannot be eliminated from any activity. Risk can, nevertheless, be dramatically reduced through competent leadership.

**Minimize Impact.** Individuals and groups have an obligation to leave an area in the same condition it was in when they arrived. Without such continual care, our cumulative impact will diminish the wild areas we love. Outdoor leaders have a unique opportunity to model and teach Leave No Trace principles, helping establish the standard for everyone.

**Maximize Learning.** When it fits into the framework of a given activity, the leader should seize upon opportunities to educate. While outdoor activities are not always educational in focus, they always present opportunities for participant learning. When participants leave a program with improved outdoor skills or a greater appreciation for and understanding of themselves, groups, or natural environment, you’ve performed a real service.

**Maximize Enjoyment.** Participating in outdoor recreation, to most people, means having fun (enjoyment may also come from relaxation, exercise,
challenges). This is why most people participate in outdoor programs. Even groups that put other goals ahead of enjoyment—successfully negotiating a particular river or building character in youth, for example—will benefit from having a little fun along the way.

To fulfill these responsibilities, an outdoor leader must have both a complete understanding of them and a lot of experience, knowledge, and skills. The rest of this book will help you along the path toward living up to these responsibilities—something that even the most experienced and skilled leaders continue to work on.

Analyzing the Wind River Range Experience
Looking at the four fundamental responsibilities of outdoor leaders, here’s an analysis of Lotz’s leadership on the climb in the Winds.

Minimize Risk. Lotz took effective and decisive action to control risk, a leader’s most important responsibility, when she decided that the group needed to descend. She was confident in this decision, even in the face of opposition from two group members. While in hindsight this may seem like the obvious course of action, making decisions in the field, frequently based upon incomplete information, is often challenging. Decisiveness based on extensive training and experience were the keys to Lotz’s actions and will be discussed frequently in this book. Would this still have been the right decision even if the increased winds and rain never materialized? I would argue yes, though the challenging weather conditions certainly made the decision easier to justify later.

Minimize Impact. Environmental impact does not play a significant role in this anecdote. The situation could have been different had Lotz made other decisions. One of the Leave No Trace principles for minimizing impact is to “plan ahead and prepare.” Poorly prepared or led groups, such as this one, often cause more impact on the environment than those that are well-prepared and well-led. When planning and decisions go awry—such as in an emergency or rescue—protecting the environment tends to become secondary to human safety. A rescue in the Wind Rivers might have required flying a helicopter into the otherwise protected wilderness. The well-prepared leader is likely to avoid such situations.

Maximize Learning. Instead of simply dictating that the group descend, Lotz engaged the participants in the decision-making process—they were, in this situation, learning to lead themselves. Had they attempted to climb to the summit, they might have had an even more memorable learning experience. However, given the concerns about returning safely to level ground, the potential of an extreme weather event being over the summit, the group’s goals of completing the ascent, and the fact that the group members were all novices, Lotz made the right decision. The group descended and continued to make other decisions based upon experience and knowledge. Lotz’s leadership continued to guide the group towards their goals and concluded with an enjoyable experience.

The Wild River
In June 1998, a group from a high school outing club in Vermont set out for a backpacking trip in New Hampshire’s White Mountains. The group consisted of six students and two adults, including the trip leader, who was also the school’s outdoor program director. Starting out under rainy conditions, the group ascended to the South Baldface Shelter. During the night, the rain increased significantly in intensity.

The group’s plan for the second day was to head to another shelter, a bit more than 8.5 miles with 2,500 feet of elevation gain. In the morning, the group leader decided that, because of the weather, she would lead the group on an alternative route instead of having them ascend nearby South Baldface Mountain over steep ledges. The new route—now requiring more than 12.5 miles of hiking—added 1,000 feet of cumulative elevation gain. The route also traverse a ridge exposed to the weather and involved four crossings of the Wild River that can be challenging at normal water levels.

Torrential rains continued, and by 1 P.M. the group still had about nine miles to go to reach their intended destination, including the traverse of the river and the river crossings. At this point, the group leader gave a map to two of the group, ages 14 and 15, and told them to continue hiking to the shelter. She thought the two girls could move faster than everybody else and would better off if they reached the protection of the shelter. Behind the two girls, the main group continued at a slower pace. At a well-signed trail junction, the group took a wrong turn and ascended Eastman Mountain.
After realizing their mistake and backtracking to the point where they had made the wrong turn, the main group decided to camp for the night. The group leader decided to set out to the road alone in an attempt to summon help. On her way out, she slipped while crossing what is typically a small brook. In the flood conditions, though, the leader was quickly swept 60 feet downstream and later reported that she had nearly drowned.

Sergeant Bob Bryant, who works for the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, which has jurisdiction over search-and-rescue operations in the state, says, “The leader came out of the woods totally wet and confused and we headed in early the next morning.” In continuing poor conditions, Fish and Game officers, along with volunteers from search-and-rescue organizations, hiked in to assist the main group and find the missing girls. As Bryant tells it: “We were lucky that we had just practiced setting up tyrolean (rope traverses), because that was the only way we could get people across the streams.”

The search-and-rescue team found the main group first, and they set up ropes to help the members across swollen brooks. Search teams also used these ropes as they fanned out on trails to find the two missing girls. “When we got to them they were just stranded by high water,” says Bryant. Rescuers set up more ropes to aid the girls to safety. After losing a sleeping bag in a brook crossing the on the first day, the two girls later made a risky crossing of the extremely swollen Wild River. Realizing they would not make it to the shelter, they spent the night sharing their one remaining sleeping bag under the shelter of some dense conifers.

During the night, with the water still rising, the girls had become trapped between steep, flooded brooks feeding the main river. That morning, fearing that they might have to remain in place for several more days, the girls improvised a shelter of hemlock boughs. They also rationed their supply of food. “Unlike the leader, it seemed like they did a great job, given the circumstances,” concludes Bryant. With a little exasperation, he adds, “We spend most of our search-and-rescue time dealing with groups that have not kept together—usually because a slower hiker gets left behind. This situation was a little different, but like the rest, they probably would have been fine if they just stayed together.”

**Analyzing the Wild River Incident**

Far different from Erin Lotz’s experiences in the Wind River Range, the tale from the Wild River Valley shows what can occur under ineffective leadership. Analyzing the events through the four fundamental responsibilities, we can assess what went wrong.

**Minimize risk.** This leader failed to minimize risk in an acceptable way. Breaking up the group—generally a last resort—requires careful consideration and planning. In this situation, it happened twice, both times with poor results. The resourcefulness and calm, effective decision making by the two girls separated from the group prevented them from suffering physical harm. In addition to physical risk, a big concern in a situation such as this one is the potential for participants to develop a lifelong aversion to the outdoors, as well as potential for more significant psychological harm.

**Minimize impact.** In emergencies we do things, like cutting boughs trees to fashion a shelter, that we likely would not do in normal circumstances. The impact in this example was minimal, but leaving only our footprints the wilderness is much more likely if we plan ahead and properly prepare minimum-impact outings.

**Maximize learning.** Experiences like this can be highly educational, as lessons are seared into the minds of those involved. Despite this, the lead failure to provide a safe learning environment makes this a negative experience. While educational benefits can result from providing participants with experiences and even the freedom to fail, a safety net must always be in place.

**Maximize enjoyment.** Unless they had a strong penchant for adventure seeking, it is unlikely that many of the participants enjoyed this experience.

The leader’s inability to meet her fundamental responsibilities seems to have arisen largely from poor judgment skills. If we were to analyze the situation more deeply, we might find that limited technical skills, lack of awareness, planning, and improper motivation were among the factors contributing to the poor decisions. It is likely that much of this is related to inexperience or inadequate training.

**Three Foundations of Effective Leadership**

Leaders need a solid foundation to support their outdoor leadership. One way to think of outdoor leadership is as a three-legged stool. The stool must be well-topped this stool, the legs of which are technical, interpersonal, and judgment skills. Ideally, the legs would be equal in length and the leader’s stability assumed. As you can imagine, if one leg is a wee bit short, the stool becomes unbalanced. With two short legs, or one missing almost entirely, the stool becomes impossible to sit on. At this point the leader slides off—and the results can be bruising. The three broad foundation skill sets, which empower leaders to meet their fundamental responsibilities, are described over the following pages.
The Balanced Stool

A person with equally strong technical, interpersonal, and judgment skills is likely to be an effective leader.

Technical Skills
The leader on the Wild River trip was short on technical skills. Technical skills are a combination of physical abilities (also referred to as kinesthetic, or motor, skills) and knowledge necessary for any given activity. Paddling a canoe, navigation, first aid, backpacking, and reading the weather are all examples of technical skills (though judgment also plays a role). There are two general categories of technical skills: the core technical skills all outdoor leaders should have and activity-specific technical skills—such as those needed for alpine mountaineering—that are required only for those leading that type of activity.

Those without solid technical skills for the activity they are leading cannot be counted on to take care of themselves, let alone make decisions for a group. Take, for example, the leader from the Wild River trip, whose faulty navigation and crisis management skills contributed to the troubles on that trip. Ideally the leader’s technical skills will be stronger than what is demanded by the activities. This “reserve” can save the day when the unexpected happens. Physical fitness is a component of technical skills, in particular being fit for the specific activities you will be doing.

What level of technical skills do you need to lead others in the outdoors? It is incredibly varied. Leading children on an exploration of a salt marsh requires only a minimal set of technical skills (though effectively engaging them may require phenomenal interpersonal skills). Guiding high-altitude alpine climbers may require years of experience and training to amass the necessary technical skills. Various parts of this book—the following chapter, Learning to Lead; in particular—describe the technical skills required for successful leadership. There are so many types of leadership roles that it is incumbent upon the prospective leader to investigate which technical skills are necessary for the role desired. Core technical skills of outdoor leaders are:

- Trip planning
- First aid
- Crisis response
- Risk management
- Leave No Trace
- Nutrition and hydration
Interpersonal Skills

Defining and evaluating interpersonal skills is more difficult than doing so with technical skills. Teaching, facilitation, group process, awareness (of yourself and others), empathy, and even sense of humor are interpersonal skills. The psychological and communication abilities that comprise interpersonal skills are vital to the efficacy of all social interaction. These skills require time, experience, and conscious effort to develop.

Erin Lotz utilized interpersonal skills during the discussion regarding a potential retreat from the climbing route in the Wind River Range. These interpersonal skills helped Lotz to facilitate a speedy decision, and even though not everyone agreed with her decision, they did respect it. Everyone walked away with a good learning experience. Contrast this with the Wild River fiasco, in which reports from the group indicated that the group was not communicating well. While not all of the details are available, we do know that the entire group was not aware of the decision to split up. Perhaps, had communication been better, someone might have voiced concerns about the plans to split up the group. At a minimum, increased communication could have made the challenging situation a bit less scary for participants.

From 1998 to 2004 I worked on risk management, leadership training, and volunteer relations for the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC). During those six years at the AMC, I realized that many of the organization’s thousands of volunteer leaders had stronger interpersonal skills than I had expected. Prior to joining the organization, much of my own outdoor leadership experience involved working with professional outdoor leaders who were in their early-to-mid-twenties. Most volunteer leaders at AMC are a bit older and come to the role with broader life experiences than other leaders I had met. AMC leaders may be parents, have careers, and been active in community organizations. Such experiences have helped these leaders develop effective interpersonal skills that they can carry over into their outdoor leadership roles.

Parenting, office careers, and community involvement may all appear to have little to do with outdoor leadership; however, a closer look reveals that success in these enterprises requires many of the same interpersonal skills as outdoor leadership. Among the many relevant leadership skills that parenting may help leaders develop are teaching, communication, empathy, and even crisis management. A successful professional career often requires working in a group setting and developing leadership, communication, and empathy skills.

Unfortunately, life experience doesn’t always lead to effective interpersonal skills. For most leaders, an intentional focus on the development of these skills and honest, constructive feedback from others are necessary. Keep in mind, people are often more willing to provide critical feedback on technical skills than they are on interpersonal skills. Many are willing to say, “Let me show you another way to tie the rope on the bear bag so it’s easier to untie.” Fewer people are comfortable telling you, “When you ignored my advice on where to put the bear bag, it made me feel like you didn’t value what I had to say.” Leaders of all ages need to do what’s necessary to acquire interpersonal skills; these sometimes neglected skills, and approaches to developing them, will be a major focus of this book. Core interpersonal skills for outdoor leaders are:

- Communication
- Expedition behavior (teamwork)
- Leadership style
- Judgment
Judgment Skills

Judgment is the capacity to evaluate and draw conclusions. In an outdoor leadership context, good judgment is the deep understanding of yourself, others, the activities you engage in, and the environment around you that informs your assessment of situations and leads to well-formed opinions. Good judgment is also timely. Judgment can be hard to separate from our interpersonal and technical skills. I like to think about judgment as controlling the application of our technical and interpersonal skills. On the climb in the Wind River Range, Erin Lotz used her rock climbing and weather forecasting skills, but in the end, she needed to employ judgment to make the decision to descend. Then, once she reached that decision, she used her best judgment to determine the appropriate interpersonal skills to communicate the decision. Much, but not all, of this ability is based on experience.

Returning to the story of the soggy high school backpackers in New Hampshire’s Wild River Valley, let’s focus not on the leader, but on the two girls who were trapped by rising water. Propelled into a challenging situation when they were separated from the rest of the group, these two girls made some initial decisions that could be viewed as missteps. These decisions likely resulted, at least in part, from a desire to follow instructions given to them by the designated adult leader, even though they were poor. After losing the sleeping bag and realizing the gravity of their situation, the girls, despite being inexperienced and in a stressful situation, made several excellent decisions. These decisions included staying put and not attempting to cross any more streams, improvising shelter, sharing a sleeping bag, and rationing their food supply.

How is it that an experienced adult leader can compound poor judgment with more poor judgment while two teenage girls—inedxperienced in the outdoors—can make solid ones? Some people seem to have an instinctual ability to envision a desired outcome and make consistently effective decisions en route to achieving that goal. Others have a much more difficult time with this. Experience, while helpful, is not the solution in and of itself. I know very experienced leaders with remarkably poor judgment skills. The simple key for those who struggle to cultivate effective judgment skills seems to lie in experience, training, feedback from others, and personal reflection.

Making effective judgments is challenging. Those who are best at it will shine the brightest in the darkest of situations. Those two girls from the Wild River—I don’t even know their names—had it. I would put them in an outdoor leadership role in a heartbeat. Others may need to work a little harder. Reading this book is a great step in that direction. Core judgment skills for outdoor leaders are:

- Awareness of your environment
- Awareness of your group
- Awareness of yourself
- Capacity for working with incomplete information
- Understanding of different decision-making processes
- Calm attitude
- Ability to envision the desired outcome
Motivation

Even well-rounded leaders with appropriate interpersonal, technical, and judgment skills can still fall off their balanced three-legged stool. What will topple your stool if all your skills are up to par? A hard shove—delivered to leaders lacking in motivation. It is not simply motivation that's required, but appropriate motivation. The mountaineer who becomes a leader to get "free" trips to the mountains, but is really uninterested in working with people, may be in for a bit of a shock about what is involved.

The best leaders are excited about their role. They're enthusiastic about putting their technical, interpersonal, and judgment skills to work. They smile, they teach, and they make the experience enjoyable for others. Leaders who see their role as a chore do not engage participants fully and may even neglect important tasks related to safety and the quality of the experience. Outdoor leadership demands too much—physically, intellectually, and psychologically—for a leader to be effective without being fully committed.

Motivation, broadly defined, is everything that drives you to get going when the going gets tough and pushes you to be the best leader you can be. One source of motivation is the sense of caring you have for your participants, a topic addressed in more detail in the coming pages. Other positive sources of motivation for outdoor leaders include sharing their love of the outdoors, pride in doing a good job, satisfaction from shepherding the group through challenges, the respect they garner, or even a paycheck or a free trip (ideally, these last two are not the primary factors).

Most outdoor leaders are excited about their roles. Three types of leaders seem to have challenges with appropriate motivation: leaders, often new ones, who may not be in it for the ideal reasons; highly experienced leaders who are burned out; and leaders focused on other distractions in their lives.

The peak you want to climb, the rapid you'd like to run, or the group member you'd like to get to know better are not proper sources of motivation. Personal goals such as these should play, at the most, a tertiary role to the primary and secondary goals of minimizing risk and attaining group goals. Likewise, ego boost—from running the show or strut ting your skills—is not the reason to assume the leadership mantle.

Leaders, especially full-time professionals, may begin with appropriate motivation, but become burned out over time by the stress of always being responsible. It has happened to me; taking some time off allowed me to return to leading with far more motivation than I had when I first led a trip. Personal issues can also be a distraction and deliver a blow to your motivation. Being away a lot, often a part of being an outdoor leader, can take a toll on interpersonal relationships. Being motivated and focused in the field is a challenge if you do not know what your life will look like when you return home. As with burnout, sometimes it is valuable to take some time in the frontcountry to focus on these types of issues.

Caring also helps motivation. Ideal outdoor leaders display natural caring for their group members. This type of caring, a bit analogous to what parents feel for their children (though it need not be so strong), stems from the leader's relationship with a participant. Leaders who exhibit natural caring genuinely want the experience to be the best it can possibly be. This can contribute significantly to a leader's motivation.

It is important to mention that leaders who do not possess natural caring instincts are still obligated to care for participants. We refer to this as contractual caring and it occurs because it is obligatory for the leader. Even a leader who doesn't have a deep commitment to the experience of the participants or care deeply about them as individuals must take care of them. Participants' experiences, and often their lives, are largely in a leader's hands. They rightfully expect that a certain amount of care will be put into their experience and safety. This can be viewed as a sort of contract—participants agree to undertake the outdoor program, and a leader agrees to provide an appropriate amount of care. Some leaders default to contractual caring at the beginning of an outing before they have had an opportunity to form a personal relationship with participants.

Keeping Your Stool in Balance

A leader should attempt to attain a reasonable balance of interpersonal, technical, and judgment skills. Everyone is sitting on a three-legged stool that is a bit off kilter. Awareness of your abilities will help you focus your energy and learning on areas that need improvement. Most outdoor leadership is done in pairs, and an awareness of your strengths and weaknesses may also help you pair with co-leaders who complement your skills. While you might work well with groups, for example, your partner might have strong safety skills. You'll learn from other leaders.

Simply advertising yourself as a leader or being hired to perform that role doesn't make you one—a leader needs followers. Solid technical, interpersonal, and judgment skills, partnered with appropriate motivation, will help make those you lead most comfortable with your leadership. It's true that a lopsided leadership style, weak in one or even two areas, may encourage some parti-
Summing Up

- Outdoor leaders have four fundamental responsibilities: minimize risk, minimize impact, maximize learning, and maximize enjoyment.
- Effective outdoor leaders need a healthy balance of technical, interpersonal, and judgment skills.
- Technical skills include physical skills and knowledge and are perhaps the easiest of the three skills to develop.
- Interpersonal skills are the psychological and communication skills necessary to work effectively with others.
- Good judgment combines the deep understanding of yourself, others, your activities, and your environment to help you assess a situation.
- Both interpersonal and judgment skills can be difficult to develop. People have varying natural abilities in these areas, but the skills can be enhanced through training, practice, feedback, and personal reflection.
- Motivation can profoundly affect one’s leadership abilities, and leaders should assess whether they have the proper motivation.
- Caring leadership is an underappreciated trait and can stem either from a leader’s personal commitment to participants or from a leader’s obligations.