Focus your growth as a leader in two areas. First, decide the type of activity you would like to lead. Second, determine which of your leadership skills need the most attention. This focus will help you become an effective leader faster.

Determining the type of activity you'd like to lead allows you to focus your training, practice, mentoring, and reading in that area. While practicing kayaking may, in some way, help you while leading a backpacking trip, you'd probably be better off practicing backpacking. Also important is the type of population you'll be leading. You may want to lead adults, families, at-risk youth, or people with disabilities. Leading each of these groups requires somewhat different skill sets. Given that there are so many ways to build your experience, you can tailor your experiences to fit your desired result.

Determining which aspect of your leadership skills requires additional development can be difficult. As a leader, you should always be open to feedback and give yourself time for reflection. You can receive valuable feedback from co-leaders, mentors, and the participants on your trips. Look for patterns in the feedback you receive. If you hear something once, give it at least a moment of reflection. If multiple people are giving you similar feedback about something you can improve, there's almost certainly some validity to what they have to say. This feedback can help you focus your efforts to develop your leadership skills further.

---

**Summing Up**

- The broad skill sets necessary for outdoor leaders include technical, interpersonal, and judgment skills.
- The process of acquiring new skills begins with awareness of the need for the skill, understanding the skill and its components, and practicing the skill.
- Training in technical, interpersonal, and judgment skills can be integrated in field-based programs.
- First aid training is necessary for all outdoor leaders.
- Mentorships and apprenticeships as well as personal experience are important parts of every leader's development.
- Make a written plan to guide your leadership development. Work to utilize all the approaches to leadership development outlined in this chapter.
- Keep a log of your leadership development activities, including the trips in which you lead and participate. It is good for your own development and will impress potential organizations you may lead for.

---

**In the chapter you will learn:**

- How awareness informs decision making.
- Three areas of a leader's awareness: environment, group, and self.
- The importance of self assessment for leaders.
- How to stay aware of key information.
Though I walked away unscathed, it remains the closest I have come to perishing in the mountains. The weather presented challenges I had never seen. The organization for which I was leading did not provide the requested equipment or food that was appropriate for the trip. Unexpectedly, the participants and I did not all share a common language. My assistant leader’s decision making and judgment were so problematic that I relieved him of his leadership duties for the sixteen-hour technical evacuation at the end of the trip.

An instructor training program for a Mexican outdoor program, the ascent of the glaciated, 18,500-foot Pico de Orizaba in 2006 became a high-consequences test of every leadership concept I know. I had never learned as much about leadership—or myself—in such a short time. While even this simplified telling of events will suggest that the problems were caused by a variety of mistakes, the lack of awareness on the part of both me and my co-leader were at the core of the issues that occurred on this trip.

“We are thinking of climbing Orizaba for a staff training trip. Do you want to lead it?” The email from a friend, Ernie, had arrived months before the trip. My Spanish, never great, was rusty: Would the participants speak English? Can we run it as a training expedition and establish a high camp on the mountain, instead of doing the more typical one-day dash for the summit? Would I be the lead instructor? With these concerns addressed and some assurances that the necessary equipment and supplies would be available, I agreed. Ernie was an American living in Mexico with extensive mountaineering experience there, and also a manager for the program for which I’d be leading the training. He would be handling the pre-trip logistics in Mexico, and I would arrive just before the program began.

I arrived in Mexico City and met Ernie. I was disappointed to learn that the equipment we’d be using was not what had been promised, but I figured we could make do. We loaded the gear and food into our van, ran a number of last-minute errands, and left to rendezvous with the participants. Once I met the group it was clear that some of the members—contrary to what Ernie had told me earlier—did not speak any English. While this change was fairly understandable given that the training was for Mexicans, I was surprised that I did not know about it in advance. The trip was shaping up to be very different from any of the leadership and technical skills trainings I normally run. We boarded a van and headed for the mountain, later switching to a four-wheel drive truck for the final rugged dirt road approaching the peak.

One challenge of climbing Orizaba is perception. The third-highest peak in North America, it is possible to hike with relatively little difficulty. Every Mexican on the trip claimed to know someone who had ascended the peak without an ice ax or crampons while wearing blue jeans. Though I did not mention it, I knew of an American who had unicycled down the south side of the peak, which is sometimes entirely snow free. Yet hazards on the mountain have claimed more than 60 lives: the extreme altitude, the long 45-degree glacier slopes, severe weather, and the occasional crevasse. Still, despite the hazards, after the rugged four-wheel drive trip all the way up to 14,000 feet, it can be hard to convince people that the best approach is not to dash off to the summit.

Upon arriving at base camp, we settled into the large shelter, or refugio. The sun set behind a growing bank of clouds, and the temperature sank. Soon a light rain was falling. Less than an hour later, we were being pelted with sleet. We worked to get situated in the shelter and started to prepare dinner. The roof began to leak. After dinner, Ernie and I reviewed our plans with the group and nestled into one of the lower tiers of shelf-like bunks to avoid the drips. Over the next three days, most lessons were held indoors, as the weather outside hovered around freezing. At times the wind was so extreme it was impossible to stand up. Toilet trips became mini expeditions, and nobody ventured outside without alerting someone else of their plans.

We made the best of the indoor activities, but everybody clearly wanted to be outside. While most of the group spoke fluent English, I was the only one who did not speak Spanish, the native language of most of the participants. Although I was a bit linguistically isolated at times, I did not mind.

When I woke up on the fourth day, I sat up in my bunk and saw the beginnings of a bright dawn. We would finally be able to move up to our high camp. I woke the group, and we made breakfast and packed. Over the past several days we had become well-rooted in the hut. It took four hours to get the group and all their gear out the door. The sun was high in the bluebird sky and I was ready, pack on, to begin ascending the mountain.

Ernie would have nothing to do with the departure. He had prepared, he said, a lesson on Leave No Trace practices. I suggested he could deliver the lesson that evening at our next camp. No, Ernie said. The lesson had to be delivered immediately because human impacts were visible in the surrounding area.

“This isn’t just a climb. I need to make sure the education happens,” Ernie told me. Because lessons were all we had done for the prior three days, I did not understand this and felt we needed to get moving in order to reach our planned high camp that day. It took a while to sort out this disagreement; I felt that we needed to be assured of making it to our next camp in daylight, while
Ernie was adamant about teaching his lesson. Eventually we agreed he would teach for 30 minutes.

Ernie asked the group to remove their packs and herded the participants toward a gully near the hut. The outhouse was full, so the gully had become a popular alternative. The odor was powerful as the sun thawed the unburied excrement. Gentle gusts of wind blew stray scraps of toilet paper about. The lesson promptly morphed into a condescending lecture in English and Spanish. Ernie’s attitude toward the participants and me regarding the departure decision were incredibly frustrating. I did not think I could interrupt him politely enough to avoid permanently impairing our relationship. I checked my watch and skulked off, not confident in my ability to bite my tongue if I stayed.

I repeatedly looked up the mountain and wondered how long it would take to make it to our planned campsite, knowing there would be few, if any, other flat places below there where the group would be able to sleep. After just under 30 minutes I returned. The group looked miserable. A few minutes later, I tried to get Ernie’s attention. After he didn’t respond, I tried harder, waving and motioning at my watch. Finally I walked up to him, whispered into his ear, and asked to chat with him for a moment.

“I’m not done with my lesson,” he loudly said.

Two hours later Ernie finished his lesson, and at 1 P.M. we finally put on our packs. We had eaten breakfast five hours earlier, and I was hungry and snacking on an energy bar—an action that always reminds me that my group is probably more in need of fuel than I am. However, I was so eager to get moving I said nothing and mentally planned a lunch stop farther up the mountain.

We began the hike, following a widely used but poorly defined trail. Everything—rocks, plants, and flowers—was encased in ice. At first it was beautiful, but as we moved up the mountain the ice began to cover the trail. At first, by simply being careful we were able to walk on the ice, but as we progressed upward the footing became treacherous. I suggested that we stop, have a bite to eat, and put on our crampons. I was also concerned about the time of day and the oncoming darkness. I mentioned this to the group, but they were committed to continuing. The hiking was not difficult, and I felt we could continue reasonably safely once we had our crampons on, even in the dark.

Our hike continued after some food, assistance with crampon attachment, and a brief crampon lesson. Everything was encased in 2 or 3 inches of clear ice. Although the scene was beautiful, the footing was slippery and demanded that we be extremely careful in the steep sections. In the morning, when I had been concerned with time, I had not anticipated anything like this coating of ice. My prior experience on the mountain suggested this wouldn’t be more challenging than a steep and loose hike on a poorly defined trail.

The route became steeper, and the temperature dropped as the sun set and our elevation increased. As we climbed, the ice became thicker and the cold temperatures made it harder. It became difficult to kick steps into it. When the slope became even steeper for a short section, I took out my ice ax and worked with a participant to chop steps. The sun was already low in the sky. With an hour of light left, Ernie and I estimated we had three-quarters of a mile to go to reach the campsite. Everyone was moving well with their loads, but the slippery terrain was slowing us dramatically.

Ahead of us, the route steepened into a bit of a headwall before the plateau. It would typically be ascended by way of loose gullies, which were now filled with ice. When we were unable to hike farther, we halted to assess our options. The light was already fading when we saw a hundred-foot stretch of ice ahead of us—far steeper than anything we had encountered below. Turning back was an option, but we would have to travel for at least 90 minutes on the slick ice before reaching anything resembling a level campsite. Although we did not know what was above us, the terrain did not look too bad beyond this one steep section. Ernie and I agreed the best approach was to continue, and a quick discussion found the group in agreement with this.

I had been slowly moving from a democratic leadership model into more of a guiding, or directive, mode. With the light fading, I asked Ernie to give the group a lesson on using fixed lines—ropes anchored in place to which a climber attaches a safety tether that can slide up a rope as the climber ascends. I worked with a relatively experienced participant to determine the best way to move the group through the steep ice. We had hoped to do some ice climbing on part of the glacier, and for that reason had brought a couple of ice tools that are designed for using on steep ice. I never anticipated needing an ice tool to get to our high camp; however, once we selected a route up the ice, it was steep enough that I felt reassured about having an ice tool in one hand and my lightweight mountaineering ax in the other.

Having left my pack behind, I ascended the first hundred feet of ice rapidly. From my new perspective, I looked up to see that we would have more steep ice to ascend. Then I heard the shrieks from below.

Below me, but about 50 feet up the steep ice, was a participant named Rosalee, who was unroped and screaming for help. She was out of balance on the ice, totally terrified, and I was afraid she was about to take a 50-foot fall. Ernie was climbing up to her position (also unroped) and proceeded to try to provide
support for her while maintaining his own position holding onto an ice ax. I had not finished setting up my anchor, so I hurriedly burrowed myself into the ice and snow and took a seated position. I lowered an end of the rope down to Ernie and Rosalee. She didn't have her harness on yet, so I yelled to Ernie to tie it around her waist. It was a challenging balancing act to get the rope around her and tied on; however, even with tension on the rope, Rosalee was unwilling to move. Ernie took her pack from her (he had left his below). I briefly worried about Ernie, who remained unroped, but decided that, at the moment, his safety was not my priority.

With the safety of a rope from above and with her pack off, Rosalee refused my suggestion that I lower her down, and instead ascended to my position. She was shaking violently when she arrived. Her first, angry words were something to the effect of “What were you thinking?” I certainly understood why she was upset; however, I was utterly confused as to why she'd begun climbing the ice before the rope was ready.

I communicated with the team below and the climbing process began. Rosalee, staring at the people safely climbing up with a rope, said to me, “You know, I could have died.”

“Yes, and I'm not sure what you were doing climbing without a rope,” I replied.

“Ernie told me to. He said it would be alright.”

I very rarely openly disagree with another leader in front of a participant, but I felt justified in this case and said, “Well, I would never have sent you up that ice like that.”

“Well, the two of you better get your [expletive] together.” Rosalee's English was very good.

I felt ridiculous and angry. When Ernie finally arrived, having again declined the use of the rope, I took him aside to discuss what had happened.

“I thought it would be OK,” Ernie said.

“You thought it was OK to send someone who never used an ice ax or crampons before today up a technical ice climb with a 40-pound pack?” I was using a tone of voice that was not exactly suited to conflict resolution.

“Well, you were moving too slowly up there, and it was getting dark.”

“But we agreed that you would teach down there while I set up the rope,” I replied.

“Sometimes I have to use my own judgment.”

I was a bit shocked that Ernie was defending his decision after what had happened. We could not take a break from the situation now. Going up or down was a slow, somewhat hazardous proposition. I did not have time to argue the details of the situation with Ernie.

“Remember our agreement that I'm in charge of safety on this trip?” I said.

“Yes,” Ernie answered.

“OK. The only way I'm going up is if you agree to follow my decisions on safety.”

“OK, but I don't appreciate you attitude.”

I was already moving toward setting up the next rope. Most of the group had ascended the first steep ice section. I moved up and off to the side into a narrow gully to assess the next section. I was moving quickly in the half-light of twilight when I slipped on the ice. It was not steep; I think I just tripped. I hit the ice hard and began sliding immediately.

Ernie was the only one who saw me fall. I then passed behind a rock outcropping. I tried to arrest my slide with my ax pick, but this was ice, not snow, and it simply bounced off. The gully continued for hundreds of feet into a boulder field. Time slowed; I knew that I had to stop myself quickly, before I accelerated significantly. It would be the only way to avoid hitting the rocks below at high speed.

I emerged from behind the rocks and the entire group could see me rocketing toward my potential doom. I lifted the ax up just a bit and slammed it down with all the force I could muster. I twisted my body, pushing my shoulder and pick into the ice. Somehow it worked—I slammed to a stop, working to get my crampon points into the ice for extra security. I still cannot understand how I was able to arrest my slide given the hardness of the ice.

I got up, climbed back up the gully—moving with extraordinary care—and fixed the rope, attempting to stay away from the group as long as possible. Above that section I fixed three more lines in the dark over exposed terrain, though none was as steep as the first pitch. It was nearly midnight when the last of the group reached camp. It was a brilliant night, the stars shining as brightly as I had ever seen, and bitterly cold. When I finally crawled into my bivy sack, I felt more aware of my surroundings than ever before.

After our late arrival to high camp, we took a day to acclimatize and rest after our near-disastrous late-evening ascent to about 16,000 feet. The day was relaxing and featured a morning yoga class, a hike with some overdue ice ax instruction, and a lot of melting ice and cooking. Ernie and I debriefed the events of the previous day and he agreed for the second time that I would take the lead on safety and scheduling issues. He asked to have some specific teaching responsibilities and I agreed to that.
We reviewed plans with the group and agreed to conduct some skills training sessions the following day and to attempt the summit the day after that. Things felt fairly good again and I was confident we were on track.

The following morning I met with Ernie early. We reviewed his plan to teach a self-arrest class during a hike a little higher on the mountain. (I had once been a participant in a similar class he taught in the U.S.) I would work with some of the more advanced students on short-roping techniques. I agreed to assist Ernie with setting up a safety rope (J-line), and then he would teach the group. I reviewed safety concerns with him again, primarily focusing on making sure that participants did not wear their crampons while they practiced self-arrest skills. Once the group assembled, we moved up onto the lower slopes of the glacier.

I helped Ernie set up his teaching area and moved off to teach my lesson a hundred yards away. I looked back to see the first participant about to begin his practice slide. He threw himself down the slide with gusto and began to arrest his slide correctly by first using his ice ax before using his toes. Suddenly he flipped backward into the air, cartwheeling several times before being jerked to a halt by the rope. I immediately knew what had happened—Hector was wearing his crampons, which became caught in the snow’s firm surface and flipped him. I had warned Ernie about the potential for this to happen.

My group and I hurried over to the self-arrest practice area. Ernie was conducting an initial medical assessment of Hector while everyone crowded around. I asked most of the group to back away from Hector, suggesting we take a lunch break. Five minutes later, I checked in on Hector, who seemed to be fine, considering the situation, except for a dramatically swollen ankle. After seeing his ankle, I knew that our plans for the summit climb, with little remaining time, would have to be called off. Eventually we splinted Hector’s ankle (there was no possibility of getting his boot back on) and assisted him down to camp.

Hector’s ankle was enormous—it had swollen to several times its normal size—though circulation remained acceptable in his toes. Because Ernie had failed to fill the first-aid kit, we had nothing more powerful than ibuprofen to alleviate Hector’s pain, which he rated as nine on a scale of one to ten. As the group prepared dinner, I stepped away to tend to Hector’s needs.

After dinner, I asked Ernie to relinquish all leadership responsibilities during the evacuation. He agreed, reluctantly. I then asked a participant, Donato, who was a professional rock climbing guide, to assist me with the evacuation the following day. Donato’s lack of any English-speaking skills was a challenge, but after having seen him in action for several days I felt that he would be cautious;

I was confident that with my limited Spanish and several potential translators we could work through any communication challenges.

The evacuation went remarkably smoothly. Hector’s ankle was well-splinted. The descent was still coated in ice, so we lowered him through the steep parts. Donato went ahead, determining the best route and rigging anchors for our ropes. I lagged slightly behind, with Hector and the other participants, checking the anchor setups and supervising as Hector was lowered. Donato and I both put significant effort into communicating with arm gestures, along with my broken Spanish. It went flawlessly.

We were able to arrange our four-wheel drive transport back to town via a relay of handheld radios and cell phones. Sixteen hours after we began and 9,000 feet below that morning’s elevation, we entered into another world—the closest town’s annual patron saint festival. With Hector’s immediate medical needs taken care of, most of us ended our day twenty-two hours after it had begun.

Everything ended reasonably well, with Hector’s ankle eventually making a full recovery. Things, obviously, could have turned out much worse. But we would likely have succeeded in our goal to climb Orizaba if my awareness had been keener the day of Hector’s injury, and on the days leading up to that. The reality is that the awareness was there, but I was so distracted by the overall situation and by dealing with some of Ernie’s decisions that I did not pay enough attention.

Among my awareness failures was not beginning the trip with enough understanding of the group. I also was aware that Ernie was having a very difficult time being an effective instructor, but it took me a while to act decisively on this. In part, I let my frustration with him cloud my ability to act. That frustration should have been a greater part of my transitory self-awareness—I had the cues, but had a hard time focusing on what was important and taking action. This poor transitory self-awareness also played a role in my decision to climb into the gully, which almost had dire consequences.

Finally, I continue to ask myself, “What of Ernie’s awareness?” A couple days after the trip, we spent several hours discussing what went wrong, which was almost everything. Despite his years as an outdoor leader, Ernie was not using his awareness of environment, group, and self effectively on this trip. While I believe he had the information he needed, he was not making the key connections necessary to act on it. I hope my honest feedback to Ernie helped him make these connections in future leadership endeavors—as is mentioned earlier, self-awareness is not always a leader’s strongest trait.
Before delving into the details, here's one more thought: Use your group to aid your awareness. Everyone who has hiked much in front of a group can recall stopping to look at the map and saying something like, "I think we missed our turn." Someone farther back in the line invariably pipes up with, "Oh, you mean the trail off to the right about a mile back?" The person in front asks why no one said anything, and the response is "Well, I was following you and I thought you knew where you were going." Nobody is omniscient, so set a tone of openness to observations. Developing your own awareness skills is the first order of business, but also consider how to instill these skills in others.

**Awareness of Environment**

Are you typically the first person in a group to spot an animal, notice a shift in the weather, or figure out that you have lost the trail? If so, you have strong environmental awareness. If not, you might benefit from working on this skill. Environment refers to your immediate physical surroundings. Your location and the weather figure prominently here, but the amount of daylight, the water level in a rapid you're about to run, the animal tracks crossing the trail, and myriad other details—some seemingly trivial—have relevance.

Environmental awareness is both conscious and subconscious. You need to consider the details you are actively aware of, but also use your intuition.
On Orizaba I was consciously aware as we moved up the mountain that the conditions were far different from those I had encountered before. I knew that our late start and the slow going on the ice might prevent us from reaching our campsite. At the same time, I think I suppressed a deeper concern. I was distracted by many issues and did not listen to the little voice in the back of my brain saying, “The ice is likely to get worse as we go up.” Supressing that internal voice almost resulted in disaster.

Gaining experience in the outdoors, especially as a leader, is the best way to improve your environmental awareness. Many times I have been shocked when people fail to notice an unusual odor, a stunning vista, or the moose crashing in the bushes nearby. A subtle change in vegetation may indicate the presence of a spring that could be the only water source for miles. The indistinct rustle in the underbrush could be a clue to an exciting—or hazardous—wildlife sighting. Cues about your environment are all around you; try to notice as many as possible.

The environment presents hazards that you must be prepared for. Hazards vary according to region, season, elevation, activity, and other factors. Hazards could include high-water stream crossings in the mountains, surf landings in a sea kayak, or more exotic ones such as the “assassin beetle” of South America (which transmits the potentially fatal Chagas’ disease). Special skills or knowledge are often required to simply recognize and understand environmental hazards. Forecasting avalanches, reading whitewater conditions, or assessing rock fall potential are examples of such skills.

Knowing where you are is fundamental to environmental awareness. Locating your position on a map is a start; however, you also need to know your route and what you’ll encounter along the way. The locations of water sources, campsites, and other resources are important. Ideally, you’ll be personally familiar with the route, but this isn’t always realistic. At the least you should consult your map, written materials, and anyone who has traveled in that area. It can be tedious, but I carefully tracked my route on the map as I lead a hike and pay more attention to my surroundings than I would if I were on a personal outing. When the safety of others rests in your hands, be over prepared. Constant attention to the map not only avoids route-finding dilemmas but can be invaluable in a crisis.

Any potentially dangerous location will prompt me to continuously reevaluate the best route to a safe location. I’m reminded of a body-width canyon in Arizona through which I once led several groups. Wading, swimming, and bouldering through this canyon with full expedition packs were once-in-a-lifetime experiences for many participants. This was, however, a serious undertaking: Once we were inside the canyon, there was only one potential escape route out—via a small side canyon (in addition to the beginning and end of the narrows). We were careful to enter only under ideal weather conditions because of the potential for flash floods. The canyon provided a perspective on the potential danger—before it was away for a few weeks and returned to find flood debris that included logs and a smelly elk carcass lodged 20 feet above our heads. In this type of situation, advance planning is essential to your environmental awareness.

All leaders need to be familiar with the complexities of weather. It’s surprising how many groups report being caught dangerously high on a mountain in a “sudden storm” that emerged from a “perfectly clear” day. Sometimes an approaching storm hides behind a ridge or trees, or rapidly gathers strength above a mountain range. More often, people are not paying attention to the storm approaches. It has happened to me—one of the most memorable times was when I led a group down from Hurricane Ridge, Olympic National Park. I had not paid attention to the sky, and if you have not done so already, invest some time in learning simple weather forecasting.

Another component of environmental awareness is the knowledge of the equipment carried by your group. Because equipment has the potential to modify the environment, it is relevant to your awareness of the environment. A headlamp turns night to day (or twilight, at least), a tent creates shelter in a storm, and a compact stove and a small packet of soup powder enable you to turn snow into a tasty snack—imagine how different your experience of the environment would be without these or other material resources. In a crisis, thorough knowledge of the equipment your group carries can be a lifesaver.

Although this is not an exhaustive list of what you need to be aware of, begin by honing the building-block skills of map reading and weather forecasting. Spend as much time as possible in the outdoors, taking the time to observe your surroundings. Identify and acquire any specialized knowledge or skills required for environmental awareness in the locales where you aspire to lead. Take your time and make sure you’re comfortable and familiar with any environment you aspire to lead others into.

**Awareness of Group**
Do you notice early on if there is tension in the group or if someone is being excluded? Do you promptly recognize that someone is struggling to keep up with the group? If you answered affirmatively you will do well with this aspect...
of awareness. Outdoor leaders are not simply technicians, impersonally engineering an outdoor experience. Instead, leaders must take into account the personalities of the people involved. People are the reason we have leaders, and awareness of those in your group is critical to your decision making.

Without awareness of the needs and personalities of the people in your group (this includes participants and other group leaders), your leadership will be contentious. Awareness requires social interaction: You need to be friendly, or at least sociable. Some people naturally observe and interact with others and easily recognize what their body language is communicating. Others need to put more effort into it. Awareness of people is an art, but there are many different approaches, and with practice this awareness can be learned.

The intense physical demands of outdoor recreation often push people to emotional extremes. Exercising causes the body to produce chemical compounds that, combined with the experience of, say, reaching a beautiful and challenging mountaintop, can produce feelings of dizzying elation. On the flip side, exhaustion, discomfort, dehydration, anxiety, and many other factors can drive people down toward deep physical and emotional lows. This isn't just true for the participants you are leading; it's also true for you. Awareness of your own physical and mental condition—self-awareness—is discussed in the next section and is critical to effective leadership.

One trait that effective leaders possess is empathy. These leaders have such a strong understanding of the mood and motivations of others that they can almost experience their inner emotions themselves. While many effective workplace managers employ empathy, the intense nature of outdoor activities makes this a particularly crucial skill for an outdoor leader to have. Empathy allows a leader to better support group members and is particularly valuable during challenging excursions or when working with beginners.

Also be aware of the physical condition of each member of your group and any relevant health concerns or physical limitations. This information can come via a written or online form; a phone call to the participants before the beginning of a trip will also help a leader gather this information. On Orizaba I would have been well-served to know more about the participants before the trip, including the language they spoke. Obviously, a high level of awareness of the participants will be more difficult to attain on a day trip than on an extended outing. For shorter outings, then, you may want to identify those you suspect will need more assistance. But be subtle; you don't want anyone to feel you're giving someone in the group special attention.

Leaders should also think about their co-leaders. On Orizaba, I had to work very hard to compensate for the language barrier and remain aware of the group's collective mind-set. My awareness of Ernie, my assistant leader, suffered as a result. My understanding of his situation was so limited, I gave up and treated him at times in an oppositional manner (more on this later). My frustration caused me to lose track of the impact that Ernie's actions was having on both me and the group. When a situation becomes this confusing and complex it may be time for a heart-to-heart discussion (or even, in this case, time to call off the trip).

When I lead, I "float" around in the group, especially for the first few days of a trip. On the trail, on the river, or whenever I can, I change my physical location within the group frequently. I try to observe and talk to everyone in the group. I watch people's body language: Are they smiling in a natural manner, are their shoulders slumped or held erect, do they appear attentive, or do they have a distant stare?

Try not to pass up opportunities to initiate two-way relationships with members of the group. Talk to people and listen to what they say. Maintain eye contact and acknowledge comments with a verbal response. Steer conversations toward the task at hand and avoid topics that distract people from the moment,
such as popular culture or work. I ask people why they chose this trip or if they caught the view we had a while back; try to be creative. Stay away from generic questions such as “How are you doing?” You’re likely to get a similarly canned response.

As you float in the group, observe, and interact, try to pick up on subtle cues to guide you to areas of potential concern. A participant who challenges your authority as a leader may have a valid concern or may be nervous and looking for reassurance. Many cues are not verbal. If the group hikes for hours and nobody asks to take a pee break, for instance, they probably are not drinking enough water. A hiker with an unusual posture may be struggling with an improperly adjusted pack. Scan the group for patterns of negative behavior and work on discerning the cause.

Passive observation and interaction are not enough to acquire all the information you need to know about your group. Sometimes you must be more direct. Early in a trip I’m often concerned that people are not drinking enough water to stay properly hydrated. I frequently ask people (especially children) to remove their water bottles from their packs so I can see how much liquid remains. If it is clear they haven’t had enough to drink, we’ll have a few group “toasts.” Besides offering a chance for bonding and humor, these water toasts encourage people to drink up and highlight the importance of proper hydration.

Another example of how I directly interact with trip participants is the staging of communal foot checks with inexperienced hikers on the first few days. These checks accustom people to caring for their feet and reveal “hot spots” when there’s time to treat them—before they become blisters. Techniques like the group water toasts and foot checks are especially effective, because they’re non-confrontational and don’t single anyone out.

At times you will have to be less subtle and ask point-blank questions of individuals or the group. As you float around the group, there’s nothing wrong, for example, with asking an individual how much water he or she has had to drink. The disadvantage of such direct questioning is that it may appear that you are singling someone out. Be discreet so that the whole group doesn’t learn about concerns you may have about an individual—especially if you’re asking about confidential or sensitive topics (such as medical issues). Use a non-confrontational manner when approaching individuals about whom you have a concern. Participants who feel they will be blamed for their problem—say, a blister—are less likely to accept help and more likely to suffer silently, until they reach their breaking point.

Another way to share information is by convening a group debriefing session. This can be as simple as a discussion after a meal, or it can be more formally structured. Group debriefing has the advantage of building awareness and empathy among group members. Experiment with different techniques for checking in with participants to find one that works for you.

Never forget that many people are not comfortable in the outdoors and don’t know how they should feel or behave, given the newfound demands on their bodies and minds. Even experienced outdoorspeople can remain unaware that they are becoming hypothermic, hyperthermic, or severely dehydrated. Sorting out routine discomfort and changes in behavior from those that may merit concern is often a challenge. Monitor your group as often as possible and look for patterns that may indicate problems. Observe, listen, interact, ask questions when necessary, and let your experience, intuition, co-leader, and the information in this book help you.

**Awareness of Self**

Self-awareness forms the foundation upon which you build your outdoor leadership. There are two components to self-awareness—one is fairly stable and the other in regular flux. The stable component requires you to understand your competencies, weaknesses, fears, motivations, and biases. Are you, for example, capable of leading three participants up a difficult climb? We will call this your baseline self-awareness.

The second, dynamic component is an awareness of your current emotional and physical state. Are you justified in your annoyance at the participant who didn’t put moleskin on blisters, or are you frustrated because you’re a bit tired and hungry? Understanding these factors allows you to account for them, and how they affect your baseline self-awareness, during your decision making. This second, changeable aspect is your transitory self-awareness.

Mood affects transitory self-awareness, and it is a sneaky monkey. In the moment this trickster can lead you to actions you never would have imagined doing, ones you cannot fully explain in retrospect. So get a handle on how your sneaky monkey responds to various situations. While it is hard to predict the response to new and unaccustomed stimuli, the more you understand your mood the more you can factor it into the decision-making process. The more predictable your decision-making process, the better off you and your group will be.

Remember that people do not have perfectly objective views of themselves. Nevertheless, leaders are capable of increasing their baseline and transitory self-awareness. The best leaders are able to accurately assess their own outdoor and interpersonal skills. They know how they typically respond to stress, danger, exhaustion, difficult individuals, and other problems. Leaders who possesses
this self-awareness can, if necessary, compensate in a variety of ways for their own limitations. On a fundamental level, self-awareness allows you to understand which leadership situations you can effectively handle and which require you to invest more effort or look for assistance.

On the Orizaba climb my transitory self-awareness was stretched. Because so much was going on—frustration with my co-leader, communication challenges, safety concerns, time pressure, possibly the physical effects of altitude—both my mood and abilities were fundamentally altered. My baseline self-awareness told me that entering that icy gully was not a major concern; after all, I've climbed many thousands of feet of similar ice. My transitory self-awareness, however, should have stopped me in my tracks—but I was not listening. This lapse in self-awareness sent me flying down an icy gully toward possible death.

Beyond the impact that baseline and transitory self-awareness can have on making decisions, leaders who have a strong understanding of themselves realize the way they can affect the mood of an entire group. A leader with a positive mood or a can-do attitude positively affects others. Enthusiasm is infectious—though, unfortunately, negativity can be even more so. If the leader is nervous—or, as the case may be, confident—running a rapid, that will have an effect on the other person in the canoe.

Because people will place great trust in you as they are led through snowstorms, deserts, extremes of altitude, or other hazardous environments, self-awareness is critically important. On such rigorous adventures, you and everyone in your group will experience mental and physical stress. You need to understand how interconnected the two are, not only for participants but for you, the leader. Exhaustion, hypothermia, hyperthermia, low blood sugar, dehydration, and other factors—especially in combination—often have a deleterious effect on physical and mental capabilities, as well as on mood. The careless leader who becomes physically compromised will likely have a diminished mental capacity, which will be a burden on the group.

Assessing Your Own Abilities

An outdoor leader will likely make thousands of large and small decisions each day in the field. Although most leaders are usually cautious, some occasionally overrate their abilities and place themselves in risky situations.

On the ill-fated Pico de Orizaba expedition, my baseline self-awareness was strong, even though my transitory self-awareness failed me at times. This good baseline has not always been my standard. One instance in which I overestimated my abilities occurred on an Arizona canyoneering trip I was excited to be leading. The route through the canyon led past several waterfalls, constrictions, and other obstacles. Wearing clothes and running shoes while carrying our expedition-size first-aid kit, I jumped off the first small waterfall, dropping some ten feet into a deep pool. My objective was to keep the first-aid kit above water—which I barely managed to do when I first dropped in. Then my head became submerged. I struggled to the surface but quickly went under again and gulped some water. Survival became an issue—I could not readily climb back up the waterfall. Luckily there was an easy way out—I dropped the first-aid kit and swam across the pool, pushing the kit ahead of me.

My good mood—I was excited to lead a group through the remote canyon—probably had an impact on my transitory self-awareness. The bigger problem, however, was my baseline self-awareness—I really thought I would be capable of swimming in the plunge pool while wearing shoes and clothes and carrying 5 pounds above my head. I had, in actuality, performed a similar feat when I passed my lifeguard training a few years earlier. It did not occur to me that my move from leading trips on and around water to leading land-based trips in the Southwest had made my swimming skills rusty. Thankfully, the sole casualty in this situation was the damp first-aid kit (to go with a slightly deflated ego).

As a climbing instructor and guide in a variety of settings, I have seen many other professionals poorly assess their skills. From leading (or soloing) routes well beyond their abilities to asking participants to venture into terrain where the leader did not know how to provide for their safety to cavalierly standing near cliff edges without a rope, I have observed the results of the weak self-assessment abilities of many climbing leaders. They usually manage to work their way out of the scrape with their skins and their participants intact—but this is not always the case.

Tracking the outcomes of your decisions in a journal is an effective way to improve self-awareness. While you should remember most of your experiences, a journal can help you recall your thoughts at the time of an incident and give you food for thought when reviewing the situation in the future. This technique can also provide you with some useful insights into your growth and development as a leader.

Self-Care

Self-awareness and the resultant self-care are essential to effective leadership. Arlene Blum was expedition leader for the 1978 American Women's Himalayan Expedition that ascended Annapurna, the tenth-highest mountain in the world.
In her book *Annapurna: A Woman's Place*, Blum writes about the prospect of taking a respite from the demands of leading a major climbing expedition:

It was a pleasure to imagine myself heading up to Camp I, lighthearted and relieved of all responsibility for the day. The problems at Base Camp could wait. I went to the supply tent and hurriedly threw a load into my pack, hoping to escape before one more problem came up. I didn't make it. As I was tightening the straps on my pack, Lopsang [their head Sherpa] came up with a worried look on his face.

Blum did manage to get away from camp that day, despite the problems she learned about from Lopsang. After several months of challenges, Blum had the self-awareness to recognize that a respite from her responsibilities would be beneficial. She was willing to relinquish control briefly and allow herself some downtime. Often, a few minutes away from your group is precious—though as is clear from this example, escaping isn't always easy. It is important to accept that you cannot be present at all times and cope with every issue. If others are competent, let them assume some responsibilities.

Amid the many responsibilities of leadership, awareness of your own needs and the resultant self-care often require extra attention to yourself, which can seem selfish or excessively time consuming. While there is clearly a limit, leaders who respect their own needs are generally able to function more effectively than those who don't. This is particularly important to remember in a crisis, when ignoring your own needs is more likely. Self-awareness can help ensure that you consume enough water, or it can help you know your own weaknesses. Don't forget that your self-awareness can have an impact on your group's awareness—their experiences will frequently be magnifications of what you are experiencing.

In summary, self-awareness involves knowing yourself (baseline self-awareness) and monitoring your mood, which is inextricably tied to your physical state (transitory self-awareness). For the outdoor leader, self-awareness is critical to understanding yourself and using that knowledge to temper your actions. Perhaps even more crucially, self-awareness is fundamental to taking care of your mental and physical needs. Effective outdoor leadership is built on a foundation of self-awareness. Without knowledge of self, your other leadership skills will be undermined, sometimes to the point where you lose credibility.

### Focusing Awareness

You will always be aware of many things about your environment, group, and self, and it can be challenging to determine which are relevant. You may be aware that the temperature is 40 degrees and an osprey is flying overhead, that all group members have green backpacks and ate oatmeal for breakfast, that you also ate oatmeal for breakfast with a few raisins, and that you feel something small crawling along your leg under your pants. This is just a start. If you also consider that you’re in an area where many ticks live and that you know from experience that the green packs your organization provides have a tendency to be uncomfortable, some of the other information becomes more important. Unfortunately, discerning patterns in the information you take in isn't always easy. Discerning patterns, however, is the key to awareness. This section will present two approaches to discerning the most useful information—they can be used separately, but are effective when used together.
Targeting the Most Relevant Information

The idea of focusing on the most relevant information is best explained by the "bull's-eye approach" developed by Jill Fredston and Doug Fessler in their book *Snow Sense: A Guide to Evaluating Snow Avalanche Hazard*. While their book addresses only avalanche hazard, their theory about the bull's-eye approach can apply to any situation in which an outdoor leader needs to be conscious of many different issues at once. Instead of an avalanche, consider this example of a river crossing.

Inside the outer circle lies all the information available on a situation. For example, the river flow is higher than usual, nine people are in the group, pretty flowers are growing on the far bank, and the water is flowing quickly.

The relevant information lies within the second circle. These facts are more likely to relate to the situation at hand. For example, you know the water is cold, one of the group members is less than 5 feet tall, the rocks on the last crossing were slippery, and the group is motivated to work together to cross the river.

The bull's-eye contains the most useful information. This is the information that will allow you to make an assessment and decision—all the superfluous information is stripped away. Bull's-eye information might include the following: The crossing appears to be about 3 feet deep, the relatively shallow water downstream will prevent disaster if someone falls, the cold water and air increase the likelihood of hypothermia if someone falls in the river, and the group did three equivalent river crossings the day before after receiving careful instruction.

This bull's-eye illustration can be a helpful way to think about all the information you have in front of you. It's more useful when approaching a challenge you have already identified than it is for identifying potential concerns. The following technique of pattern recognition is more helpful for looking at the bigger picture. Both approaches feed directly into your decision-making process.

Pattern Recognition

Jim Miller, a veteran outdoor educator and program administrator in the western United States and Canada, instructs leaders to look for patterns. He explains that leaders must categorize information and quickly assess it. An avid birder, Miller draws an analogy to the way he immediately places a bird—especially one he's unfamiliar with—into a category such as seedeater, waterfowl, woodpecker, or bird of prey. Cues about environment, group, and self must be similarly grouped; otherwise, the amount of information could be overwhelming.

When clouds move in and the temperature drops, Miller's ideal leader uses these observations to deduce that a cold front is likely on the way. When a participant is sitting off to the side at a meal, not talking to anyone and not eating much, it may be she isn't feeling well or is having a challenging time interacting with the group. You need to group observations; but beyond that, Miller feels, and I agree, that leaders need to make quick judgments based on patterns they have observed before. Weather cues or observations of participants are useless unless you're able to make some basic assessment using them.

While he's the first to advocate that leaders get to know their participants, Miller also argues that at the beginning of an activity the leader must often make quick judgments about participants. A lot can happen right from the start of the trip—leaders need to tailor their leadership to the group. The only way to do this is to get an impression of the group's members. Are they confident with taking charge, and can they be trusted with additional responsibility? Are some participants quiet or excessively loud—both indicators that they may be nervous? The initial assessment relies, to some degree, on rapid judgments—though it is also important to avoid stereotyping people. A good way to avoid stereotypes is to make a strong effort at continuing to get to know people throughout the trip.

A helpful way to think about pattern recognition is to recall when you learned how to drive. At first there were too many cues to easily comprehend. You pushed on the accelerator and you sensed motion, you heard the engine noise increase, and you saw the landscape move more rapidly. Soon you connected all those cues and learned how much pressure to apply to the accelerator to get the proper response. Then you tried merging onto the highway. You learned to observe your speed, the speed of cars already on the highway, how much more room you had until you had to merge into traffic, and other factors. Soon afterward, you were able to make a quick assessment of any merging situation. Developing your pattern-recognition abilities as a leader functions the same way—it improves with practice. This ability to recognize and categorize
Summing Up

- Environmental, group, and self-awareness all assist in informing a leader's decision-making process.
- Self-awareness leads to critically important self care, a crucial part of effective leadership that outdoor leaders sometimes ignore.
- Actively engaging in the collection of information is important. Perhaps even more important is becoming accustomed to subconscious observation.
- Awareness leads to the grouping of subtle cues and eventually to the recognition of patterns; these patterns can indicate a shift in group dynamics, that a potential campsite is nearby, that you may have come into contact with poison ivy, or many other things.

In this chapter you will learn:

- The challenges of decision making for outdoor leaders, including coping with incomplete information.
- How people use natural decision making (also called pattern recognition or intuition) to make most decisions.
- How to make more effective decisions.
- An analytic process for making major decisions, especially when there is more than one leader.