CHAPTER TWO
Getting Started

In this chapter you will learn:

- The importance of hands-on experience.
- How leadership skills and confidence develop.
- Different types of training for outdoor leaders and where to obtain it.
- How to complement training with mentorship, personal experience, and reading.
“I had no formal training as a guide,” relates Rick Wilcox. “I started out taking the AMC rock climbing course in Boston. Then, when I was a senior in high school, I became a winter hike leader.” Today Wilcox has led 38 expeditions as a co-owner of the International Mountain Climbing School, and in 1991 he summited Mount Everest as a leader of the New England Everest Expedition. On his home turf in New England he has pioneered numerous climbing routes and authored three editions of An Ice Climber’s Guide to Northern New England. Since 1976 Rick has given back to the region’s mountain travelers as president of New Hampshire’s Mountain Rescue Service, a volunteer organization that takes responsibility for vertical rescues and winter rescues above treeline in the White Mountains. He has seen firsthand the tragic results of poor judgment in the mountains and has faced his own share of challenges.

Outdoor leadership has a long history in the United States of being undertaken informally. It was infrequently pursued as a profession, and rarely was training available (at least outside of the military). Today many volunteers continue to become casually involved in outdoor leadership, but training programs for outdoor leaders are now commonplace, and participation is nearly universal for professionals and those in formal leadership roles.

Wilcox tells a compelling story of near tragedy on an expedition he led to the Himalaya—a situation he believes resulted partly from his lack of formal training. He and his expedition members were attempting a seldom-climbed route on Nepal’s 23,640-foot Langtang Peak. Another guide, moving ahead, had fixed a rope that Wilcox and other team members were ascending. Above them one of the guides stopped and was stomping a platform out of the snow for the full group to use. The guide’s efforts at packing out a platform accidentally released a small avalanche. “All I saw was a wall of arms and legs,” explains Wilcox. He, along with five of his team, went on a 2,500-foot fall, sliding and tumbling down a snow-filled gully. The six people, all falling together, had no way of arresting the slide. Amazingly, none of them suffered serious injuries, although the incident did prematurely end the expedition.

When the uppermost guide knocked loose the snow, it hit the first person on the rope, a participant on the trip. The rope broke where that participant’s ascending device was attached. Modern ropes are amazingly strong, but this one was only 6 millimeters in diameter—approximately the thickness of a pencil (as opposed to the stronger 8- to 11-mm ropes climbers typically use). The rope was anchored every 100 feet, but there were six people between the top of the rope and the next lower anchor. Once the rope broke, there was nothing to stop them from falling. Today Wilcox—considered a model high-altitude climbing leader—uses 8-millimeter ropes on expeditions, with 9-millimeter versions for steep sections. Moreover, he learned more about the unpredictable nature of hazards in the mountains and the risks of trying to travel too lightly. “It was an eye-opener,” admits Wilcox, “and it made me a better big-mountain guide.”

“Today we have a system we use to train high-altitude guides,” Wilcox says. “I never had anything like that, just experience at high altitude to teach me the bugaboos.” Still, although Wilcox became a renowned climber without any formal training, he knows the value of a well-educated guide: “Crummy people skills do not make a good guide. In the 1960s and ’70s anyone who could do a pull-up was a guide.” Wilcox believes this type of guide cannot provide what he calls “good customer service”—an experience both reasonably safe and high in quality. He has been active in developing training and certification programs for climbing guides and believes, as I do, that leaders need a combination of training and experience.

**Learning**

The lessons that Rick Wilcox learned on Langtang Peak are indelibly etched in his memory. That learning benefited not only Wilcox and his future clients, but also the many guides-in-training he has subsequently worked with. Still, as he well recognizes, such a risky approach to learning is best avoided. Nonetheless,
on-the-ground experience forms the foundation of learning to be a leader. “You can’t feel it, smell it, experience it in a video or book,” says Rick Estes. Estes, a friend of Wilcox’s, is a retired lieutenant with the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. During his 28-year career, he oversaw search-and-rescue operations in a large area of the White Mountains.

“Mother Nature has no compunction taking life. It is not an easy life for a moose in the woods, or a black-capped chickadee bounced around and blown down by the winter winds.” These animals live their entire lives in the outdoors, Estes points out, but are not immune to hazards. When humans venture out, they may be subjected to the same hazards despite having less experience and fewer natural protections than animals. “Not that many people have been in a situation where your body is shutting down on you, like it does when you are hypothermic. Imagine how debilitating you feel being sick with the flu. Now imagine being on a mountain.”

“Get started as a leader does not require falling down mountains or slipping into serious hypothermia. However, would-be leaders do need to place themselves in real-life situations in order to learn about subtle environmental cues, working with groups, and themselves. This hands-on learning will enable you to make the judgment-based decisions necessary for effective outdoor leadership. The key to learning leadership is a slow progression. Training programs, participation in outdoor programs led by others, personal adventures, and mentorship are excellent starting points. A logical program of training and personal experience is best. It’s vitally important that leaders be prepared before taking on responsibility for others.

Skill Development
As introduced in the previous chapter, three types of skills are required for outdoor leadership: technical skills, or physical-activity- and knowledge-based skills; interpersonal skills, which involve complex social interactions; and judgment skills that require evaluating options, often with incomplete information. The development of technical, judgment, or interpersonal skills follows roughly the same process, with three primary stages:
ing these skills myself. Mastery of relevant technical and interpersonal skills is vital not only for leadership, but also for teaching these skills to participants.

Confidence
As leaders develop technical, judgment, and interpersonal skills, they also develop confidence. Confidence is the glue that holds the other leadership skills together and allows them to be put to effective use. As you gain experience, you simultaneously build confidence, because you will know that you’ve successfully handled similar situations in the past—and that you can apply your knowledge to a new situation, even one that differs from those you have previously encountered.

Crisis situations—even minor ones—can be particularly challenging to a leader’s confidence. Lieutenant Estes, mentioned earlier in this chapter, was once able to restore a leader’s confidence via a cell phone call. “The leader was dealing with an ankle sprain. The leader didn’t have confidence in himself—the call only got him answers he already knew.” In this case, a little boost to a leader’s confidence and affirmation that he was doing the right thing saved the state from having to conduct a rescue. However, that confidence boost from an outside voice is not always available or appropriate.

Although confidence is extremely important, false confidence leads many new leaders into trouble. New leaders often find that a confident attitude makes it easier to lead others. False confidence may pass for effective leadership on short excursions or uncomplicated activities. On a mentally, physically, or otherwise challenging trip, a confident attitude is little substitute for the deeply ingrained experience and skills that bring true confidence.

Some leaders tend to lack confidence even when they have the experience and skills necessary for their role. A lack of confidence can be taxing for leaders who continually doubt their own decisions. If participants sense that you lack confidence, they will be more likely to question your abilities, further increasing your stress level. On the positive side, a little confidence tends to beget more confidence: Participants who sense confidence will look to you for leadership, which will reaffirm your belief in yourself.

Developing Your Skills
So how can you improve your leadership abilities? The major methods are training, mentoring, and hands-on experience. Reading can help a bit too. Effectively implementing these methods is detailed in the following sections.

Training
Training is easily the best bridge to becoming a leader. Strong training provides an aspiring leader with a comprehensive set of skills—mentoring and hands-on experience alone are less likely to provide this. Firsthand experience is important in all pursuits, but it is especially important for outdoor leaders. Experiential training allows aspiring leaders to practice skills in realistic settings, serving as an intermediate step—a bridge—between understanding the fundamentals of a skill and putting it to use. Training isn’t just for new leaders; it’s also critical for experienced leaders who need to expand and update their skills. The different types of training detailed in this section play a critical role in the development of basic-to-advanced skills.

Some leader training is very activity specific, such as the valuable offerings of the American Mountain Guides Association, or the newer Professional Climbing Instructors Association. Other training focuses more broadly on outdoor leadership, often addressing technical, interpersonal, and judgment skills simultaneously. One such program is AMC’s venerable Mountain Leadership School, a five-day program that was founded in 1959. (Other mountain clubs offer similar opportunities, many of them tailored to fit into the lives of volunteer leaders.)

Other broad-based outdoor leadership training, for current or aspiring professional leaders (or those with two or more weeks of time to invest), comes from the National Outdoor Leadership School’s (NOLS) Educator, Instructor, and Professional Instructor courses. This highly regarded option combines technical, judgment, and interpersonal skills training (often in that order, with priority given to technical skills). Outward Bound, particularly the North Carolina Outward Bound School, also offers instructor programs with an exceptional focus on interpersonal skills. Wilderness Education Association courses, offered through a variety of institutions (often colleges and universities), provide formal certification in a variety of skills for outdoor leaders.

Increasingly, colleges and universities, through either degree or outdoor recreation programs, offer sophisticated outdoor leadership training. Arizona’s Prescott College has been a leader in this area, providing an adventure education degree program incorporating a substantial amount of field time. Many other colleges and universities now offer excellent outdoor leadership courses and related degrees.

Technical Skills Training. For every intrepid outdoor adventurer who wants to scale icy mountains or descend frothing rivers, there is someone who wants to show him or her the ropes. This has not always been the case. These instruc-
Participants do not typically possess the technical skills, such as river rescue, that leaders need to have.

tors may be paid professionals, though one downside to this type of training is that it can be quite costly. If you are lucky, you may be able to find a less expensive volunteer-led program or find a friend who will provide some instruction. A well-qualified instructor is generally the most expedient way to acquire necessary technical skills.

The best instructors follow an organized teaching progression, anticipate the mistakes beginners are likely to make, and have learned how to best explain and demonstrate skills. Working with such an instructor is the best way for you to observe effective teaching and leadership skills that you will be able to put into practice yourself. You may want to find a training course with a focus on teaching. Aspiring leaders need to have a particularly strong grasp of technical skills, especially in higher-risk activities; such courses will help.

If a friend offers to teach you how to rock climb, be aware that your friend may not be an effective teacher and may not know the best techniques. A skilled instructor will likely do a better job. When I'm formally instructing a person or a group, I have a different attitude than I do when I'm taking a friend out. Although I will instruct my friend on the basics, with a focus on safety, I'll also want to make some time to climb. I may not cover every skill in the same depth that I would as an instructor.

The best approach to learning technical skills will vary depending on your learning style, available time, financial resources, the risk level involved in the activity, your tolerance for experimentation, and many other factors. Get out and determine what works for you. A combination of approaches will probably do the trick.

Interpersonal Skills Training. Interpersonal skills can be improved through experiential education that offers scenarios similar to those you’ll face as a leader. Some of this could take place in a classroom, although it rarely does. The best place to learn interpersonal skills is in the field, where you will be using them. Unlike most traditional educational approaches, experiential education may place you in complex, often real-life, situations. This method will allow you to learn, in a safe and facilitated environment, from the successes and mistakes of yourself and your classmates.
Experiential, field-based leadership training programs provide some of the best opportunities for interpersonal skills development. Options available through AMC, NOLS, Outward Bound, Wilderness Education Association, and universities have been discussed. While such programs rarely focus entirely on interpersonal skills, this should be a significant component of the curriculum.

Some people have an aptitude for mastering interpersonal skills and will develop their abilities rapidly with effective training. Others will find this aspect of outdoor leadership particularly challenging to learn. Rely on what you do best (which might be technical or judgment-based skills), but continue to pursue opportunities to enhance your interpersonal skills.

**Judgment Skills Training.** This component of a leader’s skill set can be challenging to develop. Like with interpersonal skills, some people have an aptitude for on-the-fly judgment in the field. Others are less competent and seem to become overwhelmed by the information (or lack thereof) around them. Judgment skills can be learned during technical skills training, but the best way to learn might be from programs designed specifically for improving judgment skills. The impact of judgment, while difficult to grasp in a classroom, quickly becomes apparent when learning outdoors.

Want to learn exceptional judgment skills? Engage in training with challenging and risky activities, as well as difficult environments. Train in situations more challenging than those you will be leading. When I was in college, I took an NOLS Educators course—in January in Wyoming. That experience taught me how to think far ahead and make solid decisions. That intense time in the Wyoming winter helped me develop my judgment skills for the easier task of leading backpacking trips the following summer. (It helped my technical and interpersonal skills as well.)

**First Aid Training.** First aid can be considered a technical skill, although effective training in this skill will also include judgment and interpersonal components. First aid is included here separately because of its importance and because leaders have infrequent opportunities to practice these skills on the job (beyond blister care and handing out adhesive bandages), rendering training critically important.

First aid is the one aspect of outdoor leadership training that most say is mandatory. Those who will be leading activities where emergency medical care is more than an hour away—a reality on most outdoor excursions—should have current training in wilderness, as opposed to standard, first aid. Wilderness
first-aid courses address issues that are common in backcountry settings, and teach you how to improvise first-aid and rescue equipment and to administer care over many days. Standard first-aid courses teach you only what to do during the brief interval between the call to 911 and the arrival of help.

Shortly after I began working as an outdoor leader, I became a Wilderness Emergency Medical Technician. Not only did this relatively advanced training allow me to obtain leadership positions I would not have been considered for otherwise, it also taught me how to manage field safety and emergency response. I have taught several Wilderness First Responder courses and am always impressed by how much students learn, especially in the hands-on practice scenarios. I recommend obtaining the highest level of wilderness first-aid training you can.

If you aren't convinced, here are a few additional reasons to take a wilderness first-aid course:

- You'll learn a great deal about avoiding a variety of problems.
- Role-playing scenarios foster technical, judgment, and interpersonal skills.
- Hands-on skill practice cannot be replicated by reading a book.
- You'll develop a comprehensive set of up-to-date first-aid skills.
- On the street, or in the backcountry, these skills could save a life.
- The courses are fun, interesting, and a good place to meet like-minded people.

Four semi-standardized training levels in wilderness first aid have emerged as the need and demand for such training has increased. They are Wilderness First Aid, Wilderness First Responder, Wilderness Emergency Medical Technician, and, somewhat less commonly, Advanced Wilderness First Aid. A number of organizations teach these courses, including SOLO Wilderness Medicine, Wilderness Medical Associates, Wilderness Medicine Institute (part of the National Outdoor Leadership School), and Aerie Backcountry Medicine (where I occasionally teach). There are many other excellent training providers. If you have questions about a wilderness medicine training provider, look for recommendations from other leaders or from the organization for which you are interested in leading. If you have the option, choose a course in which you’ll spend a significant amount of time in class. (I am skeptical about the value of newer course offerings in which a significant amount of the learning is Internet-based.)

Be sure to recertify—many of the first-aid skills you will learn require practice. Even if it is not required for your leadership position, a periodic refresher is invaluable. There is a reason recertification standards are in place.

**Organization-Specific Training.** This training is provided by the organization sponsoring the trip you are leading. AMC, for example, provides leadership training for both professional staff and volunteers. These training programs may address broad leadership principles, but they also cover any unique aspects of leading for the particular organization.

Varied participant demographics and program philosophies demand different approaches from leaders. You would, for instance, run a far different mountain biking program for troubled youth than you would for vacationing adults. The youth program might require each participant to share equally in the workload, with activities that focus on team building; the adults, on the other hand, might have all their meals cooked for them and expect to have the natural history of the area interpreted along the way. Good leader training will address the environmental factors that dictate where people lead trips, as well as the logistical factors. All these factors make the training provided by an organization very helpful—even if you are already an experienced leader.

Each organization will also have different levels of risk tolerance, making training essential. The safety practices I use when working with experienced adults as a professional climbing guide, for example, vary from those I use when instructing beginner youth climbers for a different organization.

**Limitations of Training.** With the proliferation of training programs there are many new, often young, outdoor leaders who arrive at their first leadership role heavily trained, and maybe even certified. They may have Wilderness First Responder certification, several technical skills certifications, and outdoor leadership training. Unfortunately, they can be awful leaders, especially when it comes to having interpersonal skills and strong judgment. Many of them have spent just enough time in the outdoors to obtain their certifications. Because some young leaders take surprisingly little initiative in getting outside on their own adventures, their experience is limited to being a participant in a training program, with someone always present to watch their back.

Training, while valuable, should complement personal outdoor experience and leadership responsibilities that show progression, ideally through some form of mentorship. Outdoor leadership has many dimensions. Expecting fully functional leaders to emerge from any training program is unrealistic. Remember, however, that life experience can be valuable, so older leaders may be able to move with greater ease from training to leadership roles than younger ones.
Mentorships can be highly effective leadership development practices for all those involved. Mentor-mentee relationships can encourage growth, foster humility, and provide a depth of knowledge to all leaders. Outdoor leaders can use mentor-mentee relationships in many ways, but I would like to focus on the relationships between leaders.

In my career I have mentored and been mentored by a number of people who had a significant influence on my development as an outdoor leader. I will describe two of these relationships; one mentorship was informal and the other formal.

I did not seek out the informal mentorship with Sarah. It happened naturally and went a long way toward teaching me how to be a mentor. She promoted an open atmosphere in which I could ask her questions and she could ask me questions, which encouraged an open dialogue around making decisions and fostered a cohesive working relationship. The tone of this dialogue was one of mutual respect, with the intention of helping us understand and learn from one another. Sometimes this dialogue was open and done in front of the participants; other times the dialogue was more reflective and happened after the fact. She was both a mentor to me and a strong leader of the participants. Our relationship also created an atmosphere in which the participants felt comfortable asking us questions. One person doesn’t have all the answers, but collectively we have many. I had no idea how influential this style would become in shaping the way I lead. I still use this approach when the method seems appropriate.

The other mentor-mentee example from my experience was intentional and formal. Rich was interested in becoming a more effective leader. He asked me for structure and proposed a model in which we could focus on the areas he wanted to develop. I was immediately impressed with his organization and self-awareness, in addition to his specific learning objectives. I was flattered that he was willing to solicit feedback from me. He wanted feedback in five areas, ranging from facilitating discussions to managing rock climbing sites. We discussed intentions and parameters for each of these activities, then talked about the “class” afterward, focusing on strengths and deficiencies. The discussions were brief, but focused, unless otherwise warranted.

A mentorship is a supportive relationship established between individuals in which knowledge, skills, and experiences are shared. The mentee is someone who wants guidance in developing specific competencies, self-awareness, and skills. The mentor is an expert in subject areas the mentee would like to know more about and is able to share wisdom in a supportive manner.

Mentoring is a tool that we can use to become better leaders. It can be an informal or a formal practice. Mentees observe, question, and explore. Mentors demonstrate, question, explain, and model. The following assumptions form the foundation for a mentor-mentee relationship:

- Dialog and open communication are the avenue by which the mentor and mentee transfer and develop knowledge, ideas, and techniques.
- Deliberate learning is foundational. The mentor’s job is to promote intentional learning, which includes capacity building through methods such as instructing, coaching, providing experiences, modeling, and advising.
- Both failure and success are powerful teachers. Within reasonable parameters, the mentor has the option to provide the mentee with the opportunity to “fail.” This can promote creative experimentation and exploration of ideas and theories. Mentors, as leaders of a learning experience, need to share stories about how something turned out well. They also need to share their experiences of failure, when something turned out poorly. Both types of stories can offer powerful lessons.
- Mentoring ability becomes stronger over time. It taps into ongoing learning, which is not an event, or even a string of events. Rather, it comes from the synthesis of ongoing events, experiences, observations, studies, feedback, and thoughtful reflection.

Mentoring is a joint venture. Through reflection and collaboration between the mentee and mentor, the mentee can become more self-confident and competent as the knowledge and skills learned in the mentorship are applied. The relationship established between the two people is unique to their needs, personalities, learning styles, expectations, and experiences. Successful mentorships include asking questions and sharing responsibility for learning the subject matter. Mentorships can provide challenges for the leader who seeks more depth. Participating in a mentorship venture, whether as mentor or mentee, can promote an attitude of lifelong learning and an atmosphere of humility.

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Mentoring and Apprenticeship

My friend Brennan Brunner occupied the lofty position of outing club chairperson when I arrived at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Though I participated in only one backpacking trip he led, Brunner shared many of his insights into outdoor leadership with me over bowls of Cheerios in the dining hall. I went on to serve as chairperson of the outing club for two years and took several assistant leaders with me on a variety of trips. Although in retrospect I realize that they could have learned more had I stepped back and let them do more of the work, they did gain a lot of experience without the pressure of serving as the primary leader at first. After the trips, when they became primary leaders, they continued to turn to me for guidance regarding their outdoor leadership activities.

Mentors are wise teachers who help people get the most from their learning opportunities. Mentors offer insight into people's experiences, advise them about additional learning opportunities, and provide helpful hints. As you learn to be an outdoor leader, you might have one mentor or—if you're lucky—several people might guide your development as a leader. Many leaders and outdoor enthusiasts happily build relationships that allow them to share their expertise.

An effective way for a budding leader to gain experience is as an assistant, intern, or apprentice. This is a common approach for volunteers and professional leaders who'd like to expand their experience and polish their skills. Experience as an assistant would give you a chance to demonstrate your skills and move into a full leadership position later. Many talented leaders in training move rapidly from an apprenticeship to a leadership role after demonstrating that they are ready.

To learn as much as you can, be patient and take the time to appreciate your opportunity. As Scott Smalley, a former leader for AMC, NOLS, the Green Mountain Club, and Adirondack Mountain Club, tells me, “Being a good leader is being a thief and taking all the best practices from others.” Work with different leaders and try to adopt their best techniques. Before agreeing to an apprenticeship, make sure you'll be given the chance to take on appropriate leadership tasks and that you'll receive constructive feedback from experienced leaders. Some organizations view eager apprentices, who often work for very small wages, simply as a source of cheap labor. Be sure you maximize the value of the relationship for yourself.

Reading

Because you're reading this book, you obviously believe that reading is one way to develop your leadership skills. Although this book cannot replace outdoor leadership training, mentorship, and experience, it does serve as a source of important information that can be referenced repeatedly. This book relates the experiences of many leaders, draws lessons from them, allows you to do the same, and supplements your experience in the field. Remember the analogy of a good leader to a thief and take as many ideas for yourself as possible while you read.

This book can also help teach you some, but not all, of those skills and their components. To maximize the usefulness of this book, follow these steps:

- Use the book to identify which skills you need to develop.
- Develop a written outline of the skills you would like to work on.
- Periodically refer to different chapters as you gain experience and new perspectives.
- Read other books about outdoor leadership. For specific recommendations, turn to the “recommended reading” appendix at the end of the book.

The following materials can be useful for developing your outdoor leadership skills:

**Technical Skills Instruction Books.** For most outdoor activities, selections of books and manuals explain beginning-to-advanced technical skills. Equipment and accepted techniques tend to change over time, so use the newest editions you can find. Also, be mindful that many books are written with the recreational outdoor enthusiast in mind—really, the people you're leading. The technical (especially safety) skills that leaders employ are often more sophisticated. Attempt to find books or manuals that are targeted toward leaders, and never rely on a single source as the final authority.

**Outdoor Education Books.** Books exploring various aspects of outdoor education and leadership, such as ethics, facilitation, and experiential education methods, are available. Many of these cover valuable concepts not addressed in this book.

**Periodicals and Websites.** These can provide more current or esoteric information than is often available in books.

**Accident Reports.** While much can be learned from honest retellings of success stories in outdoor leadership, accident reports can be gripping and are remarkably popular. Accident reports for some activities are available in annual compendiums, as well as from many other sources. A selection of accident reports from the Northeast is published twice a year in the AMC journal *Appalachia*. Every organization should also make appropriate internal accident and incident reports available to its leaders for educational purposes.
Leader Manuals. Most organizations that offer outdoor programs print leader manuals. If done well, they provide valuable program-specific information and policies. Despite this, I often find that leaders are not familiar with their program’s manual—read yours!

Experience

“I was an überguide,” says Jane Imholte of her first summer trying to be the ultimate outdoor leader. At 18 years old, she solo-led trips for YMCA Camp Menogin in Minnesota’s Boundary Waters. Working with relatively young girls, “I was leading alone and doing all the work—for the thirteen days I was with my group I had cooked every meal and carried the canoes over every portage.” Years later, it is clear from the tone of her voice that she is still astonished she would have ever done all of this. Three days from the end of the trip, the group of seven girls Jane was leading was portaging between two lakes. Jane was climbing over a downed tree when she heard a crunching and popping noise in her knee. Initially, her injury did not seem particularly bad, and she continued on with her überguide tasks, doing another 3-mile portage later in the day and then cooking dinner before she finally got to go to sleep.

During the night she woke up, and the pain in her knee was so intense that she had to take Tylenol with codeine to keep herself from crying out. The next day “I couldn’t do anything for myself—I needed assistance to go pee,” says the leader who had been doing it all just hours before.

There were few options for Imholte and her group other than taking the most direct route out of the wilderness. “For the next three days the group had to portage everything, including me,” recalls Jane. “It was inspirational to see a small girl decide she was going to portage the 70-pound cedar canoe I had been paddling.” The group took over every responsibility, even making chicken with dumplings for dinner one night—unfortunately using white cake mix, instead of flour, in the dumplings. Jane, who started the trip “getting a sense of self-esteem and -worth” from taking care of everything, was now a passenger in the middle of her campers’ canoe.

With the medication keeping the pain under control, Jane cried with pride as she watched her group coalesce and learn to rely on one another. With a newfound cohesiveness and resolve, the group made it back to camp. Imholte, an attorney today, recovered from her knee injury to lead many more wilderness trips all over North America. The injury remains “one of the best things that happened to me” and her “biggest learning moment as a leader, because it forced me to relinquish so much control.” Imholte allowed participants the opportunity to take on tasks she’d previously felt they were incapable of doing. The participants’ success gave them confidence and a newfound sense of pride. While subsequent trips did not feature such dramatic circumstances, Jane gave every group she led the opportunity to develop some of that same confidence and pride.

Imholte’s story epitomizes the fact that gaining experience in the field is the best way to learn to become an outdoor leader. What Imholte learned in her first year of leading wilderness trips could have taken years of training to understand so completely. Experience, of course, does not have to come from leading a group; participating in another leader’s group, excursions with friends, or even solo outings can give people the opportunity to hone their technical skills.

This point bears repeating: The easiest route to becoming an effective and inspiring outdoor leader is to gain a lot of outdoor experience. For very basic, nontechnical trips, this might mean as little as twenty days’ experience in an activity. For more complex trips and those involving technical skills, the leader will need hundreds of days of practice before assuming a leadership role. Becoming a leader does not end the need for practice. Leading does not provide an opportunity to push your limits, visit entirely new places, or build new technical skills. To have these experiences, remain vital, and grow as a leader, you must make time to have personal outdoor adventures, as well as lead others.

Unfortunately, people tend to practice what they’re already good at doing. Everyone does it; we use our talents and avoid tasks we find difficult. We more frequently enjoy recreational activities in which we have some ability than those whose fundamentals we struggle to grasp. What has helped me understand this preferential engagement is my enthusiasm for rock climbing.

There are four basic types of rock climbing: slabs, faces, overhangs, and cracks. I’m a poor slab climber, decent at faces and overhangs, and (to be immodest) I can climb up and back down cracks that some of my climbing partners could never hope to climb. Because I abhor slab climbing, I avoid it, and seek out crack climbing because I love it. The long climbs I like to do often encompass all four types of climbing. As much as I find slab climbing distasteful and downright scary, if I’m going to climb I need to practice that in addition to the other skills. Some modest ability at climbing slabs would make me a better and safer climber.

Similarly, the outdoor leader needs to consciously develop a broad array of skills. The leader who finds facilitating a discussion distasteful is just as likely to need to lead a discussion as one who doesn’t. The moment the group really needs a facilitator is too late for the leader to start learning; the time for developing leadership skills is before the trip.
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 into 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.