



Managing Risk

BY ALAN STEWART

At an early date in my experience as a leader I was introduced to the importance of risk management in Scouting. Referred to B.P.&P, I noted that Section 13000 - Risk Management has several good points. Section 10006 - Accepted Practices for Outdoor Activities has many risk reduction suggestions for particular activities. In my experience, much more can be had from a PROCESS than a set of RULES. In this article I will try to dispel some of the misunderstanding associated with the term "risk" and offer a logical process to deal with it.

Say for example you plan to take ten average Scouts for a 10 day canoe trip with two leaders. For eight of the ten days you will be out of reach of any road, no cell phone coverage, some rapids, bears in the area, insects galore, no doctor, and some Scouts can't swim. No leader I know would launch on an adventure like this on the spur of the moment, yet almost all of us would go after the right preparation. Most of this planning can be described as risk management.

A Magic Formula

Risk = Probability X Consequences

This simple formula immediately shows us two important things. The first is that by defining risk we can then have a handle on measuring it. Even if we just assign high/medium/low/negligible to probability and catastrophic/hazardous/major/minor to consequence, we then have a way to quantify risk.



Photo: Bryan Mierau

Why do we want to define risk so precisely, you ask? The reason is that we can then tackle the high risks first. For example, we might fret endlessly about perishing in a forest fire and ignore the risk of getting Beaver Fever (Giardiasis). If we use the magic formula we would have been satisfied with the catastrophic scenario right away and put our attention to getting some water purifier pumps.

The second important thing this simple formula shows is that because there are two elements to risk, there are at least two ways to fight it. For example, if the risk is getting lost on a night hike, the probability can be reduced by sticking together, sounding off, etc. Consequences can be reduced by having a search plan, and conducting the Hug a Tree program. One set of mitigation techniques reduces the probability while the other assumes it will happen and fights to reduce the consequences.

With the plan to launch on a ten day canoe trip, you could quickly list 50 or more risks to consider. Even the first time you try to score the risk you will be automatically considering mitigation measures. Keep track of all these thoughts; they will be your plan to success.

How Do We Keep Score?

To manage the risk of the big canoe adventure, the leaders and the Court of Honour will meet at least twice just for this topic. Someone has to take notes. All the risks that anyone can think of should be written down. Cover the range from drowning, hypothermia, or starvation to trivial things like cuts and scrapes. Be creative and even silly if you like: Jason giggling so hard he falls into the fire. One risk we often forget about is the risk that someone won't enjoy themselves. Write it down; it can be dealt with just like the others.



Then try to score all the risks in terms of probability and consequences. Sometimes it is useful to score yourself as if you were launching tomorrow without any preparation. While you tackle these risks one by one make notes of possible mitigation steps. Generally the mitigation changes the score so don't worry about a final answer yet. Deal with all the risks, even the silly ones. Although this is potentially life and death business, the meeting shouldn't be without lighter moments, especially if the youth are involved.

As you make your way through all the risks, colour code them red, yellow, or green in order as to how dangerous you perceive the risk to be. While going through this exercise, don't forget to remind yourself of the reason for the adventure. It is going to be a once in a lifetime trip with life-bonding, confidence-building, scenery and wildlife viewing opportunities. You will come out the other end stronger and better. But, the reward has to be worth the residual risk or you should find a new adventure to plan.

Mitigation Techniques

From your first risk brainstorming session you will now have red, yellow and green risks. Naturally start with the red risks and work down.

It will turn out that experience and common sense are the best risk mitigation tools we have. To best use that experience might take a bit of imagination. This is another good reason to work in a group – more imagination. To illustrate, let's take one risk from the canoe adventure, capsizing. The probability of this happening with five canoes over ten days is a near certainty. If we launched tomorrow we will put the probability at once per day. Consequences might be wet gear, lost gear, lost tents, lost food, hypothermia, lost paddles, damaged canoes, cuts, scrapes, and drowning. If you want to be very analytical, you can assign different probabilities to each consequence. Usually you can assign just one probability and one aggregate consequence. Without mitigation this could be a red risk.

A quick but thoughtful brainstorming on mitigation for capsizes should give you at least the following:

1. water-tight packing techniques
2. cargo lashing
3. spare paddles
4. life-jackets
5. extra kit
6. proper clothing
7. capsize training
8. swimming lessons
9. reading good books on canoe tripping
10. paddling training and practice
11. weather limits
12. clear leadership.

If you think about these 12 ideas you will note that most of them reduce the consequences of capsizing and several reduce the probability. It is also useful at this point to realize that all of these, with the possible exception of training, cost next to nothing. Most of us would arrange for some sort of training anyway, at least for the leaders who could pass it on to the youth. So for this one risk – capsizing, we can re-evaluate the possibility of twice for the whole trip with only minor inconvenience for the most likely consequence. With just a little effort we now have a plan to manage the risk of capsizing. One risk down and 49 to go.

Follow Up

There should be two times to follow up on the risk management plan. The first time is shortly before the adventure. At this point you should ask:

1. Did we accomplish the risk reduction plan?
2. Did we forget any risks that have to be dealt with first?
3. Are we ready to launch?
4. Do we accept the residual risk?

The second time to follow up is after the adventure is over. This is an important opportunity to review what worked, what didn't and where improvement is required. Ask yourselves:

1. What went well?
2. What went wrong?
3. Did we overkill some risks?
4. Did we forget some risks?
5. Was the risk mitigation appropriate?
6. What would we do differently next time?

Why Do It?

In Scouting adventures we expect a large gain for a small risk. Although the risk of some adventures may seem high initially, it is the training, confidence and preparation that makes it small.

If we treat risk as a measurable quantity, treat it methodically and find creative and commonsense ways to reduce it



Photo: Bill Bowman

then we can conduct big adventures with lower risk. However, there is probably no way to keep Jason from giggling himself into the fire.

Life always has risks and the biggest lives often have the biggest risks (at least before they are managed). X
 – Scouter Alan Stewart with the 9th Surdel Scouts in Delta, BC developed this risk management technique from a course he used to teach in Transport Canada Civil Aviation. See the Bowron Lakes article on page 12 for more about the adventures his Scouts experienced.

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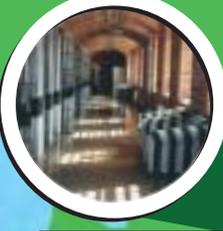
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