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Host Leadership in outdoor, bush, wilderness, and adventure therapy

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One of the original inspirations for our work in Host Leadership was Sir Chris Bonington, Everest mountaineer and expedition leader, who was interviewed and quoted in the original Host book. In this chapter Stephan Natynczuk describes how leading as a host can fit well with a variety of outdoor contexts based on his work in the field of adventure therapy.

Introduction

The idea of hosting an expedition to some far off, relatively unexplored place is nothing new. Typically, one has an idea for an expedition and invites people to join in. The expedition team, being selected on the basis of such things as a prospective member's personality, temperament, experience, knowledge and skills, all offered something to the collective effort by which the expedition will succeed. Sir Ernest Shackleton's poetic, yet possibly apocryphal, newspaper advert famously invited men to apply for a hazardous journey in the knowledge that they might not return (Morell & Capparell, 2003, p. 55). Shackleton, perhaps demonstrating aspects of Host Leadership, carefully invited extraordinary, exceptional men for his Antarctic expeditions; these people shared his vision, were hardy team players, and willing to do any necessary task.

However, there are more frequent contemporary expeditions where members self-select based on their own needs from the expedition, the number of places that are available, the amount of adventure on offer, the expedition's location, cost, duration and so on. Prospective members might choose at any time to take part or not. Occasionally membership is not voluntary (Tucker *et al*, 2015): expedition members being sent by a third party, their participation prescribed because it might be 'character building', therapeutic, or restorative in some way. Whatever the process by which expedition members are chosen, there remains

a challenge to the leader about how the expedition meets its objectives and about how every member is maximally included to benefit both the collective effort and each individual's personal best interests.

Leading outdoor adventure activities

Outdoor adventure activities have traditionally been used for a wide range of personal development 'courses' from building character in challenging youth to developing leadership and teamwork in management – see Ogilvie (2013) for an extensive review. Leadership styles for outdoor adventure activities have been explored in many books over decades (for example Ogilvie, 1993) and the trend seems to have become more facilitative, adopting a softer approach (Bunyan, 2011) as coaching becomes a more significant aspect of leadership awards, certainly from U.K. national governing bodies. Host Leadership with its theoretical underpinning (McKergow, 2009) offers a new, humane, inclusive approach to providing people with a realisable chance to know themselves at their personal best, especially through adventure (Natynczuk, 2012).

While a Solution Focused practitioner working in a consulting room may seek exceptions (times when things go better) to whatever brought their client to therapy by asking carefully crafted questions, a Solution Focused practitioner (the host) in an adventure setting might also look for exceptions that occur within the adventure experience. Examples of exceptions to life as usual might include being cognitively and physically engaged, being happy all day, being considerate, caring and sharing, being conscientious about risk and safety, and taking responsibility for one's own actions as well as the group's safety. When debriefing, the host can, for example, ask for ways in which guests can continue to be their best versions of themselves, and what difference this will make to life beyond the adventure. Some of this concept is borrowed from Walsh and Golins' (1976) Outward Bound Process model and Sibthorp's (2003a) empirical overview, which described a motivated participant learning new skills and adapting to a new environment in search of satisfying success and mastery. Here, one role for the practitioner is to ensure this sense of mastery takes hold among participants and is transferable learning. The practitioner also takes on the role of a *co-adventurer* (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004), gently guiding participants to a state of success, perhaps aware of the Servant Leader model (Northhouse, 2013) yet acting as a host (McKergow & Bailey, 2014) in alignment with the initial invitation to take part in the adventure. In Host Leadership a participant is a guest, which is a significant relational shift. This contrasts strongly with the leader taking a position of power, deciding

what is best for the participant, both holding progress away from individual participants and being the judge of that progress against norms that are not necessarily helpful to any single participant. Nyland and Corsiglia (1994) describe pressurising clients to form solutions before they are ready as solution forced, and suggest it is a novice's mistake. Clearly being solution forced does not sit well with Host Leadership, especially if it involves working for another's best interests and not those of the guest. Being solution forced risks harming the therapeutic alliance (Shennan, 2019, p. 123) and might be questionable both ethically and legally. These often complex considerations are dealt with in Mitchels and Bond (2010, 2011).

Host Leadership and Servant-Leadership – building relationships

I have previously been an advocate of the Servant-Leadership model though now regard Host Leadership as an evolution of Servant-Leadership within expedition and adventure leadership. Both of these approaches to leadership 'styles' place the leader in the role of a quiet facilitator, sometimes unseen, yet without whose facilitation the group achieves little. Servant-Leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) emphasises the development of agency in participants through applying seven leadership behaviours: conceptualising, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically, empowering and creating value for the community.

Northhouse (2013) criticised Servant-Leadership for being the opposite of leadership, too utopian to be practical, and too much following to be leading. However, we can pragmatically adopt aspects that are useful to practitioners working therapeutically. McKergow and Bailey (2014) described leadership as a relationship with *leadership as engagement* in which the group is “engaged, aware, committed, involved, taking action, participating in an ever-changing landscape, everyone getting and giving more” (p. 5). McKergow and Bailey (2014) put the leader in a position similar to a host who has carefully and deliberately invited participants to an event with a common purpose, much like choosing participants for an expedition, yet here the host is also an initiator, inviter, connector, space creator, gatekeeper, and co-participant.

Being in a leadership role during a therapeutic adventure or expedition is a complex undertaking, as Harper (2009) found. One might be challenged by circumstance to be authoritarian for urgent reasons of safety, a guide, a coach, an instructor, a teacher, or a technician: any combination of these in a tradi-

tional leadership role (Brymer & Gray, 2006). Juggling these roles badly can put at significant risk the essential collaborative, or therapeutic alliance. Horvath et al (2011) are clear about the value of building an alliance in a therapeutic process.

Norcross (2010) defined collaboration as “the mutual involvement of the participants in the helping relationship” (p.122). That a helping relationship encompasses much more than the alliance goes without saying. Routinely monitoring the effect of one’s therapeutic work and the quality of the alliance can have a significant impact on outcomes (Miller et al, 2015; Brattland et al, 2019). It is important to establish the alliance early in therapy (Joyce & Piper, 1998), which includes clarity about what to expect, agreement on what the practitioner and client are working towards, and the relational bond. Bachelor and Horvath (1999) suggest that the longer a client is engaged in therapy, without a positive or improving alliance, good outcomes are increasingly in jeopardy. Worse, Hannan et al (2005) found therapists struggle to predict how clients perceive the alliance. As hosts we have to privilege the client’s experience in our care, and in our initial meetings, stress “the relational bond, the special sense of understanding, safety, and trust” (Norcross, 2010, p. 121) and actively facilitate the building of connections between expedition members.

When therapists were asked about what worked in their own personal experiences of therapy, over 80% said it was due to the relationship (Norcross & Lambert, 2011). When clients are asked, they do not emphasise particular techniques or theoretical assumptions made by their therapist. They, too, say it was the relationship. Both can be correct. The therapeutic alliance is simply the most robust finding we have for factors contributing to therapeutic outcomes (Wampold & Imel, 2015) and a good alliance is made up of a relational bond, agreement on what the client wants from therapy, and agreement on the tasks or method of the therapy (Bordin, 1979). Host Leadership is strong on intra-group relationships, the host connecting with their guests and connecting their guests to each other (McKergow & Bailey, 2014), and accepting guests’ autonomy. The quality of inter-relationships and connections is everything.

The flexibility of the Host Leadership model is also pragmatic in encompassing a range of leadership styles and tasks, bridging leadership roles on the continuum between hero and servant (McKergow, 2009), allowing for flexibility in function with a pragmatic approach to achieving the objectives the host has in mind for the group. Managing adventures to keep the group safe sometimes requires the leader to step into a hero mode (especially during an emergency when an author-

itative mode is perhaps most efficient and most effective), sometimes to be a servant, sometimes something in between. Within the host model there is also the 'space' for the leader to be authentic, working as Northouse (2013, p. 267) illustrates for the collective good, and as Harper and Dobud (2018) and Dobud (2017) argue, to work for the best outcomes for our guest.

Using Host Leadership in practice

To illustrate how the theory translates into practice I would like to draw from my own experience in adventure therapy. In this aspect of my work with adolescents I combine adventure activities such as caving, rock climbing, hill walking, canoeing, kayaking, off-road cycling and bush-craft, with Solution Focused practice and a broad, experiential curriculum of learning outdoors. This cohort generally does not engage with education for a variety of reasons and its members are at risk. For these young people I offer an alternative education package, commissioned by schools and local authorities. I will comment briefly on each of my main roles as a host leader.

Inviter

After receiving a referral, an introductory meeting with the young person follows. During this meeting I outline what is on offer in terms of activities, the broad objectives of the day-long sessions, and we agree on our expectations of each other. At this point the young person is invited to take part and to join me and my assistant in adventures of their own choice from the previous paragraph. Occasionally there might be up to three guests in our party for day long sessions and up to 12 guests for an expedition. It is explained that participation is a choice and our new guest is asked to take joint responsibility for our individual and collective safety. For example, if guests spot something "not right" or "a bit dodgy" there is an expectation that they point it out immediately.

Asking a young person to assume co-responsibility for the outcome of the adventure is possibly a very empowering step and is also a basic component of Solution Focused practice (O'Connell, 2005). Honouring the guest's choice of activity maximises engagement and potentially demonstrates that guests are taken seriously for their choices and are regarded positively as individuals. At this point we are living Rogerian core conditions of congruency, unconditional positive regard, empathy and Adler's Social Interest (Watts, 1998). Ideally our guest feels valued as a co-participant.

Initiator

Once we are underway with our adventures our guests are always expected to take an active part in dynamic risk assessments as we progress through the day. Trust is further developed through this type of meaningful collaboration and the therapeutic alliance takes hold. In my work, choice is always extended to the guest as to whether, when and how we complete our objectives or have a change of mind at any point, “Challenge by Choice” being a common component of adventure experiences (Hovelynck, 2003; Beames & Brown, 2016, p. 66; Harper, Rose & Segal 2019, p. 238). Within Host Leadership one cannot play ‘lip-service’ to challenge by choice. Guests are invited and participate by their own choice; disrespecting guests’ choices would seem like holding them prisoner. Certainly the adventure would lose a vital sense of authenticity (Beames & Brown, 2016, pp. 50-51).

Space Creator

Careful and attentive use of the environment is vital to outdoor and adventure therapy, and is dealt with extensively by Harper, Rose and Segal (2019), and Gass, Gillis and Russell (2012), and Greenway (1995) provided accounts of the power of wilderness. It goes without saying that environment and habitat have to be respected and protected. The practice of Leave No Trace (Simon & Alagona, 2009) translates metaphorically both to therapy (Natynczuk, 2012) and Host Leadership as well as caring for the outdoor spaces we use. McKergow and Bailey (2014, pp. 120-137) described ‘space’ with several functions: a place for things to happen, as physical, interactional, headspace for planning and reflection. Additionally, space has a temporal component; it takes time and skillful pacing to allow for reflection to occur, and to ensure there is time for things to happen. The host has to be skilled at and mindful of “holding the space” (McKergow & Bailey, 2014, p. 130).

Gatekeeper

The role of gatekeeper is mostly about maintaining the integrity of the adventure experience or expedition for the whole group, perhaps helping to find solutions that do not draw heavily on limited resources (Ratner, George, & Iveson, 2012, pp. 86-88). It is not about controlling individual participant’s experiences through preventing participants from leaving. In pragmatic terms, the role of gatekeeper includes our agreement about when we finish, medical considerations informing the appropriateness of the venture, and what

happens if a guest's behaviour, cognitive ability, physical ability, and/or emotional condition change to make the adventure unsafe. These considerations are outlined in the joining instructions and form part of our contract, in turn informing the risk assessments for the venture, to which we have all agreed and consented.

Co-participator/ co-adventurer

It goes without saying that adventure and the day belong to the guests. I as a host might have visited the cave, rock face, river, or forest more times than I can remember, yet the experience and venue is most likely new and the adventure authentic for the guests. As host, the conversation and activity are managed so that nothing is taken away from the guest's experience by the familiarity of the venue and activity to the host. All that happens during the adventure is a new collective experience: the experiential learning is different for each guest and perhaps intangible (Hovelynck, 2003). Nonetheless, ideally with everyone at their best, perhaps discovering new meaning in their lives through adventure (Repp, 2004), the guests are living through exceptions to their usual experiences and reactions to challenge, and gaining transferable skills such as those discussed by Sibthorp (2003b). The shared physicality of the adventure is also a key factor in bringing about change in the way that the mixture of perceived risk and the sense of accomplishment at overcoming challenges blend to help construct a new appreciation of self (Russell & Farnum, 2004).

Connector

Connections between the guests, and between the guests and the host, develop from shared experiences, common endeavour, mutual dependency, respect, trust, and increased wellbeing that emerge from undertaking outdoor adventures as co-participants. Everything is agreed among the guests and with the host, and in this way agency and self-efficacy develop (Gass, Gillis & Russell 2012, p. 74) certainly within the group and on the day. The social aspects of the experience may be a greater contributor to change than the adventure experience, though cannot be wholly separated (Harper & Obee, 2019).

Conclusion

Host Leadership offers the expedition or adventure leader a model that draws on useful aspects of several approaches to leadership, whilst honouring the guests as valuable and important individuals and contributors to the group.

The host, in fulfilling McKergow and Bailey's (2104) six roles, gets the best for themselves, the guests and the organisation. Hill *et al* (2007) discuss the complexities of adolescent development and from their paper it is possible to regard this group as the hardest to work with. However, Sandu (2019) suggests good work can be done when alliances focus "On building a bond rather than dealing with risks or resolving conditions" and goes on to describe "Micro-processes characteristic of initiating, developing, and cementing these relationships".

Host Leadership would seem to be a most effective leadership model for working therapeutically with adolescents in outdoor, bush, wilderness and adventure therapy, and I have no doubt that this model translates well to working with adults in similar settings. It seems that Host Leadership, being a simple, pragmatic approach, especially in helping to build good alliances, facilitates the pursuit of happiness through adventure (Mortlock 1984, pp.120-127).

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