

# Leadership Styles

By Carlin Val and Jess Kemp

The intent of this study was to examine how a group's dynamic changes under the influence of different leadership styles, and to determine what leadership style works best in a large group expedition. The main question identified was "What roles can a leader play in affecting the dynamic of a large group while partaking in a field expedition?"

The following research questions were addressed:

1. How can a leader create a positive group dynamic while facilitating an outdoor experience?
2. How does leadership affect group dynamics?
3. How does leadership and decision-making interconnect within a positive group dynamic?
4. Which leadership style works best for various situations in the field?
5. What are the barriers and pathways for each leadership style?

Data was collected to draw a connection between leadership styles and their affects on the group dynamics of large groups during outdoor expeditions.

### The Research Context

Field Explorations I is a third-year course that is offered as a mandatory credit to Outdoor Recreation students at Lakehead University. Students of the 2007 class had the option to choose from three different field trips: crown of the continents (hiking), dogsledding, or a voyageur canoe trip. These courses help to teach theoretical and applied topics that relate to outdoor leadership, parks and tourism. The voyageur canoe trip was the only course that was free to take. As a result, a high number of students enrolled on this trip. It was because of this high number that researchers chose this expedition to conduct research. The high enrollment of students

offered researchers the highest diversity in data when comparing leadership styles to group dynamic. The voyageur canoe field explorations course contained the following themes:

1. Leader of the day: experiencing different kinds of leadership each day.
2. Voyageur Heritage Interpretation: learning about the day-to-day lifestyles of the voyageurs.
3. Land Heritage Interpretation: learning about the history of the trip's route.
4. Teaching Heritage Interpretation: teaching children in the surrounding communities while on the canoe trip.

### Leadership Styles

Leadership is the ability to move a group towards a common goal that would not be met if a leader had not been there (Graham, 1997). Researchers of this study categorized leadership styles into three main styles of leadership, which helped to organize the observations into more simplified data.

#### *Autocratic (authoritarian) leadership*

When faced with the need to provide a decision, an autocratic leader is one who would come up with a solution for the entire group on their own. The autocratic leader would generally solve an issue and make decisions for the group using observations and what they feel is needed or most important for the majority of the group members to benefit at that time (Dessler & Starke, 2004). While recording the research, these were the leaders that would decide for the group when they would wake up and depart, and exactly how far they should go for that day. If the group came across any conflicts or barriers within the expedition, these leaders would also make the decisions on their own, inquiring feedback from the three hired instructors to ensure that their decisions were okay.

### *Democratic (participative) leadership*

The democratic leaders were those who took a very relaxed yet in-control approach to leading the group. Participative leaders, more often than not, would consult the group when approaching an issue and consider their suggestions, but the leader retains the final say in what particular approach is taken (Dessler & Starke, 2004). Within the expedition setting, many of the participants displayed this kind of leadership by obtaining suggestions from other members of the group to come to a group consensus when trying to solve a problem or an issue. These leaders would then talk amongst themselves and come to a decision as to what the group would do.

### *Laissez-faire (abdicator) leadership*

The laissez-faire approach to leadership is the idea that the participants should be able to work problems out and make their way through an expedition without too much extra guidance. These kinds of leaders would provide very little guidance when dealing with group issues on the expedition and would allow group members to come up with decisions on their own. The abdicator leader would take an extremely “hands-off” approach to leading in order to encourage group problem-solving and critical thinking, without allowing participants to depend on the leader for the final word (Dessler & Starke, 2004). This approach was seen when suggestions would be made to the leader to take a certain approach and the leader would just respond with a simple “sure, let’s do it,” and decisions were made without a lot of consideration.

It is important to note that in the real world it is highly improbable to have a completely democratic or completely autocratic leader (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, in press).

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The research took a qualitative approach in order to gather all of the necessary information to answer the main research

questions. The approach taken to this research was the Grounded Theory, in which a concept is exposed through continuous data collection and assessment (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research began with a look at generative questions that helped to guide the research, but were neither static nor restricting (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Most of the research was gathered while participating in the field of the expedition. The research was gathered in three different methods: a self-diagnosis of individuals’ own leadership styles, daily field notes by the researchers and finally, a focus group held at the end of the trip. Answers to the main questions were developed and from those answers, common themes as well as theories resulted.

### **Conflicts**

Before the voyageur expedition took place, researchers had created a list of possible conflicts that would arise. Conflicts were considered prior to the voyageur expedition as a method to foresee skews in data collection.

#### *Assumed conflicts*

The following is a list of possible conflicts:

- Weather (wind days, rain, cold)
- Portages
- Equipment malfunction
- Students’ level of comfort
- Distance covered
- Personality conflicts

#### *Actual conflicts*

After the voyageur expedition, the researchers found the following to be actual conflicts that had the ability to alter data collection:

- Credibility of Myers-Briggs
- Weather
- Distances that had to be made up
- Personality conflicts over extended time period in close living space.

Depending on a specific conflict, the group dynamic could change as a direct result. As a result it would not matter what leadership style was being administered.

### Observations

There were three occurrences on the trip where leadership had a clear effect on the group dynamic.

On the voyageur canoe trip there were three instructors and two student leaders of the day, for each day. One night while the students slept, the tarps failed and certain individuals got wet. Since all instructors were sleeping in a separate shelter and there was not a set leader for that day (previous leaders had completed their obligations at bedtime, and the leaders for the next day were not to begin leading until the following morning), the students were leaderless, and therefore an emergent leader was needed. Findings here suggest that in the case of an emergency, if no person is declared the leader, an emergent leader is better than no leader. The emergent leader was able to organize fellow students in sharing sleeping bags in a way that kept everyone dry, warm and as comfortable as they could be.

One morning on the voyageur canoe trip there were wind conditions that normally students would not paddle on. Due to the sail that the students had built, the instructors (actual leaders) decided to proceed. The strong winds allowed the group to make up an unscheduled rest day (due to wind) and as a result lifted the spirits of the group. The instructors (leaders) demonstrated a dynamic leadership style when they made the call to proceed even though it was not recommended in the liability guidelines. The guidelines say it is not safe to paddle in choppy waves; however it does not state anything about sailing through choppy waves. In this case it was safe to do so, and as a result of the dynamic leadership the group dynamic was high and had positive energy.

When forced to make a decision on doing a night paddle, the leader of the day tried to demonstrate a democratic leadership style

and facilitated a group discussion. The group had reached a perceived consensus when one student spoke out and said that they did not want to complete a night paddle. The group discussion then turned into a 17-on-one verbal argument. What happened was the argumentative student had been holding the boats down and felt like they were not involved in the group decision-making process. As a result, this student felt like they had to make their opinion heard. The only way to do so at that time was to demonstrate a conflicting argument. When the leader of the day saw this conflicting argumentative student, he then instinctively apologized for not recognizing that she was not involved in the group decision making process. After this apology the student lost the stubborn attitude and the group was able to find a consensus. It is evident that in this situation a complete group decision (completely democratic leadership style) was needed to uphold a positive group dynamic.

### Conclusion

Findings suggest that the Myers-Briggs personality test was not the most appropriate tool to use when determining personality/leadership traits in the participants of this study. Though the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a popular method of testing personality types and has been used in a variety of settings, some researchers have found that the test is unwarranted in an applied setting (Pittenger, 1993). Findings indicate that there were too many inconsistencies in the personality self-identification test. Perhaps the personality/leadership identification tool should have more distinct groupings.

Findings conclude that it is close to impossible to determine the exact leadership style that would work best in a large group expedition. Groups of any size are incredibly diverse and unique. It is hard to classify and even harder to satisfy those needs and wants. The leadership style that would work best in upholding a positive group dynamic would be a dynamic leadership style. A leader should be able to mould to the group given to them, demonstrating the ability to

choose from a number of leadership styles and then applying it appropriately to the group.

### References

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