

An exploration of 4 Star Sea Providers' understanding and development of situational awareness and decision making during 4 Star Sea Training

John Carmody

Independent Study submitted as part of Postgraduate Diploma, Performance Coaching, University of Stirling, 2016.

Abstract

Background and Purpose:

Decision-making has been described as essential to the process in outdoor leadership (Galloway 2007; Tozer, Fazey & Fazey, 2007) and Adventure Sports Coaching (ASC) (Collins & Collins, 2015). However, the only way the developing leader can become more proficient is to expose themselves to situations they have fewer experiences in, thus increasing the risk (Collins & Collins, 2013). Training courses may assist in this development, however, little is known about the extent to which they provide for the development of decision making. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore what a group of current Providers' understanding of situational awareness and decision-making is, what skills they identify as critical to effective 4 Star leadership and how they develop these in the context of 4 Star training.

What was done?

Participants: Six participants agreed to participate in this study. All participants have been a 4 Star provider for a minimum of 3 and maximum of 25 years (mean 12.7, standard deviation 10.0). They have participated in 12 to 50, 4 Star trainings (mean 24.0, standard deviation 16.9). Four of the providers were from the UK and two from North America (NA).

Process: Each provider participated in a semi-structured interview. Topics included their background, personal experiences, and practice related to the 4 Star Sea Leadership award. The interviews were conducted via Skype at the convenience of each provider and lasted on average 29.08 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were read a few times using an open coding process searching for commonality in terms or any sense of developing themes. These initial commonalities were then analysed further producing 6 main themes.

Key findings:

The 6 main themes were:

1. 4 Star skills (e.g., Assessing, Communicate, Decision-making, Empathy, Good judgment, Situational awareness): The participants all had general agreement when describing personal paddling and leadership skills they expect of 4 Star candidates. They describe the skills of a 4 Star leader as being able to effectively paddle and lead in the 4 Star environment using planning skills and on water awareness to make decisions and facilitate a meaningful experience for those being led.
2. Decision making (e.g., Deliberative, Semi-deliberative, Non-deliberative, Naturalistic): All providers expect candidates to make decisions in a way to keep folks safe in 4 Star environments. Time

constraints affect the type of decisions they expect the candidate be able to effectively make. Planning, route selection and adjustments to plans based on signs from the environment are expected and reflect an ability to leave time to make those decisions. Decisions made with less time increase the likelihood that a less than ideal decision will be made.

3. Situational awareness (e.g., Big picture, Environment, Group): Situational awareness/assessment was the most consistent theme across all the interviews. There was general consensus that having strategies allowing time to make decisions was critical for the 4 Star Leader. Understanding what to expect to see or experience, and using this, as a guide to identify 'what is different' was important to all the participants. Early awareness of things being 'different' whether it was the group or the environment was a key to effective leadership.

4. Personal experience (e.g., Decision, Experience gone bad): Initial responses consistently identified an obvious point that things started to go wrong, but on further probing, an earlier faulty decision could be identified in each case.

5. Training in 4 Star (e.g., CLAP, Decision-making, Incident management, Scenarios, Situational awareness): All the participants incorporate principles to introduce risk assessment, situational awareness and decision-making in the context of Trainings. There is agreement that using CLAP is a good framework allowing folks to self-check the effectiveness of their leadership ability. Effective scenarios are good tools to identify and test the relationship between situational awareness and decision-making. The decisions they introduce in the context of trainings all involve a cognitive process relying on time. Time to reflect and debrief a scenario is important.

6. Assessment (e.g., Experience, Communication, Decision-making, Personal skills, Planning, Situational awareness): There was agreement that an assessment needed to be authentic and give the candidate the ability to demonstrate their ability to lead paddlers in the 4 Star environment of the sea. Consistent themes leading to a poor outcome relate to awareness of the environment, group or self at a point soon enough so that awareness can be used to make effective decisions. A lack of experience is an identified commonality in the process of decision making or the actual act of leading

Conclusion

The ability to effectively balance safety and risk while still giving folks an adventure requires balancing the personal skills of both leader and participant with the risks inherent to the environment. The providers in this study demonstrated an understanding of the importance of real life to understand and develop the skills to lead in 4 Star environments. The expectation of skills of leadership and decision-making were consistent among the participants where good decisions were made when there was time available. As well, they all stressed the importance of early awareness of change, either in the group or the environment, as an important skill for 4 Star leaders. CLAP and the use of effective scenarios with opportunities for reflection were an important part of 4 Star trainings and effectively introduce situational awareness, risk assessment and decision-making. All that being said, these same skills: awareness, decision-making and experience are the commonalities identified as why participants were unsuccessful at assessment.

If you would like further information on the research or to receive a copy of the full project please contact John on john@seacliffkayakers.com