The Colorado Outward Bound School: Biographical and Personality Factors Contributing to the Leadership Effectiveness of Instructors

RONALD D. RIGGINS

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to determine the leadership characteristics of effective Colorado Outward Bound school instructors and develop criteria which might be useful in their selection. A biographical inventory questionnaire was developed and administered, along with the FIRO-B personality test, to 130 instructors and assistant instructors at the Colorado Outward Bound school. Profiles of instructors and assistant instructors rated "most effective" and "least effective" were compared to determine if statistically significant differences between the two groups existed. Statistical evidence was found relating a limited number of biographical characteristics to leadership effectiveness. There was no statistical evidence linking personality characteristics and leadership effectiveness.

Since the mid-1960s, organized adventure based programs have witnessed growing popularity and influence in the United States. Introduced in 1962, when the Colorado Outward Bound school opened, programs are now offered by numerous public and private human service agencies. They have been incorporated into the curriculums of hundreds of secondary schools, colleges, and universities. Increasingly, they have been adapted for use with a variety of special populations.

In adventure based programs, it is the intense physical and psychological nature of the experience which produces the adventure. It is the quality of leadership, particularly at the instructor level, which determines whether the adventure produces success or failure on the part of the participant (Baker, 1976; Buell, 1981). Despite this fact, little research had been completed pertaining to leadership in these programs (Green, 1981; Iida, 1975; Meier, Morash & Welton, 1980; Shore, 1977).

The general purpose of this study was to investigate the leadership characteristics of effective Colorado Outward Bound school instructors and assistant instructors and develop criteria which might be useful in their employment. Outward Bound was selected for the study because it is the most prominent program incorporating adventure based concepts and experiences. Its American centers serve thousands of students annually. Its standard and adaptive courses are models for similar programs nationwide. It sets the trends others follow.

The scope of Outward Bound programs encompasses more than high adventure. Self-awareness, problem-

Ronald D. Riggins is an assistant professor with the Recreation and Parks Program at Western Washington University.
solving, interpersonal growth, environmental awareness, and a host of other concepts are integrated into the total Outward Bound experience. However, at its heart remains the purposeful stress-challenge experience which sets it apart from most other programs involved in outdoor and experiential education.

Review of Related Research

Most adventure based program research has dealt with participant outcomes, particularly with regard to changes in self-concept (Ewert, 1983; Fletcher, 1970; Haris, 1975; Koepke, 1973; Nye, 1976; and others). Numerous writers and experts in the adventure based program field have suggested qualities, attributes, and competencies they believe essential to effective outdoor leadership (MacRae, 1976; Lyman, 1976; Petzoldt, 1974; Rogers, 1979; and others). However, few structured research studies have taken place.

Baker (1975) studied changes in participant leadership perceptions elicited by participation in a basic five-week course at the National Outdoor Leadership School. He concluded that there appears to be little significant change in participant attitudes concerning leadership behavior resulting from course participation.

Borstelmann (1979) carried out empirical assessments on Outward Bound students and their instructors to determine how they related along value and self-determination dimensions. He concluded that instructors do a better job with those students who share their convictions about self-determination and function in a cooperative, task-centered way. They function less well with students less certain about their self-control and more concerned with an individualistic, compassionate, peaceful orientation to life.

Schulte (1975), Cousineau (1977), and Buell (1981) conducted studies attempting to determine competencies required of adventure-based program leaders. Schulte conducted a review study of whitewater instructor certification based on the increasing awareness of the necessity for safety in whitewater operations. He concluded that judgment errors are difficult to prevent, but the lack of knowledge upon which to base safety decisions or action can be prevented.

Cousineau surveyed adventure based program professionals with regard to leader competencies. Among his conclusions were that respondents preferred diverse background preparation, the implementation of minimum standards of skill competencies and skills in first aid, rescue techniques, and lifesaving. They also favored a minimum age requirement and that certified leaders have experience as both program participants and leaders.

Buell identified a number of general competency areas based on his survey findings. Among them were philosophical, historical and theoretical foundations, leadership and instructorship, counseling and human development, environmental awareness and action, outdoor skills and abilities, first aid and safety, administration and supervision, and evaluation and assessment.

Green (1982) assessed professional option regarding the content of a college-level outdoor leadership course. Topics rated among the most important were risk management and hazard analysis, first aid, wilderness ethics and minimum impact philosophy, judgment, and the knowledge of outdoor leadership objectives.

Wells (1978) researched factors involved in the possible attrition of adventure based experiential educators. Among the attrition factors he identified were emotional demands, responsibility for student safety, legal responsibility and the threat of tort suit, uncontrollable environmental factors, emotional involvement with students, loss of personal time, family stress, inadequate pay in relation to duties, and unappreciative students.

Hendy (1975) and Easther (1979) conducted studies involving outdoor leader evaluation, personality assessment, and related factors. Hendy studied the personalities of Outward Bound staff members in a comparative fashion, as one of four purposes for his study. He described female instructors rated superior as reserved, extremely imaginative, and very self-sufficient. Superior male instructors were described as being more imaginative and experimenting than other men.

Easther tried to determine if a relationship existed between an outdoor leader course instructor's evaluation of potential leaders and other measures. He compared instructor ratings of students with student course results, personality test profiles, leadership questionnaire factors, peer rankings, and ratings of an interview panel of employers of outdoor leaders. Among his findings were that neither the personality nor leadership assessment instruments effectively measured outdoor leader potential, the most reliable measure of potential was the evaluation of an experienced outdoor leader or instructor, and that peers of a group of trainees were the next most reliable judges of potential leadership.

Of these studies, only Hendy's attempts to measure actual leadership effectiveness and relate that effectiveness to other factors. As Darst and Armstrong (1982) state, "The evaluation of instructors continues to be a critical problem for a number of reasons" (p. 62).

Procedures

Evaluating the personal leadership related characteristics of Outward Bound instructors involved the collection and analysis of biographical and personality data. Profiles for each instructor were generated, based on the data. Selected variables in the profiles of "most effective," "average," and "least effective" instructors were treated to determine the relationships between selected biographical variables and leadership effectiveness, and selected personality variables and leadership effectiveness.
A biographical inventory questionnaire was developed by the researcher. It was administered, along with the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior (FIRO-B) personality assessment instrument, to instructors and assistant instructors employed by the Colorado Outward Bound school during the 1982–83 instructing season. One hundred nine valid sets of data were generated from the 130 responding instructors. This represented 52 percent of the instructors employed during that period.

Data sets were organized on the basis of evaluation rankings and entered into the IBM computer at Western Washington University for statistical treatment utilizing the SPSS-X programs for chi-square analysis and multiple regression analysis. Descriptive analysis of the data was used to depict salient features relating to the biographical and personality characteristics of the selected instructors and assistant instructors.

The instructor evaluation form regularly employed at the Colorado Outward Bound school was used as the basis for instructor and assistant evaluation. Based on a review of literature and discussions with experts in the adventure based program field, a single evaluative criteria was selected from the Colorado form by which to rate the instructor's effectiveness. Doing so decreased rating conflicts resulting from the implementation of multiple rating categories. The criteria selected was “Teaching and Leadership Effectiveness.”

Findings

A number of statistically related findings resulted from the study:

1. Six biographical characteristics were found to significantly relate to instructor effectiveness through chi-square analysis at alpha .05. These characteristics were “Outward Bound Position,” “Number of Outward Bound Courses Instructed,” “Outward Bound Student Participation, Standard Course,” “Undergraduate Degree,” “Age,” and “Family Size.”

Proportionate analysis of the results led to the following observations: (1) instructors were ranked higher than assistant instructors; (2) leaders with more course experience received higher ratings than those with limited experience; (3) leaders who had not participated as a student in an Outward Bound standard course were ranked higher than those who had; (4) older leaders were ranked higher than younger ones; (5) leaders with BA degrees received higher rankings than those still in school or without an earned BA degree; (6) leaders who came from families with four or more siblings received higher ratings than those from families with fewer siblings.

2. Each of the six biographical characteristics found significant through chi-square analysis was also found significant at alpha .05 through hierarchical multiple regression analysis. In addition, the characteristics “Sex” and “Travel” were also found significant. Review of the data revealed that: (1) male leaders were rated higher than female leaders; and (2) leaders who had traveled for long periods of time on their own were rated higher than those who hadn’t.

3. The only significant characteristics evidencing a negative correlation with leadership effectiveness was “Outward Bound Student Participation, Standard Course” (.27).

4. Computed Multiple R and R² values revealed that roughly thirty-one percent (0.30608) of the variability in instructor ratings could be attributed to variation in the biographical characteristics found significant through initial multiple regression analysis.

5. Of the education variables assessed only “Undergraduate Degree” was found to be significantly related to leadership effectiveness. There was no significant relationship existing between instructor effectiveness and the type or number of undergraduate courses taken in any given academic area.

6. Participation in basic courses offered by the National Outdoor Leadership School bore no significant relationship to instructor effectiveness.

7. Statistical analysis yielded no significant chi-square or F values at alpha .05 for any of the six personality dimensions studied. Personality characteristics, individually and as a whole, made no significant contribution to instructor effectiveness.

Descriptive analysis of the results provided a wealth of information regarding both instructor personalities and biographical backgrounds. When Outward Bound instructor and assistant instructor scores on the FIRO-B personality instrument were compared with the scores of eight other groups, they were found to be lowest on three dimensions studied—Expressed Inclusion, Wanted Inclusion, and Wanted Control. On one additional dimension, Expressed Control, their mean scores were next to the lowest. On Expressed and Wanted Affection dimensions mean scores of the Outward Bound leaders ranked among the highest of the groups compared. Comparisons of group means are provided in Table 1.

When mean instructor scores were assessed in light of Schutz’s FIRO-B categorization scales, the Outward Bound leaders were characterized as having low scores on all four Inclusion and Control dimensions and borderline scores on both Affection dimensions. Low Inclusion scores reflect “a preference for low structure, a laissez-faire attitude with respect to authority, neither wanting to give nor receive orders” (Schutz, 1977, Insert).

To some degree it might be surmised that this type of personality profile befits the Outward Bound instructor who works essentially in an environment of “aloneness,” yet one in which he or she must maintain an underlying nurturing relationship with students (Kline, 1979). Within the “10-group” described by Walsh and Golins (1976), instructors are required to maintain the balance of “objective judgment” described by Rogers.
TABLE 1. Mean Group Scores on the FIRO-B Dimensions: Inclusion, Control and Affection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>I_e</th>
<th>I_w</th>
<th>C_e</th>
<th>C_w</th>
<th>A_e</th>
<th>A_w</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outward Bound Instructors (N = 109)</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Recreation Majors (N = 189)</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Administrators (N = 104)</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses (N = 16)</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Psychology Majors (N = 35)</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical School Students (N = 39)</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (N = 667)</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business School Graduate Students (N = 108)</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- I = Inclusion; C = Control; A = Affection; e = Expected; w = Wanted.

(1979); "the ability to divorce oneself from the role of the participant while being with the group" (p. 3). Morlock (1978) identified the importance of maintaining a sense of "inner pessimism" and "outward confidence," thereby enabling the ability to foresee and avoid negative consequences while maintaining an exterior attitude of aloofness.

Kine (1979) addressed the concept of the "counterculture of responsibility" whose creation requires a "dramatic demonstration of merit" on the part of the instructor (in James, 1980, p. 85). In this atmosphere new values are tried out in a supporting yet challenging community. The role of the Outward Bound instructor might be described as one of "pushing" the student away and "pulling" the student in, both at the same time. It becomes at times a delicate balance requiring the instructor to be "empathetic, genuine, concrete and confrontive" (Walsh & Golins, 1976, p. 11). High Affection and low Inclusion needs on the part of the instructor may well serve this purpose where he or she must create a sense of being removed from the group as it struggles to grow, yet create an underlying sense of caring which will support the student through the feelings of dissonance and apprehension encountered during the course.

Biographical variables investigated in the study were grouped under four general research factors: (1) Demographic Background, (2) Individual Experience, (3) Education, and (4) Professional Experience. From these factors questions regarding further education, desirable skills and professional motivation yielded worthwhile descriptive data.

Responses to the question, "Based on your experience, if you were to return to school what courses would you take to help prepare you for the instructor's role?" were varying, reflecting strongly held opinions. Fourteen instructors felt that no courses of any kind could prepare one for the instructor's role. The following comments are reflective of their perspective:

"None. I know of no competent outdoor educators who did not receive the best part of their training outside an academic setting."

"I don't think courses prepare people for an instructor's role—only doing—and experience in the outdoors—big mistake that people are taking 'courses' in OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP. You can't mold anyone into a 'leader'!"

"Absolutely none. Institutional (college) training is, paradoxically, the worst way to prepare for actual outdoor instructor work."

Other respondents provided answers listed in Table 2 ranging from natural sciences to courses in "women's reality." A total of thirty-three different subject areas were named. Six instructors chose not to respond to the question at all.

Instructors were asked to identify in order of priority the three skills they felt were most important for an instructor to possess. Choices for top priority fell under three general headings: (1) technical expertise, and (2) interpersonal skills were identified, along with a list of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Area</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Dynamics</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (experimental education)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Sciences (astronomy)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Areas (EMT, First Aid, etc.)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Recreation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mythology, Folklore</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive outdoor experiences accounted for forty responses. Named most often were school and outdoor course experiences and meaningful personal experiences such as involvement in river sports or aiding someone in need. The opportunity to teach others ranked third, with thirty-five responses, followed by the desire to avoid negative conditions or circumstances such as avoiding the urban "rat race."

Conclusions

1. Statistical evidence was found relating a limited number of biographical characteristics to leadership effectiveness. Relatively low Multiple R and R² values, however, indicated that some factor other than biographical characteristics was also responsible for instructor effectiveness.

2. There was no statistical evidence linking personality characteristics, as measured by FIRO-B scales, and leadership effectiveness.

Evident, overall, is the implied relationship between practical field experience and instructor effectiveness. Beyond this, there appear to be no particular biographical or personality characteristics emerging forcefully enough to be recommended as prerequisite to employment as an Outward Bound instructor or assistant instructor.

REFERENCES


