
Title	A great learning experience for school principals: Outdoor management development
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Source	2 nd International Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference, 16 – 19 December 1992, Perth, Australia

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Citation: Lim, T. K. (1992, December). *A great learning experience for school principals: Outdoor management development*. Paper presented at the 2nd International Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference, Perth, Australia.

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**A GREAT LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR
SCHOOL PRINCIPALS :
OUTDOOR MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT**

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Paper presented at the
Second International Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference
held in Perth, Australia, from December 16-19, 1992

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**A GREAT LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS:
OUTDOOR MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT¹**

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ABSTRACT

A group of 23 primary and secondary school principals attended a three-day residential outdoor management development course with an action-centred experiential approach. The experimental course was to help participants understand the nature and practice of effective leadership and develop greater awareness of their qualities, strengths and weaknesses. This paper presents an outline of the course and feedback from participants on the course. Principals were impressed with the approach and process of the course and the opportunities for self reflection and awareness rather than the skills taught. Generally they found the course enjoyable and the training relevant to their jobs.

Introduction

Managing an outdoor situation is like managing life - it is full of unpredictable events and people, a result has to be achieved and there are only limited time and resources available. Because the tasks are so different from the normal work situation, the underlying management processes are laid bare.

Creswick & Williams (1979)

A group of 23 primary and secondary school principals had their first taste of outdoor management development and many enjoyed the experience. The three-day residential course piloted in April 1990 had an outdoor-centred experiential approach. The objectives of the course were to help principals develop an understanding of the nature and practice of effective leadership as well as greater awareness of their qualities, strengths and

¹ Paper presented at the Second International Organisational Behaviour Teaching Conference, 16 - 19 December 1992, Perth, Western Australia.

weaknesses. Participants were encouraged to test their skills and abilities in a variety of situations, far removed from their normal work or leisure experiences.

The first formal adventure-based education programme, an "outward bound" school on the Welsh coast, was started by Kurt Hahn in 1941 to train sailors in marine skills and survival training. Hahn's model was used to develop other outward bound schools. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, outdoor training programs attracted corporate professionals (Thompson, 1991). Currently great interest is generated in outdoor training for management, with many organisations set up in both the U.S. and the U.K. to conduct such courses. However, there is also a growing debate on its effectiveness as a training tool. Zemke (1978) felt that outdoor training was nothing more than an opportunity for organisations to pack whole management teams off to risk life and limb together. The relevance of such training to managerial issues had also been questioned by Dodwell (1983) and Falvey (1988).

Despite the controversy over the merits of outdoor management training, it was decided to expose Singapore principals to a short experimental three-day course and to get their feedback. The course was conducted by lecturers from the local teacher training institute. This paper gives an outline of the course and the feedback of the principals.

Outline of the Course

The principals attended an outdoor-centred programme, where they lived and ate mainly indoors and participated in structured outdoor training activities. Before the course, a pre-training session was held; the trainer briefly acquainted the group with the outdoor nature of the programme and suitable training gear. He tried to allay expressed fears on strenuous activities. In the course, the 23 principals were divided into 4 groups, with a facilitator in each group. The activities, both indoors and outdoors were intact team events, requiring team members to be physically

and cognitively involved. The programme began the first day with a motivation session, followed by the presentation of a leadership framework. The teams then had to plan for a raft building exercise, but in the actual raft building session in the afternoon, the team leaders were moved to the other teams. The raft building and sailing activity was videotaped and played back during the debriefing session. There was a session on team roles that night to prepare the participants for the orienteering exercise the next day.

The second day was spent on an orienteering exercise on an island with each group having to find check points. Facilitators accompanied their own teams. There was a social evening on the second night, followed by a surprise outdoor night activity, looking for a lost child. The third day was spent mainly on indoor exercises, on planning and control. Throughout the three days, the facilitators were with their own groups, carrying out review sessions with their own groups. Each participant had to lead in one exercise and received individual feedback from the facilitator. Unlike other courses, the participants did not get a programme for the activities.

Just as for other outdoor management development courses, this course used Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb, Rubin & McIntyre, 1971; Kolb & Fry, 1975). Kolb expounds a cycle of learning in which learning is facilitated by a cyclical process of concrete experience, followed by reflections and observations on that experience, the formulation of abstract concepts and generalizations and finally, by the testing of the implications of these concepts in new situations. The facilitators tried to bring the participants through Kolb's learning cycle.

Evaluation of the course

The participants completed a free response evaluation form where they were asked to give their comments on the objectives of the course, the strengths and weaknesses, the specific areas of training relevant to their

work and recommendations on improvement to the training. The strengths and weaknesses of the course are listed in Table 1. Each participant's responses were coded and they were free to give as many points as possible in each question. The group of 23 principals gave 54 responses for strengths and 35 responses for weaknesses.

Table 1 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Course

Strengths	No. of Responses
Facilitation and review process helped self analysis, frank exchanges and support of group members.	13 (24%)
Facilitators helpful, good team trainers.	8 (15%)
Opportunity to reflect on leadership style, brings out the best and worst in a person.	12 (22%)
Challenging approach of outdoor based training, integration of indoor and outdoor activities.	10 (19%)
Stimulating and enjoyable, good learning situation.	7 (13%)
Exercises to plan and control, sharpens managerial skills.	4 (7%)
Weaknesses	
Some outdoor activities are too long and strenuous, safety precautions not taken.	11 (31%)
Not all participants get equal opportunities in leadership demands.	10 (29%)
Time constraints for preparation and review of exercises.	6 (17%)
Intact group exercises throughout, little opportunities for mixing with other group members.	5 (14%)
Residential facilities and quality of food could be improved.	3 (9%)

The strengths of the course as listed in Table 1, showed that participants were impressed with the approach and process of the course and the opportunities for self reflection and awareness rather than the skills

taught. Typical comments include the following:

The exercises were not meant to be specifically relevant. The self revelation is the most valuable and relevant outcome.

It made me see myself better as a manager in the most telling way, through hands-on experience.

Debriefing proved to be the crucial part of the outdoor training. In the course, debriefing was carried out by the facilitators in their own groups. Table 1 showed that a quarter of the responses cited the review and facilitation process as the strength of the programme; another 15% of the responses were on helpful facilitators. This was in line with what Wagner, Baldwin and Roland (1991) found: a skilled facilitator was critically important to the success of the programme. Just over 20% of the responses focused on the opportunities provided by the course for self reflection and for revealing their own strengths and weaknesses.

As studies, such as Bolt (1990), Libermann and Ostrow (1989) and Long (1987) have shown, many participants enjoyed the challenging approach of the course (19% of the responses) and found the course stimulating (13% of the responses). Only 7% of the responses indicated that the course sharpened management skills. However, there was need to take cognizance of the fact, that in the recommendations in Table 2 (34 responses given for recommendations to improve future training), 21% of the responses suggested inclusion of further management topics such as motivation and communication.

The participants had been nominated by their supervisors to attend the course and during the pre-training course (mentioned above), many expressed reservations about attending an outdoor course as they felt that the course would be too strenuous for them. Their feedback on weaknesses of the course in Table 1 centred on the length and strenuous nature of the

Table 2 Recommendations on Improvements to the Training

Recommendations	No. of Responses
Shorter duration for the strenuous exercises, strenuous exercises to be spread out, more safety measures.	9 (26%)
Duration of the course could be longer, more inter-group activities, to include over-night camping.	9 (26%)
Include topics on how to motivate and communicate with staff, objectives to be given, closer communication between course leader and facilitators.	7 (21%)
Better accommodation and food.	6 (18%)
Programme to be extended to others.	3 (8%)

Table 3 Specific areas of Training Relevant to Work

Areas	No. of Responses
Leadership style, self awareness and self management, tasks provide feedback for self evaluation	19 (43%)
Organisation and planning skills, decision making process, co-operation and team management, preparation for change	13 (30%)
Conflict management, how to handle crisis and unexpected situations	7 (16%)
General applications, every activity has some bearing on one's work	5 (11%)

activities (31%). This was supported by the responses for recommendations in Table 2: 26% of the responses included the spreading out and shorter duration for strenuous activities. However another 26% of the responses in Table 2 recommended more outdoor activities, including over night camps.

There appeared a need to plan course to suit the physical ability of trainees; Wagner, Baldwin and Roland (1991) suggested that companies can create alternative training for people who were physically unable to take such a programme.

Other weaknesses cited included time constraints (17% of the responses), intact group exercises (14% of responses) and poor accommodation facilities and food (9% of the responses). The participants stayed in their intact groups throughout all the exercises. Some participants preferred more inter group activities (26% of the responses for recommendations to improve training). A participant's recommendation which sum up a few points read as follows:

The three-day course is slightly too short as the activities need more time for review. It would be better if it is a five-day course whereby participants could be given two opportunities to lead in order for team members to analyze him/her leadership style with more accurate perceptions.

Table 3 recorded 44 responses coded for specific areas of training relevant to work. The strength of the course lie in the fact that what the participants found relevant to their jobs were opportunities provided for self awareness and self management (43% of the responses) and organisation and planning skills (30% of the responses). One participant gave this pertinent comment:

The course reconfirms that everyone can be stretched and motivated. A manager or principal needs to find the 'spark' that will ignite the enthusiasm in each and every teacher.

The same participant recommended more management topics because she felt that even though principals were self motivated and generally good in communication, there was still a need to find out how to motivate others and how to communicate the right message in the right tone. A suitable designed indoor course could probably handle such topics. A couple of participants recommended more communication between the leader and the facilitators. The four facilitators, lecturers of a teacher training institute, tended to have slightly different styles in facilitation.

Conclusion

Generally participants were happy with the course. The principals have benefitted from exploring their own self perceptions and getting the opportunity to reflect and experiment with their management abilities and skills. The evaluations of the participants showed that the outward bound approach to management development became an inward bound journey for the participants. This was in line with Keslake and Radcliff's (1980) two important elements in changing managerial behaviour: outward bound, involving the process of exploring alternative behaviours and active problem solving and inward bound, involving the processes of reflection and introspection. Anderson (1989) recommended evening sessions to integrate the outdoor and indoor elements learning experiences, with much of the onus on participants to analyze their experiences.

The continual debate on the merits of outdoor management training has not been supported by empirical evidence. There have been few large scale studies on evaluation of the training. One exception was a study by Baldwin, Wagner and Roland (1991); they did an empirical evaluation of a large scale outdoor challenging training conducted with civilian employees of an U.S. Naval Base and found that the facilitator and participation of intact work groups may be related to positive outdoor challenge training. The current study need to be extended to a proper evaluation study on the next outdoor management course for principals, modified on the suggestions given in the present course.

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