

Chapter 3: Risk Assessment and Action

This chapter briefly outlines a general way to evaluate risk and decide on an appropriate level of risk to take. It also contains advice for how to approach involving a group in the decision-making process. This latter skill can be used when evaluating risk in a group and it can also be used when facilitating any kind of group decision.

Risk Evaluation, Judgment, and Decision-making

Step 1: Evaluate the “Accident Potential” of a situation. Two forces overlap when most accidents occur:

- Objective factors: These are environmental hazards presented by the natural world, such as weather, darkness, falling rocks, moving water, lightning, snow, exposure, avalanche, cold, hot, or deep water, etc.
- Subjective factors: These are human characteristics that often play a role when accidents occur. They include: complacency, overconfidence, distraction, differing perception of risk, expectations and peer pressure, fatigue, stress, haste, and lack of competence.

The Accident potential: This is the interaction that occurs between these objective and subjective factors. For instance, acting in haste on slippery terrain can lead to an accident.

Step 2: Use and develop conservative judgment

Judgment is the logical reasoning we use in combination with past experience to help us decide what to do in a new situation. We develop judgment from 2 things working in concert: our past experience and personal reflection that leads to an insight or changed behavior that you carry forward with you. This continues in a cycle: Experience-reflect-gain insight-predict (fine-tune): experience-reflect-etc. Here are a few important points to remember about developing conservative judgment:

- Experience alone does not develop conservative judgment! Plenty of people take the same extreme risks over and over again. Reflection from one’s experience that leads to a modified future action is just as important as experience.
- We are going to make mistakes – the key is to learn from them (and not die from them)
- There are better and worse times to make mistakes – you don’t want to push your limits when you’re leading a group. Do this on your own time.
- It’s good for beginners to have simple clear “unbreakable” rules, such as: never climb a peak after noon in the mountains (because of lightning strike potential). Over time, your judgment will help you develop much more nuanced rules.
- Remember the organization you work for! Often you must follow policies set forth by your organization that may conflict with what your judgment tells you to do.
- Sometimes you don’t have the experience to use good judgment – in this case it is okay to not do something.
- The organization you work for will never get upset if you’re “too safe”, but people will get upset if you get in over your head.

Step 3: Use the risk equation to make a decision: Risk = Likelihood x Consequences of an accident occurring.

		Likelihood of An Accident	
		Low	High
Consequences of An Accident Occurring	Low	GO! This is an acceptable risk!	GO? Can you mitigate this before proceeding? Is your group developing solid skills, good safe decision-making and self-awareness?
	High	STOP? Lean towards avoiding these, but can you mitigate situation to lessen the consequences? If so, this could turn to a go.	STOP! You're being paid to identify and avoid these situations!

Also - use the "Post-Mortem Test": Always ask yourself: If we get into an accident right here, could I justify my actions and decision-making to my supervisors when I debrief this back home?

Facilitating Safe Group Decision-Making

As a field leader, you have to be able to accurately assess risks, mitigate hazards, and carry out safe actions. You also have to facilitate your group making a safe decision together. This can be challenging and requires both competency in risk analysis (see above) as well as solid communication and leadership skills. With this in mind, consider the following four ways that groups make decisions:

- Directive: The leader decides and informs the group.
- Consultative: The leader decides after consultation with the group. This can happen two different ways: the leader might first solicit input from the group and then decide or the leader might tentatively decide and get input and reaction from the group before making the final decision.
- Group decides: All group members (including the leader) contribute equally to the decision-making process. This could happen through a vote or through consensus.
- Delegation: Leader delegates the decision-making to the group after defining the appropriate boundaries and conditions. Before delegating, the leader must feel comfortable with any decision made

Many experienced leaders employ all of these decision-making styles depending on the situation and the expertise of their groups. By doing so, leaders help maintain a safe

learning environment while at the same time helping groups take ownership and responsibility for their collective experience.