

Outdoor Leadership Skills: A Program Perspective

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Successful hiring, training, and pairing or grouping of staff requires administrators to consider the relationship between their programs' goals and the specific outdoor leadership skills of individual leaders. Authors have divided outdoor leadership skills into a three-category structure, and models of outdoor leadership have focused on skills from the perspective of the individual outdoor leader. In contrast, this paper proposes a model of outdoor leadership that addresses the perspective of the program. In addition to considering the language and structure of outdoor leadership skill categories, this synthesis of literature results in the suggestion of alternate and consistent terminology for outdoor leadership skill categories and presents a model that can be used to guide hiring, training, and staffing decisions.

Keywords: Outdoor Leadership Skills, Program Administration, Technical Skills, Interpersonal Skills

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Outdoor leadership skills are commonly thought of in terms of the knowledge, aspirations, skills, and abilities of *individuals*. However, outdoor programs differ from one another regarding the specific skills they require of and value within their leaders. For example, programs that use specific therapeutic interventions will value different talents than programs targeting outdoor skill development or the development of teamwork within corporate groups. There is not a universal set of outdoor leadership competencies that is valued across all outdoor settings, with all client groups, and for all programs. Further, from a program perspective, staff skills are often considered as a merging of individual talents and skills: How can program managers or staffing coordinators bring together a team of leaders with complementary skills that will result in success? In reality, this question is even more complex, as managers must work to maximize success across programs, courses, and clients with a diverse mix of staff and staffing needs. Sometimes, these conflicting needs necessitate breaking up teams of highly effective outdoor leaders to augment less effective leadership teams in order to bring “success” to a larger number of courses and programs.

Program administrators find themselves in the position of matching the skills of outdoor leaders with the needs of their individual and unique programs. However, outdoor leadership skills are typically considered and discussed at the level of the individual leader (e.g., Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006; Priest & Gass, 2005) rather than from the perspective of the program administrator who often relies upon the skills of leadership teams rather than those of individuals. Further, there are many types of outdoor education programs dependent upon highly skilled leaders, and these programs represent diverse missions, philosophies, and goals. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to synthesize the literature related to outdoor leadership skill categories and to offer a model of these skills from a program perspective with implications for hiring, training, matching, and mentoring outdoor program staff.

Outdoor Leadership Skills

Becoming a competent outdoor leader requires that one master a wide range of skills. Speaking broadly, outdoor leadership skills are commonly described in terms of *hard skills* and *soft skills* (e.g., Priest & Gass, 2005; Sheridan, 2004; Swiderski, 1987). These terms are well recognized among practitioners and scholars alike. While these terms have served us

well in some respects, they seeped into our literature with no apparent literary foundation and with little empirical support. Further, consistent definitions of these terms and their origins remain elusive and authors continue to offer disparate approaches to the categorizing and grouping of outdoor leader skills and competencies (e.g., Goldenberg, 2001; Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006; Priest & Gass, 2005). The terms hard skills and soft skills, however, have remained consistently utilized as general descriptors of two presumably different categories of outdoor leadership skills. This section will provide a brief account of the common outdoor leadership skill nomenclature and its history.

Some of the early work established a foundation for future work by identifying outdoor leadership competencies. Buell (1983) offered an outdoor leadership competency assessment inventory that included 230 outdoor leadership competencies and organized those competencies into 12 categories of (a) philosophy, history, and theory, (b) leadership, (c) counseling, (d) program planning, (e) outdoor skills, (f) environmental awareness, (g) first aid and safety, (h) administration, (i) equipment and facilities, (j) professionalism, (k) evaluation, and (l) trends and issues. Knapp (1985) introduced that a “well-balanced leader” must display competence in both hard skills and soft skills (p. 17). Swiderski (1987) produced what may be one of the most frequently cited works on this topic within the outdoor education literature. Swiderski expressed concern that those who train outdoor educators were overlooking soft skills, a term he borrowed from the business vernacular in reference to interpersonal and intrapersonal skills (Swiderski, personal communication, May 6, 2008), and *conceptual skills*. As such, Swiderski established three broad outdoor leader skill categories: hard skills, soft skills, and conceptual skills. He divided hard skills into five subcategories: physiological, environmental, safety, technical, and administrative. He organized soft skills into the subcategories of social, psychological, and communication. The third category, conceptual skills, included two primary domains: judgment and creativity. It is likely that this work influenced future thinking about a broad, three-part division of outdoor leader skills.

Phipps (1988) agreed with Swiderski and maintained that educators often overlooked the importance of soft skills when training outdoor leaders. As the field of outdoor education gained its own distinguishable texts, the terms hard skills and soft skills became well established within the literature. For example, Green (1990) recognized seven categories of outdoor leader preparedness and he included hard skills and soft skills in his list. Phipps and Swiderski (1990) revisited Swiderski's (1987) work and explained the subcategories below the primary categories of hard skills, soft skills, and conceptual skills in greater detail.

The three-part approach to categorizing outdoor leader skills has persisted within the outdoor education literature, but authors disagree over what should be included within each category. Twehous, Groves, and Lengfelder (1991) utilized the terms hard skills and soft skills, but replaced conceptual skills with *operational skills*. Further, their work placed judgment and decision-making within the category of soft skills and placed safety skills in the category of operational skills. A contemporary textbook (Priest & Gass, 2005) also provides a three-category approach to summarizing outdoor leadership skills, but offers the term *metaskills* in place of conceptual skills or operational skills. Metaskills include judgment, decision-making, effective communication, ethics, and the like. The inclusion of communication within the category of metaskills appears confusing, as the previous literature had consistently considered communication to be a soft skill. Likewise, the category of metaskills possesses considerable overlap with both hard and soft skills because it is said to represent the understanding necessary to execute the other two categories properly and effectively (Priest & Gass, 2005). Table 1 displays an overview of the three-part division of outdoor leadership skills and the variety of ways that they have been discussed in the outdoor education literature.

One group of authors has avoided the three categories of hard skills, soft skills, and conceptual or metaskills altogether by providing a list of eight core outdoor leadership competencies (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006). They posited that foundational knowledge, professionalism, decision-making/judgment, teaching/facilitation, environmental stewardship, program management, safety/risk management, and technical ability were essential aspects of effective outdoor leadership.

Another source for understanding outdoor leader competencies is through the various curricula promoted by prominent outdoor organizations. For example, the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) utilizes a four-category curriculum that includes leadership, environmental studies, risk management, and wilderness skills (Gookin, 2006). A competent leader would possess a level of proficiency in all four areas. Likewise, the Wilderness Education Association (WEA) has created and adopted an 18-point curriculum (18-point curriculum, n.d; Teeters & Lupton, 1999). Administrators in these programs, and others like them, expect outdoor leaders to possess the ability to implement these curricula (Goldenberg, 2001). This synthesis of the literature suggests some disparity among authors who have identified and categorized outdoor leader skills, competencies, and abilities.

Clarifying Terms

The terms hard skills and soft skills are not unique to outdoor education and neither is the confusion over their meaning. Authors have

Table 1
Hard Skills, Soft Skills, and Conceptual Skills from Outdoor Education Literature

Author	Hard Skills	Soft Skills	Conceptual Skills
Swiderski (1987)	Physiological, environmental, safety, technical, & administrative	Social, psychological, communication, interpersonal, human	Problem solving, decision-making, judgment, critical thinking, & creativity
Phipps (1988)	Technical skills	People skills, the affective side of leadership	
Bartley (1989)	Technical competencies, first aid, logistics	Interpersonal helping skills	
Green (1990)	Techniques & procedures	Processing, communication, group dynamics	Judgment, problem solving, decision-making
Phipps & Swiderski (1990)	Physiological, environmental, safety, technical, & administrative	Social, psychological, communication	Judgment & creativity
Twehous, Groves, & Lengfelder (1991)	Budgeting, activity skills map-reading/navigation	Judgment/decision-making, interpersonal relations, group dynamics	Operational skills: safety skills, environmental awareness, risk analysis & management
Wagner & Roland (1992)	Equipment set-up, safety guidelines	Group process, human behavior, debriefing	
*Knapp (1999)	Technical competencies	Human relations competencies	
Priest & Gass (2005)	Technical, safety, environmental	Instructional, organizational, facilitational	Metaskills: judgment, decision-making, effective communication, ethics

Note. The following literature is not included within this table because the categories of outdoor leadership did not fit within a three-category structure: Buell (1983); Gookin (2006); Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig (2006); 18-point curriculum (n.d.); Teeters & Lupton, 1999.

discussed the importance, relevance, and implementation of hard skills and soft skills in business, management, and emotional intelligence literature. This section introduces a cross-disciplinary perspective that further illuminates the need for clarification of the terms hard skills and soft skills.

Of the three broad skill categories, the notion of hard skills seems to be understood with the most clarity. Authors have referred to hard skills as the technical skills required for a specific task or set of tasks (Ashbaugh, 2003; Bacino & Zevalkink, 2007; Ramsoonair, 2004). Costin (2002) suggested that hard skills involved the use of tools, the implementation of formulae, and involved the physical production of a product. Further, authors have agreed that hard skills lend themselves to objective assessment strategies (Ashbaugh, 2003; Mullen, 1997) and some have argued that many professions emphasize technical competence (hard skills) and proficiency over soft skills (Bancino & Zevalkink, 2007; Caudron, 1999; Mullen, 1997).

Soft skills, in contrast, are not as easily defined. Even in the cross-disciplinary literature, definitions for the term soft skills are inconsistent. While some individuals may assume they intuitively understand what is meant by the term soft skills, the range of ideas regarding this term's meaning across bodies of literature suggests otherwise. Although communication (Logethetis, 1995; Mullen, 1997; Swiderski, 1987) and interpersonal interactions (Ashbaugh, 2003; Coll & Zegwaard, 2006) appear as regular descriptors of soft skills, other skills such as behavioral skills, organizational skills, relationship building, and people skills also exist within the literature (e.g., Coll & Zegwaard, 2006; Costin, 2002; Ramsoonair, 2004; Swiderski, 1987). Morris and Watson (2004) refer to emotional intelligence as an aspect of soft skills. Caudron (1999) noted four domains of emotional intelligence, each of which could relate to what many individuals think of as soft skills (see Table 1): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

Besides the confusion over the division of skills into these two categories, additional problems with continuing to use the terms hard skills and soft skills exist. Stereotypical thinking may direct some people to think of men possessing a command of hard skills and women possessing a command of soft skills. As such, we feel that these terms naturally perpetuate this type of stereotypical thinking and could be replaced with terms that avoid this association altogether. We are not the only ones to note the stereotypical thinking embedded within these terms. Bartley (1989) suggested that participants might perceive hard skills and soft skills as gender-related. Likewise, Knapp (1999) suggested that the term soft skills might have originated from stereotypical imagery of the feminine traits of listening, feeling, cooperating, and nurturing. Despite these stereotypes, the application of these terms to outdoor leadership skills was never intended to represent gender-related labels (M. Phipps, personal communication, May 5, 2008; M. Swiderski, personal communication, May 6, 2008).

In addition to gender stereotypes, Mullen (1997) reported that the terms hard skills and soft skills suggest a hierarchy of importance, where

some individuals may perceive soft skills as less important than hard skills because soft skills sound ancillary to hard skills. Similarly, the terms hard skills and soft skills may influence an individual's thinking about the difficulty of such skills—hard skills being difficult to master and soft skills being thought of as easily obtainable (Mullen, 1997). The results of other studies, however, do not support the idea that soft skills are less important or more easily mastered (e.g., Caudron, 1999; Jordan, Ashkanasy, & Ascough, 2007). In fact, in an earlier study Cosgrove (1984) reported that eight outdoor education professionals who commented on 53 outdoor leader skills identified human relations skills as the “most important.”

According to Gookin (2006), the terms hard skills and soft skills amount to ambiguous code words that have remained present for far too long in our field. We propose that outdoor educators abandon these terms and embrace the terms technical skills and interpersonal skills. Technical skills are the physical tasks associated with the hands-on activities of outdoor education. For example, rock climbing, whitewater paddling, land navigation, wilderness medicine, and backcountry living skills represent technical skills. Interpersonal skills are those skills that specifically require direct personal interaction with participants through verbal and nonverbal communication. Examples of such person-to-person interactions include group facilitation, leading discussions, and teaching.

Many authors who have written about categories of outdoor leadership skills have included a third category that they referred to as conceptual skills (Phipps & Swiderski, 1990), operational skills (Twehous, Groves, & Lengfelder, 1991), or metaskills (Priest & Gass, 2005). This third category of outdoor leadership skills may be the most ambiguous of the three. While empirical work needed to define this category properly and to identify its components is lacking, authors have consistently included judgment and decision-making within their descriptions. Priest and Gass (2005) suggested that this category represents the understanding necessary to execute the other two categories properly and effectively. We agree with that assertion and suggest that this third category is not easily separated from the other two. In an effort to simplify, we suggest that referring to this category as “judgment and decision-making” may be the most practical solution from a program perspective.

Toward a Program Perspective Model

Some authors present outdoor leadership skills in a hierarchy (e.g., Martin et al., 2006; Priest & Gass, 2005). One model places social psychology, history, and philosophy at the foundation of outdoor leadership skills (Priest & Gass, 2005). Martin et al. (2006) identify “sense of purpose,” “sense of heritage,” “breadth of the profession,” and “understanding of

leadership” as foundational knowledge for outdoor leaders. We agree with these authors that knowledge about the field’s historic and philosophical roots establishes an important foundation for practice and outdoor leaders should attend to these competencies with great alacrity. Recognizing foundational competencies is necessary to inform a developing outdoor leader of what is expected of her or him. From a program perspective, however, we must ask ourselves, “How can history and philosophy be a foundation for practice?” If an outdoor leader does not possess basic competency in navigation or basic outdoor living skills, for example, and therefore cannot adequately teach and lead students in the backcountry, then what good is his or her knowledge of the field’s history or philosophy? This point exemplifies the need to move away from hierarchical models and toward context-specific thinking in regards to outdoor leadership skills, because the relevance of these skills depends on the programmatic context.

This section exposes two potential problems with hierarchically structured models of outdoor leadership and explores the relationships between the three categories of outdoor leadership skills. It offers an alternative way to conceptualize the traditional three-part, hierarchical categorization of outdoor leadership skills by placing the focus on the perspective of the program rather than the perspective of an individual leader.

One potential problem with traditional models of outdoor leadership is the close relationship between categories of outdoor leadership skills. It is difficult to separate outdoor leader skills into linear, organized categories because many of these skills overlap. For example, in order to execute effective outdoor leadership practices, one must possess adequate judgment and decision-making skills. It is difficult to separate judgment or decision-making from technical skills because leaders utilize judgment to make decisions regarding the execution of technical skills, such as wilderness medicine, which is often considered a technical skill. The same is true of interpersonal skills. A skilled leader must call upon his or her judgment to make a decision about the most effective approach to guiding a group through the processing of an outdoor experience or when deciding how to manage complex group dynamics.

A second problem with utilizing a hierarchy of outdoor leader skill categories is that determining the “most important” outdoor leadership skill may be dependent upon the context of a particular program. Some outdoor education programs specialize in teaching technically oriented skills, while others may focus on aspects of group and personal development. Many administrators may consider technical skills to be a basic requirement for outdoor leaders, while programs such as wilderness therapy programs may place more emphasis on the outdoor leader’s ability to

facilitate psychological growth and/or social development among participants. Of course, there is a broad spectrum of skills that outdoor leaders must possess, and this, along with the diverse range of program types and philosophies, may be partially responsible for the confusion over categorizing and classifying a hierarchy of outdoor leadership skills. In other words, the most important outdoor leadership competency is relative to a program's unique mission, philosophy, purpose, and goals.

In some cases, a list, such as that offered by Martin et al. (2006), may be most effective for providing a guide to establishing outdoor leader competencies. However, many administrators find themselves in a position of hiring, training, and staffing courses that require careful selection of the most effective leadership *teams*. Although possible, it is rare to find an outdoor leader who excels in all areas. Therefore, administrators rely upon combinations of leaders to establish leadership teams that can effectively address the needs of a program and achieve specific course goals. For example, one leader might excel in a technical aspect of a given course, while another might have specialized experience working with the population of participants on that course. Administrators often organize such leadership teams with the hope that the leaders' strengths will be used in concert to work toward achieving course objectives. We present a program-perspective model as a guide to aid in such decision-making (see Figure 1). Rather than taking a traditional linear approach, this model suggests an integration of technical skills, interpersonal skills, and judgment and decision-making that is based on a program's unique mission and philosophy and the context in which the program operates.

This model is not concerned with structuring outdoor leader skills and competencies into a predetermined hierarchy. Rather, it offers one way to consider the integration of outdoor leadership skills into organizational, program, and course-specific goals. Hiring, training, and staffing decisions begin by considering a program's mission, philosophy, and goals. Following out from this central point, administrators might consider an outdoor leader's strengths and abilities within the context of the program's uniqueness. This second layer of the program perspective model displays a variety of program-specific attributes. For example, an administrator might consider the leader's experience working in a specific type of terrain or with a specific population. The third layer, judgment and decision-making, serves as a mediator between a leader's understanding and ability regarding the specific course components and her or his ability to implement technical and interpersonal skills with the greatest effect on course outcomes. Examples of specific technical skills are listed in the left half of the outside circle. Examples of specific interpersonal skills are listed on the right half of the outside circle. One key contribution of this

model is its ability to offer a way to think about outdoor leader skills and categories of skills that considers the unique organizational and programmatic context in which they are implemented.

Once a program's needs are understood, they can then be addressed through a combination of: (a) hiring/screening; (b) pre-service training; (c) on-site training; (d) on-the-job training; and (e) matching leadership teams. Pre-service training can include reviewing manuals, texts, or web-delivered content prior to arrival at the program or training location. On-site staff training is often field-based and can involve practice, demonstration, role-plays, and additional content delivery and protocol practice. On-the-job training can range from informal learning through application to structured feedback and mentoring.

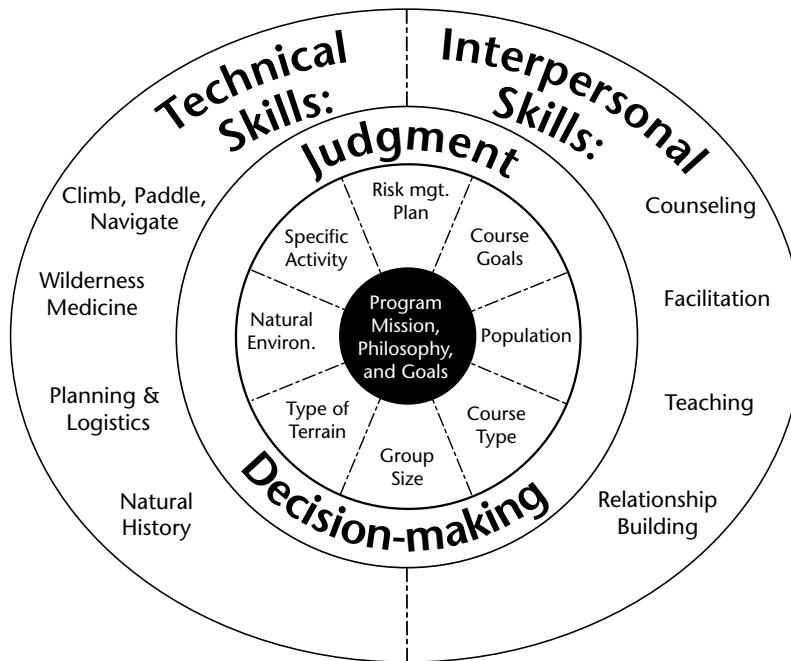


Figure 1. Program-perspective model of outdoor leadership skills

As an example, if a manager worked for a recreational and educational program for youth that targeted leadership and teamwork development, s/he might need staff teams that know the natural environment, be capable of teaching backpacking through mountain terrain, have Wilderness First Responder (WFR) certifications, and be experienced leading small groups of youth on multiday expeditions. For the goals of the course, perhaps the knowledge of natural history and counseling skills are not as

important. It remains challenging, however, to find a single person to address all of these needs. Thus programs commonly hire a complement of staff that can be trained and matched to cover the main skill sets of the program. For instance, a program may hire a person who has experience backpacking in the mountains on multiday expeditions, and then hire another person who has experience teaching and working with small groups of youth in the natural environment. With pre-service WFR training, on-site training on the program's mission and goals and leadership development in youth, and continuing on-the-job training and mentorship, these two people might be successfully paired into a leadership team. While this example is overly simplistic, this thought process could help inform hiring, training, and staff matching decisions.

Conclusion

Given the history of the outdoor leadership skills literature, we believe it is time to consider skill development from a program rather than an individual perspective and to embrace less problematic terms to describe outdoor leadership skill categories. While individuals can certainly develop additional skills and become more competent, the nature of most outdoor programs is to use leadership teams and to match skill sets in ways that maximize success for the programs' specific goals and objectives. In addition, outdoor organizations often work to implement and offer training (pre-service, on-site, and ongoing) in an effort to maximize leadership effectiveness for their clients.

This paper has considered the literary and practical use of the terms hard skills and soft skills, and has determined that technical skills and interpersonal skills offer a more appropriate and more accurate description of two general categories of outdoor leadership skills. A third category, referred to as conceptual skills (Phipps & Swiderski, 1990), operational skills (Twehous, Groves, & Lengfelder, 1991), and metaskills (Priest & Gass, 2005) in the present literature, has been considered and we have suggested that this category cannot easily be separated from technical and interpersonal skills. This third category has most often included skills of judgment and decision-making. An earlier section argued that leaders do not separate skills of judgment and decision-making from the implementation of technical and interpersonal skills; instead, leaders utilize judgment when making decisions regarding how to implement technical and interpersonal skills. Therefore, the program-perspective model integrates program-level thinking with outdoor leadership skills and has identified judgment and decision-making as a link between the programmatic context and the implementation of outdoor leadership skills.

There is noted disagreement between authors regarding how to categorize outdoor leadership skills and competencies. It is beyond the scope

of this paper to alleviate that confusion entirely. The clarification of terminology and the proposed model may, however, contribute to current thinking about this topic and offer suggestions that may inform future empirical work. Finding empirical support for the division of discrete outdoor leader skill categories remains an avenue for future study.

It is not the goal of this paper to offer a comprehensive or critical review of outdoor leadership skills and competencies. Instead, this synthesis and integration of literature resulted in an alternative model that provides the flexibility to integrate one's own programmatic goals into thinking about the relevance of certain categories of outdoor leadership skills for a given program. When thinking about hiring, training, and staffing outdoor education courses, a predetermined hierarchical approach to outdoor leadership skills may not serve us well due to the many unique organizations and programs that utilize outdoor education practices to achieve diverse specified outcomes. Perhaps, instead, we should consider the organization's mission or the program's goals as the foundation for determining the importance of outdoor leadership skills.

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