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Contact Information

Publisher

Direct Bearing Incorporated

7466 River Road, RR1

Palmer Rapids, ON

K0J 2E0 Canada

Email: publisher@directbearing.ca

The Direct Bearing Network



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Book Excerpt – The Delusion of Learning from Experience – by Jeff Jackson

Coined by Peter Sengeⁱ, this provocative statement pin points the fundamental flaw our industry's current Risk Management (RM) model is built on. Common belief in the outdoor trip leading world is that experience is a guide's most valuable tool. That may be, but our whole RM approach is based around our collective experience – how RM evolved, how best to approach technical problems, what could happen where etc. That learning is captured in the Hazard Based approach.

Experience as a source of learning has limitations. On an individual level, any one person's experience base is limited to, well, their experience. An 'experience bias' exists – if we have not dealt with a particular situation before, we have great difficulty wrapping our minds around it, let alone effectively preventing, controlling or mitigating the uncertainty. This is a basic feature of the human brain, and is consistently backed up in psychological researchⁱⁱ. The further the new situation is from our experience base, the less able we are to deal with it. Even a guide with a dozen year's experience is still in some ways a novice when they are taken to a completely new environment, or confronted with an entirely novel situation.

Implicit in the belief that 'experience is the best teacher' is that one actually learns from their mistakes. Paul Petzoldt, one of the founding fathers of outdoor leadership training, was famously quoted as saying:

There are too many people with a lot of experience who don't know what they're doing. Some people say that experience is the best teacher. To heck with that. I know people who've been making the same mistakes for forty yearsⁱⁱⁱ.

On the other end of the experience spectrum is the amount of employee turnover within most outdoor operations. Taken industry wide, the 'lifespan' of a guide or instructor is perhaps three years. Those with more than five years experience are less common, and those with over ten years experience are rare. The result of this is continual base level learning – the most basic guide lessons are being learned over and over by each new batch of rookies. Most leave before they gain real competence. New learning is sporadic and there is no means to capture this learning before the individual moves on. The industry is stuck at the novice level.

When viewed from a systems thinking approach, the 'delusion of experience' becomes more pronounced. An individual rarely sees or understands how their individual actions affect other subsystems that interact with their own. The feedback from their decision is felt elsewhere. The result is that an individual guide's decisions and actions are reinforced – 'it seemed to work, so it must be good, therefore I will do it again in the future', yet the real impact may be dealt with elsewhere. An obvious example is financial implications. A guide makes the choice to drive a tour boat into shallow water and wrecks the motor prop. When the group returns, it is someone else's job to remove the prop, take it into town to get it fixed, and re-install it, all before the next trip is scheduled to depart. While that person is busy their other work gets backed up, creating pressure on other activities and systems. The bill for the repair, overtime and system pressure is picked up by the owner. From the guide's perspective, running onto rocks was not ideal,

but not a big deal. From the system perspective, it was an expensive, time consuming and stress inducing mistake.

Another feature of systems thinking feedback is time lag. A guide's decision today may appear to be the right one, but its implications are not felt until days, weeks or a year down the road. How many guides get feedback on their first aid ability when the patient is packed up, evacuated and taken to hospital, never to be heard from again? Or perhaps an off colour joke told to a seemingly welcoming crowd turns into a letter of complaint to the owner of the company, however the letter writer doesn't remember the guide's name. Another typical scenario has a critical incident turning into a notice of legal action several years down the road (long after the rookie guide has moved on to other employment), which gets settled by insurance. The learning from this experience is long gone, or more likely never existed in the first place.

High Reliability Theory further explores the delusion of learning from experience. We do learn, it argues, but often the wrong things. We learn that accidents are rare, and usually not as bad as first imagined; we learn that cutting corners rarely backfires and actually works quite well; or we learn the wrong lessons. We attribute blame to the client, equipment or instructor error when a faulty system or multiple systems are at fault. In many cases, rarely do we know exactly what happened.

Systems thinking points out that within complex systems, the outcome is not pre-defined, so choices made along the way cannot be measured for their effectiveness, as there is nothing to compare them to. Adventure leadership has fallen into a gaping 'satisficing trap' – if it works then it is 'good enough'. Within some programs, the actual belief is 'if no one gets hurt, then you've done your job...' This sets the bar pretty low for quality programming. An individual's experience and learning is reinforced to operate above the bar, but the bar is so low that performance is really marginal, at best. Even for those performing at a higher level, our industry does little in quality control, monitoring, and follow up research. This is bad for the long term viability and mainstream credibility of the adventure industry and outdoor education fields.

ⁱ Peter Senge (1990), *The Fifth Discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*

ⁱⁱ See the work of U. Neisser, among a long list of others

ⁱⁱⁱ Wagstaff, M., Cashel, C. (2002). Paul Petzoldt's perspective: the final 20 years. *Journal of Experiential Education*. V. 24, Iss. 3.

*** *This is an excerpt from one of Direct Bearing Incorporated's upcoming publishing releases dealing with Risk Management and Systems Thinking. If you'd like to be kept up to date on this and other DBI publishing initiatives please visit our website www.RiskManagementConsulting.ca and subscribe to our newsletter.*