



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H05FAV  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
FEBRUARY 13, 2020

## **ARTICLE** **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

# Get Adventurous with Your Leadership Training

*by Christopher G. Myers and Mike Doyle*

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

# Get Adventurous with Your Leadership Training

by Christopher G. Myers and Mike Doyle

FEBRUARY 13, 2020



ORLA/GETTY IMAGES

Organizations spend [billions of dollars](#) each year on leadership development. Yet research has shown that many of these programs [don't seem to work](#) — they fail to help individuals develop the sorts of [dynamic, collaborative leadership skills](#) needed for today's work.

In our research, teaching, and consulting on leadership development, we've been inspired by the success of one particular form: wilderness adventure expeditions, where [people develop and refine their leadership](#) as they and their team navigate the interpersonal and physical challenges of trekking through the wilderness. By forcing people to work collaboratively, develop new skills, and take

control of their decisions and outcomes, the austere environment can help expose key facets of leadership and team interaction that might otherwise be overlooked in “normal” settings.

In our own experience leading these kinds of expeditions, including a leadership development expedition course for MBA students (a 10-day course either sea kayaking off the coast of Belize or backpacking in the mountains of Norway), we’ve found that they effectively achieve many of the goals of modern leadership development. These expeditions help participants develop their ability to tackle complex challenges, make strategic decisions in ambiguous situations, and collaborate and learn with their team – precisely the attributes [desired in modern organizational leaders](#). They also help build adaptability and resilience.

While outdoor expeditions and adventure leadership activities are used in a variety of organizations (including at NASA for [training and building trust in astronaut teams](#)), we of course recognize that they require significant time, resources, travel, and physical ability, which may not be accessible to all leaders and companies. Yet, we believe that there are at least four characteristics of these expeditions that can be adapted and applied to improve many other types of leadership training and developmental programs:

**Complex, unfamiliar experience.** A wilderness expedition naturally places people in unfamiliar environments that require them to adopt new skills and ways of interacting to be successful. Arriving at a remote island, with no cell reception, and being handed a tent, stove and kayak paddle is not a normal weekday routine for most people. It forces them into new patterns of action and opens the door to new habits and working styles.

This novelty unlocks opportunities for people to step up in new ways and reveal untapped aptitudes and attitudes that can bolster their leadership. Even for experienced adventurers, the ambiguity inherent in an expedition (e.g., dealing with unpredictable weather and other conditions) forces people to stretch themselves as they work with their team.

Unfortunately, we see many of the opposite trends in more traditional, “indoor” leadership development efforts. For example, a traditional leadership training course might include a lecture on general leadership ideas, combined with feedback or coaching on what the individual is doing well or poorly in their current role. Though informative, these structures miss an opportunity to expand beyond what the person already knows how to do and hone their leadership for new environments. Simply focusing on general principles or reflecting on past behavior doesn’t provide the same opportunity to unlock new, untapped potential or learn how to respond in the kinds of unfamiliar, ambiguous settings the person might face in the future.

Similarly, we often see team leadership “retreats” that place people in a similar environment to their day-to-day work (e.g., a conference room). As a result, relatively little new insight or development occurs, because people simply fall back on their well-learned habits and patterns of interaction. An expedition naturally forces everyone to adapt to a new situation, but indoor development efforts

could take advantage of this principle by moving to a new setting where existing hierarchies are less relevant (e.g., even something as simple as an “[escape room](#)” exercise). A new experience forces people to shake up their habits and reveals pockets of knowledge, insight, and potential that might have been hidden.

**Purposeful preparation.** Very few people would show up for a wilderness expedition without doing a good bit of homework — preparing physically, logistically, and mentally for the challenge ahead — and setting goals. Then, actually embarking on the expedition requires a high degree of intentionality and focus, forcing people to disconnect (literally and figuratively) from their day-to-day work setting. This preparation and intentionality enables them to engage more thoughtfully in their experience and draw potentially unexpected insights about leadership and behavior — both their own and others’.

For instance, we have many women and men in our expedition courses who are military veterans — people you’d expect would be comfortable leading a team in a remote, austere environment, and thus might default to taking the lead. Yet with the opportunity to be purposeful and think about the developmental goals they have for the expedition, these students often seek to use it as an opportunity to step back and learn from others’ leadership in order to better understand how to transition their military leadership to the corporate world.

The benefits of preparation and setting developmental goals are certainly not limited to an expedition setting, but a remote environment often encourages this preparation in ways that more traditional leadership development efforts do not. All too often, leadership development programs are seen as unwelcome burdens on one’s calendar, with any preparation left to the last minute. It’s also common for people to stay connected during training courses, responding to email or checking in with colleagues at the expense of fully engaging in their own development. And in team settings, retreats and “off-sites” can quickly devolve into complaint forums or focus on technical, process-improvement discussions, rather than on individuals’ development goals.

**Continuous, multisource feedback.** During our expedition courses, students receive a large volume of feedback on their leadership and performance. The work of an expedition itself provides excellent feedback — the team ends up where it intended to be on the map (or doesn’t), the tent stays dry (or not), and everyone leaves camp on time the next morning (or a dinner in the dark awaits). We also have nightly debrief meetings as a team, and dedicated peer feedback partners provide each person with effective reflections, observations, and advice over the trip.

This continuous practice of feedback-giving generally creates a team norm of open discussion and honest appraisals of how people experience an individual’s leadership in positive and negative ways. These ongoing interactions also engender a sense of vulnerability and trust in the group that builds camaraderie and reliance that lasts long after the expedition ends. Indeed, we have observed our part-time MBA students continuing to use their expedition-mates as virtual “sounding boards” and

sources of feedback as they return to their day-to-day work life, despite being in different organizations or in different parts of the country.

Again, the benefits of ongoing, thoughtful feedback are not unique to the expedition setting, but it goes without saying that a lot of feedback in organizations is given too little, too late, and much isn't effective. Leadership development interventions also tend to feature sporadic instances of feedback every week or month, or aggregate feedback (as in a 360-degree assessment) that paint a leader's behavior in broad strokes, distant from when and where the behavior occurred and could be addressed.

**Repeated challenges.** Wilderness leadership development also benefits from the repetitive nature of life in the outdoors. Each day of the expedition is different in some ways, but revolves around a similar set of challenges (e.g., pack, navigate, break camp, etc.). When combined with the continuous feedback described above, this repetition gives individuals an opportunity to actually implement new behaviors after receiving feedback, closing the loop on their development by testing out new actions immediately and gauging the difference in outcome.

For instance, we see students struggle through a particular task (e.g., working together to prepare a meal on camp stoves), debrief the challenges that emerged, and then wake up the next day with an immediate opportunity to implement the lessons learned when it is time to cook again. Though improvement is not always immediate, the repeated opportunities aid students' learning and help them incorporate different behaviors in real time during the course, which can help them bring these behaviors back to their work.

In our minds, this element of repetition is one of the major missed opportunities of many leadership development programs or team training efforts. Leadership programs or team-building exercises are too often "one-offs," and even when adequately debriefed and reflected upon, the intention is to simply take the lessons home and implement them in their workplace. But without the opportunity to practice putting these insights into practice right away, the positive changes or intended behaviors can be lost.

This gap allows [new information to be forgotten](#), insight to fade, intention to waver, and confusion to set in. Knowing that the transfer of leadership behavior from training settings to the workplace (where systems and structures are still built on the "old" way of doing things) is already [an uphill battle](#), giving individuals immediate practice in applying new behaviors or strategies can help them bring these ideas to work more effectively.

Unmediated by technology, competing demands, or office politics, the wilderness distills many facets of leadership and team interaction down to their essence. Yet, we think that these four elements of outdoor expeditions can shed light on how leadership and team development efforts in any setting might be enhanced. Though we will always take any opportunity to move leadership development out of the office and into the wild, recognizing and applying these principles to all leadership

development activities might be a way of bringing the outdoors inside and expanding the growth of leadership in organizations.

---

**Christopher G. Myers** is an assistant professor at Johns Hopkins University on the faculty of the Carey Business School, School of Medicine, and Armstrong Institute for Patient Safety & Quality. His research explores interpersonal processes of learning, development, and innovation in health care and other knowledge-intensive work environments. Follow him [@ChrisGMyers](#).

---

**Mike Doyle** is the Director of Experiential Learning at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School. Mike co-teaches the MBA Leadership Development Expedition courses in Belize and Norway and has led adventure-based leadership programs for more than 20 years. As a certified coach, he works with clients in leadership development, team performance and strategic planning.

---