

Leadership
Lessons Learned
OFF TRAIL

Alaska Mission Trip 2014

Introduction

In July, 2014, I had the opportunity to take a team on a two-week trip to Alaska (6-19). We backpacked the first week through the Chugach National Forest, near Seward; and, then, during the second week, we traveled by bush plane to the small fishing town of Naknek (salmon capital of the world), there to serve a church and its community. To accomplish these things, our school team joined forces with Leader Treks, a group dedicated to training young people leadership skills through difficult outdoor challenges and community service.

The following principles are lessons of leadership that I learned from the two weeks.

Lesson 1

The Lone Ranger Is Dead

Our mission team departed OKC for Anchorage on Sunday, July 6. We had two connecting flights, one in Salt Lake City and the other in Seattle. For the most part, the day of travel went smoothly, except for one hitch. We lost the boys in the SLC airport.

After a 2.5-hour flight from OKC, we had a brief layover in SLC, so time was precious. When we got off of the plane, I stopped at a TV nearby, to check our connecting gate and to make sure that we had everyone. On trips like these, I revert to my old coaching days when I traveled with large teams, and to keep track of everyone, I count them.

It was agreed that we all needed to go to the restroom, so we stopped as soon as possible. Before we went in, I made it clear that we didn't have much time, so we needed to hustle. The bathrooms were crowded, and so we (men) stood for a while, and when I came out, only Mrs. Patton (our other sponsor) and the girls were standing outside. I immediately thought something was wrong. Where were the boys?

I waited with the girls for a few minutes, and then decided to send them on with Mrs. Patton, while I stayed behind and waited for the boys. I waited a few more minutes, even darted back into the restroom, and not one boy was found. I hadn't become anxious until I got a text from Mrs. Patton that they were

boarding the plane and still had not spotted any of our boys. I quickly made my way towards the gate, looking right and left for anyone in our group. Meanwhile, Mrs. Patton texted with one of the boys and discovered that they had gone ahead of us and were sitting on the plane.

While I was relieved to hear the news, I was upset. No one was hurt or lost, but I knew that this kind of selfish thinking would not work on this trip, especially when we would be lost deep in the woods at some point. I made it clear to the group, once I was on the plane, and everyone was accounted for, that teams stick together and no one gets left behind.

Thankfully, one of the first lessons that Shane (our trip guide) emphasized to the group in Alaska was that we do everything as a team – hike, eat, sleep, work, etc. *There is no room for a lone ranger on a team.* Teammates always look out for each other, and they do things together, which means that *every team member must adopt a “we not me” attitude.* The needs of the team are more important than anyone's personal preferences or immediate whims.

Lesson 2

Thinking Inside the Box

Our first official challenge as a team came after we arrived in Anchorage. To travel around Alaska, I had rented a 15-passenger van. The problem was that each of our 13 team members had very large duffel bags, and most of us had at least one, if not two, carry-on bags. The challenge came in trying to fit all of us and all of our stuff in that van.

What I found funny, at first, was that students stood stunned on the curb, believing that it was impossible to fit everything and everyone in that small space. I assured them, having packed my own family of six into a minivan many times for trips, that it was more than possible. All we needed was a little creativity and personal sacrifice.

Once others saw me shove bags into every nook of space (in, under, and beside seats), they got into the spirit of creative packing. Soon students strategically piled onto the van, most of them with bags in their laps, and, though many of them could not see the road or each other, we all fit safely.

While I understand the need to think outside of the box at times, *every leader must first be able to think inside the box.* Just because a problem does not appear to be solvable with the means or resources at

hand, does not mean that it can't be solved. There are times when hurdles present themselves, and though it is expected for a team to go over them, *it is completely acceptable to go through, under, or around them.* Surely within a team, there are those who, if they put their minds to it, can concoct a creative solution to any problem.

Lesson 3

Needless or Necessary?

After we arrived at Primrose Trail Campground and Shane had us all introduce ourselves, the first thing he did was explain how he packs his backpack for hiking. One would think that this is a simple exercise, but for a bunch of Oklahomans who are not frequent hikers and who brought entire duffel bags of stuff, this task was tough, especially for me.

Of course, Shane took very little on the hike, because everything that's taken must be carried; thus, everything taken must be considered as to how much weight it adds to the pack. I over-packed my duffel on purpose, not knowing for sure what all I would need. Now that I was faced with 20 minutes to make my final decision, I had to make some difficult judgment calls.

I literally poured out everything on the ground and evaluated the importance and weight of each item. Was it worth its weight? Was it needless or necessary? I didn't make it in the 20 minutes, but I woke up early the next morning to finish the task. I was pleased with my final decisions, but I was anxious as to whether or not I chose wisely. It was very hard to walk away and leave a duffel bag full of stuff in the van, not knowing for sure if I would regret any of my decisions.

One of the major components of leadership is decision-making. How important is something or someone to the big picture or to the success of the mission? Is that something or someone needless or necessary? *In the end, decisions have to be made and one must trust his instincts and do his best not to second-guess his actions.* In this case, I was just dealing with my own backpack, but in the real world, these types of decisions involve people, time, and real resources, and they could ultimately determine success or failure.

Lesson 4

Distributed Weight

Another factor in deciding what to pack on the hike and what to leave behind in the van was that Shane added other necessary things to our load. We would be hard-pressed in the mountains without food, cooking utensils, water bottles, tents, and toilet bags. All of these things had to be carried into the woods and, of course, all of these things added to the weight of our already heavy bags.

What Shane did made sense. He divided up the food into meal and snack sacks. Dinner sacks were the heaviest, then lunches and breakfasts, and, finally, snacks. The guys carried one or two meal sacks and the girls carried breakfast and snack sacks. Cooking utensils included tin cups, spoons, pots, and burners; these too were divided among us. Everyone was assigned two large water bottles, which, of course, were absolutely necessary but were heavy when full. Finally, the way to carry a tent and all its pieces was to divide them up among those who used the tent.

Altogether, this pile of stuff looked daunting, but once divided out among the team members, the weight was easily distributed and much less intimidating. Of course, everyone hoped their meal was eaten first, so that their load would be lightened! *On a team, every member must carry his weight.* When teammates distribute the workload, even daunting tasks can be reduced to doable deeds. While some may carry more than others, based on their capabilities, *the success of all is compromised by the failure of one.*

Lesson 5

Two Bags

One of the most impressive acts I witnessed off trail was when one of our team members (Sarah) sprained her ankle. While she was hurt pretty badly, she fought through the pain and continued to hike through the mountains. It became clear that it would be best for Sarah if she did not have to carry the weight of her bag. At first, we lightened her bag by distributing her heavier items among us, but then, it was suggested that someone carry her bag instead.

As impressed as I was with Sarah's courage and determination, I was even more struck by the volunteer spirit of our guys who offered to rotate carrying her heavy backpack – Shane, Ian, Tate, Samuel, and Kyle. Watching these young men trudge through difficult terrain, inclines and declines, with

two bags was inspiring indeed. At one point, I found myself struggling to climb a cliff with my own backpack, when in front of me was Kyle Ergenbright, who was climbing the same cliff with Sarah's bag. He would crawl up the incline slowly, position his hands and feet, steady his own weight, and then sling Sarah's backpack ahead of him up the hill. I couldn't believe it, and what I saw pushed me to be strong myself, stop whining, and take that hill!

What those guys did for Sarah, I could have never done myself. It's not because I didn't want to but because of my age and physical limitations, I was struggling with my own 60-pound backpack; the thought of adding more weight depressed me. However, for these young, vibrant, and strong gentlemen, two bags was no big deal. I remember Kyle's comment when Sarah asked, "Are you sure you can carry two bags?" He said, "Oh yeah, piece of cake." Kyle strapped her bag on his chest; he looked like a dad carrying two kids, one in the front and one in the back.

As a leader, I recognized an important principle here. *There are times when I have to admit my own limitations and weaknesses and rely upon the strengths of others to succeed.* Even though I could not have carried two bags, that didn't mean that someone else couldn't; and because these boys could carry two bags, our mission was successful. While I was nervous at first for these guys, I realized in time that they could handle the weight. It is important to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of team members and to adjust as needed for the good of all. *Leaders must overcome their pride, the thought that they have to do everything themselves, and be willing to lean on the strength of others.*

Lesson 6

Solid or Squishy?

One of the first things I learned when we set out on Primrose Trail (our initial path) was that *footing was everything; every step mattered.* One misstep on a hike could mean disaster – a slip, a trip, a sprain, a cut, a fall, a shoe full of water or mud, etc. I'm glad that I learned this lesson early on, because once we were off trail, this truth was magnified by ten.

At first, when on the trail, the footing was predictable – hard dirt, matted grass, water puddles, and a few protruding tree roots. By the end of the week, especially when off trail, we had experienced every type of terrain imaginable – tall wet grass and weeds, uneven fields, tree-like waist-high "death" bushes,

big rocks, small rocks, slippery rocks, marshes and swamp land, moss, clover, dry riverbeds, running water, snow, soggy stumps, fallen trees, thorny bushes, small and giant holes, and quicksand, just to name a few.

The terrain was difficult and deceiving. Oftentimes, what looked to be solid was actually squishy. A rock, for example, or what looked like a rock, was actually like stepping on a sponge. A log that appeared to be strong and stable was actually hollow and wet and would crumble under your weight. A flat clump of sand and rocks looked inviting amidst of all the other unreliable footholds, but it would turn out to be quicksand and sometimes shin deep. It is a wonder that more of us were not injured or seriously hurt.

After a while, I found myself learning where to step and where not to step. I noticed that I became more cautious and careful. Every footfall was calculated and precise; even then, I slipped, tripped, or fell several times.

The thought occurred to me on this march that *things are not always what they seem on the surface; neither are people.* Many situations or circumstances seem to be reliable, when they are not. Many people appear to be solid when, in reality, they are squishy. As a leader, putting my trust in something or someone is like placing my hiking boot on tricky terrain. They can be deceiving and disappointing. As a leader, I must be extremely cautious and careful and *make sure that who and what I trust is calculated and precise, because any misstep could spell disaster.*

Lesson 7

Second in Command

As a teacher, coach, or sponsor, most of the time, when I'm with a group of students, I am leading them; but, that was not the case on this trip. The beauty of a Leader Treks trip is that there are guides (Shane and Ian) who do all of the planning and leading. Also, since Leader Treks is all about teaching students leadership skills and, then, providing them with leadership opportunities, students were in charge of our activities most of the time. Thus, for Mrs. Patton and I, there was no pressure for us to plan or lead anything. We could simply enjoy the kids and the experience.

While it was nice not to have the pressure of planning and leading, it put me in an unfamiliar position – second, and sometimes third, in command (behind Shane or students). As a first-born "doer," it is

natural for me to take the lead on a project. It is, therefore, unnatural and uncomfortable for me to watch others lead, especially untested students. I get frustrated easily because someone does not do things the way that I would do them, or someone does not stay on schedule, or someone is not efficient. It is a struggle for me to keep my mouth shut, to keep my thoughts or opinions to myself, and to allow others to make mistakes, especially when I and the rest of the group will suffer the consequences; however, that's another reason why this trip was good for me.

I am convinced that *before someone can be a good leader, he must first learn how to be a good follower*. Everyone, no matter how high on the ladder, should have to submit to another person's authority or leadership once in a while. *Good leadership begins with good followship*. By the end of this trip, I found myself immediately submitting to everything that was asked of me. *I discovered that I could lead from behind*, first by being a good role model of followship, second, by affirming those who were in the lead, and, third, by encouraging those who were also following. *Second in command is no less of a leader than first in command; that position just presents and requires other ways to lead*.

Lesson 8

What's Going On Up There?

If you've ever been on a group hike, you are familiar with the issues that I am about to mention. First, those who are faster and fitter (and younger) typically leave those who are not in the dust. Consequently, over time, the group gets stretched out. Pretty soon, those in the back can no longer see those in the front. This happened numerous times in Alaska.

Another issue that occurred often was that one person, in the middle of the line, would stop for some reason (to tie a shoe, get a water bottle, put on a jacket, use the restroom, etc.) and, of course, everyone behind him had to stop also. However, those ahead of that person continued down the path, not knowing that those behind had stopped, and, thus, the group snapped into two pieces.

Finally, a third issue that happened many times was that line leaders would stop, and, of course, the followers all stopped, but no one knew why. Perhaps it was for a minute or two, but oftentimes the line would stop for ten to thirty minutes, but everyone was kept in the dark as to the reasons for the stop. Was it to rest? Was something wrong? Were we lost?

Is this a water break, a restroom break, a backpack break? What is going on? Someone please tell us!

All of these issues could have been resolved with one important skill --- *communication*. Communication is crucial for team unity, team morale, and team success. *Without communication, it is easy for team members to get confused, discouraged, and even frustrated*. The answer to these problems is quite simple. *Those in front of the line must communicate with those in the rest of the line*, tell them what is happening, where they are headed, and if, when, and why they are stopping. Thus, followers are informed, confident, and on board with the plans; they do not feel ignored, unimportant, or lost in the dark. Likewise, *those people in line, whether in the middle or at the back, must communicate with those at the front*. That way, leaders are aware of how their followers are doing, if they have any needs, and, thus, no one gets left behind.

The same principles apply to all teams – a marriage, a family, a church, a staff, employer and employees, a school's faculty and administration. *Those in the front must clearly and constantly communicate with those who are following; and those who are following must clearly and constantly communicate with those in the lead*. Otherwise, disaster is afoot; no one will be on the same page, and that team will be plagued with inefficiency, discouragement, and frustration. *Good leaders communicate well, and so do good followers*.

Lesson 9

Life Through the Net

We were warned about them before going, we prepared for them as best we could, and we were greeted by them as soon as we arrived – mosquitoes – Alaska's "state birds"! In south Alaska, everything is wet in the summer; it is constantly misting or raining. There are swamps, puddles, and ponds everywhere, and, thus, it is a perfect place for mosquitoes, lots of them. These mosquitoes swarm your face and are not afraid to explore your nose, your eyes, your ears, or your mouth. Although they don't bite like the blood-suckers in Oklahoma, these mosquitoes are just as pesky, like gnats, more of a nuisance really. Thus, we sprayed our repellents, donned our head nets, and covered as much skin as possible, to protect ourselves from these pests.

Several mornings on this trip, I had time to sit in a prime location and read my Bible, talk to God, and admire His creation. In the Chugach region, we were

surrounded by breath-taking vistas, beautiful snow-capped mountains crowned with clouds, foggy valleys, roaring creeks and raging rivers, glassy lakes and ponds, a full arrangement of wild flowers and rocks, and mossy, overgrown forests. It sure beat having a quiet time on my couch in the living room!

However, despite the lovely landscape around me, my usual quiet time attire in Alaska covered my body from head to toe -- long pants, a jacket with a hood, gloves, and, of course, my head net. Try meditating on God's Word with a thousand mosquitoes buzzing about your head, landing on your Bible, and sneaking up your pant leg or sleeve or inside your hood. It's not easy, believe me!

The thought occurred to me in moments like these that, while we are surrounded by the beauty of life (family, friends, love, and laughter, etc.), and while we have hope, because of Christ, in the life to come, *our spiritual enemy keeps us distracted with pesky problems*, minor ones and major ones, to keep our eyes off of the bigger picture of what God is doing and to keep us centered on self.

Though it was a struggle for me to look out from behind my net, through the cloud of mosquitoes, and to enjoy my surroundings and those times I had with the Lord, I eventually learned how to do it. I pray that I can be half as successful as a husband, a father, a friend, an Elder, a teacher, or as a follower of Christ, to look beyond my inconveniences, to count my blessings, and to enjoy the good things my God has done for me. *All leaders must be able to look past the mosquitoes and see the mountains!*

Lesson 10

Mosquitoes for Everyone

Once I found myself alone on a rocky beach beside Lost Lake (our second campsite). I was the first one there for breakfast. I tried to enjoy my surroundings -- the water, the mountains, the clouds, and the trees -- but I couldn't for all of the mosquitoes busy about. There must have been a thousand of them on or near me! Or, at least, it seemed that way.

Before I lost my sanity, I was joined by two people -- Jake and Kyle. Immediately, I noticed a difference. Not only did I have company to talk to, the swarm of mosquitoes suddenly dissipated. As strange as it sounds, I began to wonder why. Then, it dawned on me -- there were other people on the beach for the mosquitoes to pester!

The more I thought about this, another life lesson began to ring true with me. *No one should ever have to face a trial alone. Trials are not so daunting when shared with others.* When Jake and Kyle came along, I was facing a thousand monsters alone; but when they joined me, the mosquitoes were divided, and I suddenly was dealing with only 333 (if that makes any sense), which was a relief to me. *Good leaders must always be aware of people around them who are suffering;* and, though it is not wise to pry or intrude, it is biblical to inquire and suffer along with them. "We who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves" (*Romans 15:1*). "Bear one another's burdens and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (*Galatians 6:1, 2*). Who around me is swarmed? Who around me needs to share the mosquitoes? Am I watching? Am I listening? Or am I focused only on my own pests?

Lesson 11

Every Rock Counts

Any person or group that hikes the mountains of Alaska will encounter multiple creeks and rivers formed from the melting snow and ice at the top. I can't even remember how many we crossed; there were too many to count. Some creeks, of course, were smaller than others, easily bypassed with one giant step, but some took careful planning and quite a bit of time to maneuver around.

Several times throughout the week, when we approached a roaring river or a crazy creek, it was apparent that the only way to cross was by piling rocks at a low point and forming a path to step on. Our guides (Shane and Ian) were always quick to spot the perfect location in which to build a "bridge"; then, they would ask for the team to supply them with rocks. One time, when we came to a particularly wide creek, this process took us an hour and a half, before the team members and their bags were safely across.

Another time, when we encountered a wide creek bed, I found myself at the back of the line; and, although I was not at the center of the bridge-building effort, I had a good view of the construction. What I witnessed impressed me greatly. Students brought Ian all kinds of rocks, big ones and small ones, round ones and flat ones; and, no matter what rock he was given, he found a place for it in the construction of our bridge. While the bigger rocks were used for stepping stones, the smaller rocks were used in their support. The thought that struck me here was that

every rock mattered to the builder; every rock had a place where it could be used.

As a leader of any group or team, it is important to remember this principle – *every rock counts*. I am a firm believer that God has gifted every person with skills, strengths, and abilities that can be used in His service; the challenge for a leader is to find those strengths (sometimes they are hidden) and, then, determine when and how they can best benefit the group or cause. As in life, God, the Master Builder, uses each one of us, in our own unique way, for the work of His kingdom; leaders too must view people as valuable rocks to be used for the bridge, no matter their size, shape, or strength. *Every member matters.*

Lesson 12

Bushwhackers & Worship Leaders

A good example of the previous principle – *every member matters* – is my son Austin. Austin loves the outdoors and on this trip, he was in his element. Of course, any outdoorsman has a knife, and Austin carried a rather large one he nicknamed, “Old Thunder.” Many times, Austin was called to the front of the line to escort the team through thick woods or dense bushes or vines. He is a big guy, so he was adept at smashing anything in his path; and, with “Old Thunder,” he would bushwhack (as he called it) a path for us through the forest.

Another example of this principle in action was Sarah Cunningham. Sarah struggled the first week; parts of the hike were challenging for her physically, but then, on the fourth day, she fell and badly sprained her ankle. I’m sure, at times, she regretted coming on the trip or the thought may have crossed her mind that she was a “burden” on our team. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only was she an inspiration to us all by how she demonstrated courage and determination, but she led our worship team the following week during Vacation Bible School. Without her, we would have had no way to sing songs and have fun with the kids through worship.

In both of these scenarios, I would have been no help at all, but these two young people played invaluable roles on our team. I had no skills, abilities, or interest in bushwhacking, and I certainly can’t play an instrument. As a leader, *it is necessary at times to put all of the team’s eggs in one basket*, and to allow that team member, who has a particular skill, to carry the basket. It requires a great deal of trust, but the team benefitted as a result, and Austin and Sarah were both encouraged by using their gifts to bless others.

Lesson 13

Praises & Prods

Many times throughout our hike, I heard the voice of Shane McGann (our primary Leader Trek guide) echo over the landscape, “Good job, team!” At a time when I would be struggling, I’d hear, “Keep up the good work!” Or, when I didn’t think that I could go on, his words would resound, “We’re almost there!” *Words* -- seemingly small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but *they are a salve to the psyche when you’re getting ground in the grind.*

At other times, not very often, it also fell to Shane to keep us accountable. No doubt, it was a duty that he did not enjoy, but someone had to remind us of our commitments, to keep the actions steps that we agreed to, to maintain a schedule, and to pick up the pace. He did it, not arrogantly or obnoxiously; he even did it without raising his voice or getting angry. He kept us on task and prodded us along.

Whether a leader knows it or not, his *words are key to any cause*, not only the words he chooses but how he says and uses the words he chooses. Everyone enjoys praises, and everyone needs encouragement once in a while; however, we also need prodding, though no one likes to receive it. *Great leaders know when to praise (often) and know when to prod (when necessary)*. Like cattle, team members need to be petted and patted, but, at times, they need to be pressed and prodded. *Good leaders know who needs both and when.*

Lesson 14

We’re Not Out of the Woods Yet

One of the things I noted about the first week of our adventure in Alaska was that each day was harder than the day before. In fact, it became a joke when one of our hike leaders would start the day by saying, “Now, this hike should be shorter than yesterday,” or, “This stretch of the mountain should be the easiest to cross.” Yeah, right. When we found ourselves still hiking seven hours later, we were quick to remind our leaders of their comments. Or, when we lay down at night and reflected on how hard a day was, we always retorted with, “Yeah, this was supposed to be the ‘easiest hike of the week.’ Ha!”

I guess what I’m trying to say is that just when I thought we were out of the woods, we weren’t. Another obstacle lay ahead of us, one that was more challenging than the one we had just survived. But, the more I thought about it, the more grateful I

became. At least our most difficult day wasn't first; and, at least the Lord gave us smaller hurdles to jump on day one and saved the highest hurdles for last!

I believe that the Lord works in this way in our lives; *He moves us from faith to faith, from one obstacle to the next.* When another mountain comes our way, we can look back at the one we just descended and say to ourselves, "God is faithful, and He helped me conquer that mountain; He will help me conquer this one as well." As leaders, we must recognize that *obstacles are not always to be viewed in a negative light; in fact, a leader and a team that learns to overcome obstacles will be a stronger team in the end.* As they climb one mountain together, they will improve their capacity to problem solve, to work together, and to believe in their ability to overcome. In essence, they too will move from faith to faith and not be intimidated by more mountains to move.

Lesson 15

Back to the Primrose Path

After more than 40 hours of hiking over difficult terrain, after enduring the mosquitoes and trudging through rain, and with our bodies but broken and our minds insane, we found the trail... (sorry, I did not mean to rhyme, just then). The Primrose Trail never looked so good! It symbolized our survival! We were close to our van, a chariot that would take us to sweet civilization – real food, a hot shower, and a soft bed! Some of our team members kissed the trail, I think, and others got a little teary-eyed. I know that I did, not from sadness but from gladness.

However, as I walked the long, lonely trail back to our ride, I had time to reflect and pray. We had been off trail for five days, facing intimidating obstacles and daunting challenges, struggling through difficult landscape and harsh elements, and all the while we were learning more about ourselves, our teammates, and our God. Now that we had found the Primrose path again, would it ever be the same?

The word "primrose," of course, refers to a flower, but it has another meaning, to be "easy, convenient, or comfortable." It was ironic that the trail we found was named Primrose Trail, because we were ready for ease, convenience, and comfort. We were tired of surviving in the wild. On the Primrose path, there would be little to no pressure. There was never any doubt what to do next, because there was a familiar and almost mundane trail that leads the way. The rest of the trip, although it would have its inconveniences,

would be a piece of cake compared to what we experienced off trail in the Chugach Mountains.

Isn't it funny how we always learn more in life when we are "off trail"? We tend to learn very little when we live on the primrose path, in the familiar and the mundane, surrounded by the easy, the convenient, and the comfortable. However, even though our faith in God is stretched and strengthened most when "off trail," our prayers are directed towards God blessing us with smooth hiking. What is always better for us we seldom ask for in prayer, and what is not always best for us we regularly ask for. Hmmm, sounds like we need a shift in our approach to prayer.

I am grateful that life is not always "off trail," one mountain to climb after another, but, at the same time, I am more grateful that there are times when the Lord deems it necessary to steer me away from the primrose path.