

LEADERSHIP LESSONS ON THE TRAIL

Montana Mission Trip 2016

In 2016 (June 18-July 3), I had the privilege of joining thirteen teammates on a two-week mission trip to Montana. Actually, the first week was spent backpacking through the Bighorn National Forest in northern Wyoming. During the second week we ministered to the people of Ashland, Montana, through community service and hosting Vacation Bible School. CHA partnered with an organization called Leader Treks, which uses outdoor challenges to train young people leadership principles and skills. In 2014, after enduring the Alaska Mission Trip, I shared some of the lessons I learned off the trail; here are a few lessons I learned on the trail.

Lesson 1 – “Great Scott”

Trials tend to distinguish the tried and true.

While I would not consider myself to be old and senile just yet (I'm 45), I do recognize the fact that I'm no spring chicken either. My abs look more like a three-liter than a six pack, and my muscles and joints revolt when I exercise. Nonetheless, hiking 35 miles in the Bighorn Mountains, with a ridiculous weight on my back, would push me to my physical limit, so I knew that I needed to do something to prepare for it; and, lifting the remote to find another Netflix episode wasn't going to do it.

Mindy, our guide, told me over the phone that, in order to be ready for the Bighorns, I needed to hit the treadmill, making sure to set the slope to the suicide levels. Well, I did the next best thing and hit the hilly streets of Edmond with a backpack I stuffed with beefy books, such as *Webster's 1828 Dictionary*. Who knew words could be so weighty? Every day for three weeks, I walked four miles through every crest and valley in my neighborhood. As God would have it, there is a “huge” hill by the high school on Scott Street. I dubbed it “Mt. Scott” and scaled it dutifully, like a good soldier would.

I also wanted to give my teammates (ten students) an idea of what our Wyoming trek

would be like, so I arranged for us to hike near Mt. Scott in southeastern Oklahoma, in the Wichita Mountains. Somehow those beefy books snuck their way into the students' bags as well. We had a great day together talking, laughing, building camaraderie, and navigating the obstacles. It was when we bounded upon a batch of boulders that I learned a valuable lesson.

Up until this point, *every person on the team played the part*. Each one of them looked like hikers; they had the clothes, the shoes, the backpack and other gear. However, *the challenge of overcoming these obstacles immediately distinguished them in my mind*. Some of them skipped across or scaled over the boulders with ease, while others took their time. They might have been slow but they were steady. However, one young man suddenly dropped to all fours and cautiously crawled like a cat!

I must admit that I was not prepared for what I witnessed; and, while this young man fought his fears with courage and the others rallied around him with help, I was partially paralyzed by the principle paraded before me – *trials tend to distinguish the tried and true*. The reason why this young man was hampered by the heights was because he had never truly hiked before. He had never done anything hard; he had never been tested. His courage, his confidence, his competence had never been pressed. The reason why the others bounded along with ease and effectiveness was because they had been there and done that. None of this was new to them.

Great leadership is not necessarily found in someone who looks the part. *Great leadership is found in someone who has navigated and endured hard things*, for they will respond to trials and tests with courage, confidence, and competence. It was David's experience with the lion and the bear, and, of course, his faith in God, that prepared him for the confrontation with the giant. It was helping Moses deal with a plethora of problems that prepared Joshua to deal with Achan's sin and conquer the land of Canaan. *Little mountains prepare you for big mountains!* Embrace your obstacles; they are opportunities for growth in your ability to lead. Who knows what mountains you will be facing next?

Lesson 2 – “Minimal and Accessible”

For efficiency and effectiveness, leaders should aim for minimal and accessible.

Having backpacked several times now, I’ve not only learned what to pack but where to pack it. While there are numerous tips for packing a bag, in my mind there are two stand-out statutes. Always aim for *minimal* and *accessible*.

Having a minimalist mindset, in regards to backpacking, is a no-brainer. What you bring you must carry, so then make it little and make it light. However, it’s also easier said than done, because you second-guess yourself on taking certain items, or you want to be safe rather than sorry. But, it makes sense – *decrease your load, decrease your labor*. A friend of mine told me, “When you’re backpacking, ounces become pounds, and pounds become pain.” It is true -- *the less you carry the more energy you conserve and the more ground you cover*.

Just as important as what stuff to take is where to stuff it. Does it really matter where it is as long as it’s in the bag somewhere? Trust me; it does matter, especially when you only have a few seconds or minutes. Take, for example, your water. If your guide says “take a two-minute break,” you want to be able to access your water as quickly as possible. You don’t store your Nalgene bottles at the bottom of your backpack. You get the picture. The same goes for many other things like your food, knife, first aid kit, rain gear, jacket, bug spray, sunscreen, flashlight, camera, sunglasses, etc. *How quickly can you get to what you need when you need it?*

Once on the trail in Wyoming, I noticed that a couple of guys took forever to pack up, or they took a long time to find something; so I decided to watch them get ready one morning. I soon discovered the problem. One boy had more than a hundred small items lying around him, and he was weeding through them slowly. I wished I would’ve taken a picture; he looked like a tornado victim rummaging through his wind-strewn belongings! He had not followed the sacred statutes of *minimal* or *accessible*, and it pained me to watch him.

The more I pondered on these two hiking tips -- making things *minimal* and *accessible* -- the more I realized that they could be lessons for leadership as well. First, *leaders tend to carry too much*. Though the reasons may vary, pride, selfishness, micro-managing, distrust of teammates, poor delegation skills, whatever, the consequences are the same – ineffectiveness, exhaustion, irritability, stress, or burn out.

Remember, though, the minimalist mindset is easier said than done. Leaders often second-guess themselves on what to do and what to let go, or they want to be safer than sorry. But, as with hiking, it makes sense – *decrease your load, decrease your labor*. The less one carries the more energy he conserves and the more ground he covers. It is a principle that I have had to learn the hard way – *less is more*. Not doing as much allows leaders to be better at what they are doing. *Carrying less means that there is a good chance that things won’t get dropped*.

In regards to accessibility and leadership, I think of the essential quality of *orderliness*. Making sure that things are easily accessible in my backpack allows me to find things quickly and save time and effort. Whether we’re talking about an office, a desk, a shelf, a storage closet, a filing cabinet, a classroom, a room in the house, a flow chart, a computer desktop, a network, or brief case, *an organized workspace is an efficient workspace*, one that will save time and effort, and perhaps prevent a headache. *How quickly can you get to what you need when you need it?* Show me a smooth operation, and I will show you an organized leader.

Both minimalism and orderliness take effort. We were created to work; we even enjoy it. To say “no” is hard for us to do, especially when it involves people; but, minimalism requires it. No minimalist leader says “yes” to everything. Organization, as well, takes effort. Things don’t naturally fall into order. Thankfully, as one minimizes his load, he aids his orderliness; and, as one organizes his surroundings, is he not, in a way, minimizing? *To be an efficient and effective leader, you must aim for that which is minimal and accessible!*

Lesson 3 – “Gear Check”

More eyes improve one’s sight.

You’ve all been there, when another person notices something wrong about your appearance. You know, those instances when you think everything is okay but, then, a friend or family member notices that something is not quite right, such as a stain on your shirt, some hair out of place, left over food on your face, a booger in your nostril, and – gasp – the dreaded open fly! Though it’s embarrassing for a second, you are grateful to have the oversight corrected.

Such as it is on the trail... you think you have everything where it’s supposed to be, only to find out that something on your backpack has broken loose, you’ve forgotten to snap a buckle or close a carabiner, or you’ve dropped an important item on the ground. Backpacking with a buddy sure does help; backpacking with thirteen buddies is even better!

I told the team on day one, “There’s no such thing as a Long Ranger on this team. We stick together. We help each other; and, no one and nothing gets left behind.” You’ve heard the Braveheart speech; well, that’s pretty much what I said, with the exception of “William Wallace is ten foot tall and can shoot lightning out his...” well, you know.

Many people believe that leadership is for lone rangers. It’s not. Good leadership becomes even better with an extra set of eyes, just someone else looking things over and “checking your gear.” We may think that we have all of our ducks in a row and everything under control, but another person comes a long and notices that something is not quite right. That’s when we must trust our teammates. Though it may be embarrassing for a moment; in the end, we will be grateful to have the oversight corrected.
Leaders – more eyes improve your sight!

Lesson 4 – “Two Lanes Are Better Than One”

A dynamic duo is better than a lone ranger.

On our first day of hiking in the Bighorn National Forest, we backpacked Dry Fork Trail, which was basically a path for four-wheelers. It looked like

two cow trails side by side. However, on the second day, the two-lane path disappeared and our trail was a narrow way for cows. I noticed that something happened to our team when we dropped down to a single path; we were no longer able to talk easily, side by side. Having conversations with the person in front of you or behind you was challenging; and, oftentimes, given the terrain, it was nearly impossible.

It was at this point that a leadership principle surfaced – *a dynamic duo is better than a lone ranger*. In other words, two lanes are better than one. Team morale was much higher on the Dry Fork Trail; conversations were more lively and productive. Walking side by side allowed camaraderie and bonding to occur, and the team stayed closer together as a unit. We were spread out along the trail, as we were later in the week.

When someone walked up beside me in the other lane and engaged me in conversation, *I must admit that I performed better on the trail*; but, when I was alone, my mind wandered. I even had discouraging thoughts, and my momentum waned. *I suddenly felt like it was just me against the mountain*, instead of feeling like it was my teammates and I battling together.

It is my personality, both as a leader and as a follower, to work by myself; but, as God said, in the beginning, “It is not good for man to be alone.” *We were made for community*. Something happens when we are around people that doesn’t happen when we are on our own. *We are encouraged. We are challenged*. We are pushed to be better, to do better, to keep up the pace, and to finish well.

As leaders, we must abandon the long ranger mentality and see the benefits of the dynamic duo. As Solomon once said, “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion, but woe to him who falls when there is not another to lift him up” (*Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10*). While it is not my nature to seek out people for conversation or company, I must get passed my selfishness, because *I need others and others need me*. All of us will perform better when we are encouraged.

Lesson 5 – “Embrace the Pace”

Everyone has a pace in the race.

Throughout our hike in the Bighorn Mountains, I recognized quickly that, as a team, we struggled with staying together on the trail. Pieces of our group broke off from the others; at times, our team might be splintered into two, three, even four clumps walking together.

As a sponsor or leader, I desire team unity, togetherness, so watching these cells develop bothered me. I began to watch carefully at what was happening. My observation was this – *everyone walked at a different pace, and those with similar gaits fell in line together.*

Students took turns leading the hikes each day, so they were obviously in the front. Teammates with a faster pace stayed with them. Then, there were the slow-and-steadies in the middle, followed by the “walking dead,” who had one reason or another – sprained ankle, bad back, knees, or hips, old age, or out of shape -- to remain at the rear. Even I held up the group, at times, trying to pace myself up some of the steeper slopes!

Our fearless guide, Mindy, also picked up on the dissolution phenomenon, and her adjustment was brilliant. She moved someone with a slower pace up front to lead the rest. Her decision worked wonders! We all stayed together and team unity prevailed.

Two leadership lessons emerged from this experiment. First, on a team, *all members are not equals when it comes to pace or productivity.* Though every teammate matters, each one has his or her own personality, strengths, abilities, and, yes, flaws. These traits are not to be taken as negatives, just facts. No two teammates are exactly alike in all things.

The second principle is just as important as the first – *a good leader will acknowledge the differences of team members and assign them to areas that will best help the team.* Every coach and administrator knows exactly what I’m talking about. Certain positions require certain strengths, skills, and, yes, even paces. *It is up to*

the leader to determine where each member can best serve the rest. While those decisions are difficult, they are necessary; what is at stake, here, is the team’s effectiveness, unity, and morale. If those decisions are not made, then you will be to blame for watching your team dissolve.

Lesson 6 – “Eat Our Dust”

Those in the rear sacrifice for those in the front.

As one of the two sponsors on our Mission Trip (Mrs. Garner being the other one), I of course felt responsible for everyone on the team. Therefore, on the hike, I liked to position myself in the back, to encourage any stragglers and to ensure that no one got left behind. Thus, I was the caboose most of the time.

Though I was determined to stay there, the caboose position was more difficult than I thought it would be. On our first day, Dry Fork Trail was just that -- dry; so everyone in front of me kicked up dust. I wished that I would’ve taken a picture; like Charlie Brown’s friend Pig-Pen, our team was wrapped in a cloud of dirt for the better part of the day. Those in the back, including me, literally ate everyone else’s dust!

The other symptom I experienced was how quiet it was pulling up the rear. I must admit that *it got lonely in the back.* While I was there to give encouragement to others, I was the one who ended up needing encouragement. Thankfully, Mrs. Garner and others would check on me at times, to make sure I was doing okay; but, that’s when this next leadership principle hit me – *those in the rear sacrifice for those in the front.*

On a team or in an organization, *every member matters, but does he know it.* Attention is readily given to those at the top or those in the front, but the same attention must be given to everyone, because *it gets lonely in the back or at the bottom.*

Do you want to know how you are doing as a leader of a group of people? Ask the lowest person on the totem pole if he or she feels like part of the team; then, you will have your answer. *Every person plays a part in the team’s success; therefore, every member must feel important, even the person eating dust.*

Lesson 7 – “If I Could Just See the Trail”

Knowing where I’m going encourages what I’m doing.

As I mentioned in my last post, more often than not, by choice, I ended up in the back of the pack on our week-long hike in the Bighorn Mountains. Thus, my view consisted of 13 backpacks and the two-foot space in front of me, where I would carefully place my next step. What I couldn’t see was the extended trail.

With only watching the backs of other hikers and the two-foot space in front of me, I did not know what to expect. I couldn’t tell what was coming up, what was on the horizon, or what to prepare myself for. I could tell, at times, that we were on an incline or a decline, that we were slowing down or even stopping; but, I couldn’t see the bigger picture, what was ahead of me.

Therefore, *I noticed that I began to focus on the monotony of the next step*, whether it was up or down, or on the constant adjusting to the pace of the group, the stopping and starting, or on the pain in my back or legs. Since I couldn’t see the goal, I became discouraged and deeply bothered. I had to do something for my sanity! I thought through several options and landed on one. *I just needed to see the trail every now and then.*

Have you ever felt like this? Have you thought these things about your work, your home, your marriage, or other areas of your life? *If you are not careful, the monotony of the next step can turn you into a maniac!* Going through the motions, repeating routines, and checking off lists can wear you down mentally and physically. What are you supposed to do? *Poke your head up and look at the trail.* Where are you going? What is on the horizon? What are your goals and purposes?

For someone on a staff or a team or someone who feels like a cog in the machine at work, looking at the trail involves seeing the bigger picture, knowing the mission. *One’s marching orders are not so bad if he knows the destination and the terrain on the way.* Here is where good leadership is important.

Leaders must communicate the big picture to their teammates as often as possible. They must cast vision and help others to “poke their head up and see the trail.” *The monotony of the next step is not so bad if teammates know that those steps lead somewhere.* They will endure the ridiculous routines, the ludicrous lists, and the mundane motions, if they believe that what they are working towards is worthy of their efforts. *Knowing where they’re going encourages what they’re doing.* So then, let them see the trail!

Lesson 8 – “Lemmings”

Follow with discernment or fall into disaster.

Years ago, when computer games were first becoming popular (early 90’s), there was one that I enjoyed called Lemmings. Lemmings are real animals, cute Arctic rodents; but somehow, over time, they’ve become synonymous with someone in a crowd who follows leaders blindly, without thought, even to their own destruction.

In the video game, you are the first lemming and hundreds of others are following you into a minefield of obstacles – cliffs, fires, lakes, pits, you get the idea. The point is to lead them through the obstacles with as many surviving lemmings as possible.

While hiking in the Bighorns, I was often reminded of this game. *Because I followed the person in front of me too closely*, I walked straight into a hole, into swampy mud, even into a creek; several times I tripped over the same rock or ran into the same tree limb. *Because I was too close, I did not have time to practice discernment about foot placement.* Thus, I quickly learned to put a little distance between myself and the person in front of me. It worked. Though my leader fell into a “trap,” I did not. I had time to stop and think about my next move.

Unfortunately, when it comes to following leaders in real life, many of us, including myself, are guilty of lemming-ness. *We follow others so closely, blindly, that we don’t practice discernment.* We simply walk lockstep with them, placing our feet exactly where they do. Therefore, we often find ourselves off-trail, repeating the same errors that they commit.

As a follower, a staffer, a worker, a student, a church member, a reader, listener, or media viewer, *we must not be lemmings!* We must distance ourselves from those we follow, just enough to allow us to practice discernment. We must not accept every decision, order, assignment, theory, lesson, sermon, rumor, article, news report, or everything we read, watch, or hear *without measuring it against truth, that which God says in His Word.*

Don't be a lemming! Look first; consider the soundness of a step. Is it in the right place? Is it worthy of your trust? Will stepping there put you in a place where you don't want to be, where God says you should not be? The opposite of Lemmings is Bereans. The level of their discernment was so high that they didn't even listen to the Apostle Paul without testing his teaching against the Scriptures (*Acts 17:11*). Who are you following too closely? *Don't be a lemming, or else you may just fall off a cliff!*

Lesson 9 – “Head Down”

With your head down, you miss what's up!

Walking on a trail sounds simple enough, I know. But, believe me, it's not. Unlike a flat paved road, where you can keep your head up most of the time, there are always obstacles on a trail. Things like random rocks, holes, branches, hills, dips, gulches, creeks, and cliffs make it nearly impossible to keep your head up for long.

However, when keeping my head down and my eyes on the trail, I noticed another unfortunate side-effect. I missed out on all of the natural beauty that was around me. I couldn't win either way. I either had to keep my head up and risk taking an errant step, or I had to keep my head down and miss the scenery. It seemed ironic to me to drive 17 hours into the mountains to miss the beauty of God's creation! What was I to do? Thankfully, we took quite a few water breaks and photo ops, times when I could talk to people and enjoy the view.

As a leader, it is easy to keep my head down all of the time, to get stuck in the rut of getting things done. While I enjoy taking breaks, stretching my

legs, coming up for air, and talking with people, there are things that just have to get done.

The best advice I could give is to strike a balance between the two. Make times to take breaks. Be intentional about seeking out and talking with those around you. Enjoy the journey! With your head down all the time, you miss out on the most beautiful part of life -- people.

Lesson 10 – “Don't Cry ‘Wolf!’”

Deception produces demoralization.

When we were hiking in Alaska, either our guide or student leader would start our mornings with a statement like, “Today should be easier than yesterday.” It never was. Or someone would say during a break, “This should only take us a few hours.” Six hours later, we were still hiking.

While the Wyoming trek was nothing like Alaska, I heard similar things, such as “Just another half a mile.” Instead, it was two miles. Or someone would say, “We're getting close!” That was a lie. My personal favorite or, should I say my least favorite, was, “Come on, guys, we can do it. We're almost there!” I must have heard that one a hundred times. Why would we have to say it a hundred times if we were truly almost there? Simple, because we weren't.

What happens when we hear statements like these? *We get our hopes up.* What happens when they turn out not to be true? *Our hopes are crushed.* I liken these statements to the boy who cried “Wolf!” and the wolf never came. The townspeople never responded and, eventually, they stopped listening. I'd rather you not say anything at all, or, at least, respect me enough to tell me the truth. Say, “We're not even close. We have a long way to go, or this will not be easy.” At least I know what to expect.

As a leader, *don't deceive those following you* with statements like these. If you want your teammates to take you seriously, don't cry “Wolf!” Be honest. Be transparent. Be real. Tell them like it is; then, they can be prepared for whatever is coming. Cry “Wolf” once and people will respond. *Cry “Wolf” multiple times, and your people will end up dead.*

Lesson 11 – “Brain Freeze Spring”

Prevent distresses by providing de-stressors.

Prolonged backpacking is strenuous, for sure, on the body and the mind. One invaluable element, that we all recognized, to combat those difficult days was *team morale*. When morale was high, we could endure anything; when morale was low, we whined like babies.

So then, the question is how did we maintain our morale? Having conversations with a fellow foot-traveler was a start; some even sang or played games. We took frequent water breaks and photo ops. We encouraged each other often; and, laughter was a huge help! But, the thing I noticed that brought us all back to life at once was... a spring.

On one of our days, high in the mountains, we ran across a pipe sticking out of the ground; it was gushing cold water. It was as if Moses had struck the rock for the desert-wanderers of Israel; we quickly dropped our bags and gathered around to watch it, sit by it, dip our hands in it, and, of course, drink from it. Some of the guys even filled their hats full of the water and, then, put it back on their heads, effectively soaking every inch of their bodies. They remarked that the water was so cold that their brains were frozen!

We enjoyed that spring so much that we sat around it for an hour. One of our girls even carved a sign that read, “Brain Freeze Spring.” What a joyous hour that was. I was reminded of Jesus’ words, that He is “Living Water,” our source of salvation, hope, and joy! We forgot our problems, our complaints, the challenges of the day, and we thanked God for “Brain Freeze Spring!” It was one of the highlights of our trip.

Good leaders must pay attention to team morale. If morale is high, your teammates can endure anything; but if morale is low, beware of the babies! They will surface immediately. Burnout is a real thing; and if your teammates reach that point, they will drop like flies. *Without a renewable source of encouragement, their strength will fail.* Find that spring and water them often -- body, soul, and spirit.

Lesson 12 – “The Leaning Stick”

Everyone needs someone to lean on.

After the third day of backpacking in the Bighorns, I was spent. We had three days to go, and our guide warned us that two of them would be uphill most of the way. Yikes! I had been praying to God for strength the whole time, but when I heard that news – that the next two days would be our hardest – I prayed without ceasing!

The next morning, when we were about the hit the trail, I was wrapping up my heavenward calls for help, when one of our boys came up to me and said, “I found this walking stick. It is perfect for the trail, but I already have one. Would you like to have it?” I knew instantly that my teammate was the answer to me prayers!

I had never used a walking stick before but I immediately noticed its benefits – balance, relieving some of the burden on an incline, and securing my footing on a decline. The best benefit of was that I could lean on it during our breaks. I’ve never been one for the “loser’s lean” as my coaches called it. You know, when you’re doubled over after a hundred-yard sprint or a suicide drill. However, I had no problem with leaning on this stick! It eased the pressure from my back and legs. Rather than calling this staff my walking stick, I named it my “leaning stick.”

For the next three days, I thanked God for that leaning stick. When the trail ended, I wanted to take it on the bus with me, as a reminder of His goodness. Then, I thought to myself, how dumb is that? What was I going to do, hang it on my wall at home? No, so I took a picture of me with it instead. Still pretty silly, I know, but I don’t care. *The Lord is my leaning stick!*

Every leader, no matter how much of a go-getter he or she is, needs a “leaning stick,” something or someone to lean on when times get tough. What or who is it that you lean on when your strength fails? Things are temporary and people are imperfect. *God is best.* He is not a crutch, mind you; *He is the stretcher.* “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and *lean not* on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your trails.”