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The Outdoor Network logo is a Chinese alphabet character meaning "to share in knowledge."

RISK MANAGEMENT

Building a Risk Management Lexicon

by Karen Paisley, Jim Sibthorp, and Andy Szolosi, University of Utah

Editor's note: *We at The Outdoor Network believe that the work being done by the University of Utah to develop a risk management lexicon is one of the most significant steps being taken right now to advance the service sector of the outdoor education and recreation industry. With insurance companies, regulatory agencies, mainstream media, and other stakeholders, our industry often has no voice. How can we if we don't even have a common language?*

Developing the risk management lexicon is only half the work: the other half is putting it into use. We encourage you not only to participate in the Utah risk management study, but also to adopt the risk management terms and definitions that the Utah group has developed, and use them in your own program (see the sidebar for more information on taking the survey and obtaining the definitions).

The Outdoor Network will continue to publish results from the Utah group and make the information available for you to use in your program.

Managing risks in the field is, perhaps, the single most important dimension of running a successful outdoor expeditionary program — a topic that is certainly worthy of dialogue among professionals. The problem is that we, as an industry, can't talk about it and don't know how different organizations manage risks. Why not? Among other reasons, some of which are highlighted by the St. Paul (2001) study, many organizations tend to have their own jargon, a language of sorts that is specific to that organization.

For example, what do we mean by "risk?" Do we define it in pragmatic terms, such as "the potential for serious injury or death," or in more philosophical terms, such as "an essential program element employed to facilitate desired outcomes?" Or, perhaps even more complicated, what does the term "instructor judgment" conjure in individual risk managers' minds? Without a common vocabulary, any attempts at real communication are limited. In essence, we find ourselves blindly describing and discussing different parts of the proverbial elephant.

A Risk Management Taxonomy

In the fall of 2002, the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) approached the University of Utah, as a comparatively impartial player, to develop a risk management taxonomy for outdoor expeditionary

programs (OEPs), which we defined as running trips of two or more nights in the field. This taxonomy, ideally, would relate risk management strategies and the types of programs that use them: Do programs offering week-long trips rely more or less heavily on instructor judgment than organizations offering 30-day expeditions? Do programs with more stringent participant screenings rely more on participants to self-manage certain risks? Among other applications, such a taxonomy could be incredibly useful for internal self-evaluations as well as for identifying baseline industry standards.

To develop this taxonomy, the initial intent was to design a survey for OEPs that would capture a picture of common field hazards, common strategies to deal with these hazards, and programmatic factors (e.g., program size) that might influence strategies used to deal with given hazards. We certainly recognize that individual programs experience risks and utilize management strategies that are, in some way, unique to that particular program. The outdoor expeditionary industry is as multi-faceted as its providers, with programs ranging from overnight trips to 30 day expeditions to semesters overseas.

However, while acknowledging our diversity, it seems probable that there are some universal concerns and challenges facing the industry as a whole. If we could identify and contain these, we could have a foundation for that meaningful dialogue sought by many risk managers who may feel they are operating in isolation. A risk management vocabulary could not only facilitate communication between individual organizations, but between organizations and insurance agencies, and between organizations and external stakeholders, as well. Further, a common understanding of terms could simplify the internal processes of writing job descriptions and evaluating employees. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to take the first steps toward the creation of an industry-wide risk management taxonomy, to obtain some baseline data, and to foster dialogue among professionals — namely, you.

We, at the U of U, began the study process by reviewing existing literature on risk management. Much of this literature was from other fields (e.g., the field of industrial safety) and was, obviously, not fully relevant to OEPs. While the existing literature offered a poor basis for a common and meaningful language, it did establish a need to further explore the language and terminology employed in OEP risk management.

To address this need, we conducted interviews with some of the industry's risk managers at the 2002 Wilderness Risk Managers Conference (WRMC) in Reno to gain a fundamental overview of industry jargon. We listened to the tape recordings of these interviews and identified two key points: First, while the interviews were fascinating, we weren't much better off than we were before in terms of our literature review. Second, in explanation of the first and as we expected, different individuals held widely varied, often organization-specific definitions of risk management, and these opinions were, in general, held quite strongly. Overall, the results of the interview process suggested a different, more structured approach to the problem.

Calling All Programs

You can download the risk management terms and definitions at the project's website **http://www.health.utah.edu/prt/rmstudy**. The site will feature information about the status of the research and resources for professionals as it becomes available.

A pilot version of an instrument that will be used to create a taxonomy of risk management strategies in outdoor expeditionary programs is currently undergoing testing with 25 industry professionals to shorten, refine, and improve the content and format. The large-scale data collection will take place in the winter of 2003. If you would like to participate in this industry-wide effort and to would like to receive a complimentary copy of the final report in the spring of 2004, please email andrew.szolosi@health.utah.edu or visit the project's web site the address above.

The Delphi Study

Think of the ancient Oracle at Delphi, where confused souls sought the advice of a wise voice. A Delphi study is simply that: a qualitative research technique that seeks to build consensus among a panel of experts, often through several rounds of communication. Experts' opinions are sought on an individual basis in response to a specific issue. In this case, opinions were solicited via e-mail on the issue of potential survey items addressing our three inter-related concepts: field-based hazards, strategies for managing those hazards, and program characteristics that might be related to the use of those strategies. The individual communication is used to prevent any sense of peer pressure from influencing the experts' opinions.

Once all of the responses are received, the research team compiles the initial results, makes any necessary

modifications to the material, and sends the information to the experts again. This process is repeated until consensus is achieved. Ideally, the Delphi study would produce an instrument for us that offers a reasonable amount of confidence in its ability to produce accurate and meaningful results from the people who ultimately respond to the survey.

The first step was to identify the panel of experts. Due to the diverse nature of the outdoor industry, we looked for experts to represent a wide range of OEP risk management views. Ultimately, we selected seven individuals as members of the panel, and they represented the following dimensions of the outdoor industry:

- University programs
- Industry consultants
- "Small" (regional) programs
- "Large" (national) programs
- Therapeutic programs
- Residential camping programs
- Legal counsel specializing in outdoor recreation law

After being advised of the potential time commitment and other requirements, these representatives agreed to volunteer their time for three rounds of review.

Round 1: We compiled a preliminary list of 15 field-based hazards (St. Paul, 2001) and 25 risk management strategies (e.g., Kearns & Maughlin, 2002; St. Paul, 2001) employed by OEPs. Then we asked the experts to do four things. First, they were asked to delete, combine, or clarify the wording of any of the risk management strategies, and to suggest any strategies they believed to be missing from the list. (Example of a risk management strategy: Field Staff Screening.) Second, they were asked to identify a category for each strategy, selecting from "Staff," "Participants," "Program Operations," "Re-evaluation," or "Other (please specify)," a classification scheme loosely modeled after Cline and Curtis (2002).

Third, they were asked to clarify the wording of the list of field-based hazards and make any necessary additions, combinations, or deletions. (Example of a field-based hazard: Program Activity.) Finally, we asked them, in an open-ended question, to identify any program characteristics they believed might be involved in deciding which strategies to use. Responses were then compiled and changes were made. From round one, we learned that we needed to provide additional levels of detail and explanation.

Round 2: This time we provided some typical examples of each strategy. For example, as an explanation of "Field Staff Screening," we added "verification of employee skills and certifications, medical screening of employees." We removed unused categories of risk management strategies, reducing the categories to "Staff," "Participants," and "Program Administration." We also clarified the list of field-based hazards: "Program Activity" became "Risk inherent in the program activity itself." We added two hazards to the list. A list of 20 initial program characteristics was identified.

We then asked the experts similar questions to those in the first round. As before, we also asked and provided space for any further comments. Again, responses for this round were compiled, changes were made, and a final request was sent out.

Round 3: Based on the results from Round 2, we identified "final" lists of 20 risk management strategies, 15 specific field-based hazards, and 22 program characteristics. In this last round, we asked the experts to take more solid (and difficult) stands. First, we presented the results of the panel's categorization of risk management strategies from Round 2. Then, if the experts didn't agree with the results, we asked them to make modifications to the wording of the strategies until they *did* agree with where each strategy was placed.

With respect to the hazards, we asked them to identify the primary source for each one (either "internal to the organization," "within the environment," or "related to external parties") — assuming that *unacceptable* levels of the hazard had occurred. Finally, we asked the experts to consider the list of program characteristics and rank the top five they believed would impact the selection and utilization of risk management strategies. As always, we provided space for any additional feedback. We then analyzed the experts' responses.

Results

The results suggest that we now have a starting point for an industry-wide risk management taxonomy. The experts provided their express and implied support of the list of 20 final risk management strategies as comprehensive and understandable (see table 1). They also supported the final list of 15 hazards (see table 2). Their feedback provided us with a starting point for programmatic factors that may influence how organizations choose to deal with risks. While we certainly realize that no list will ever be completely exhaustive, we do have a mutually understood foundation of "universals."

Further, we are moving towards the dialogue so needed by our profession: based on the results of the Delphi process, we were able to create an internet-based survey instrument designed for large-scale, industry-wide use. Individuals who complete this survey for their

organization will be able to obtain real-time comparisons to similar organizations. These results, hopefully, will spark critical examination, both internally and as an industry. We need baselines for standard practices and we hope this survey will help us move toward that goal. 享

Table 1: Field-based risk management strategies

Here is the list of comprehensive and understandable risk management strategies that our Delphi panel reached through consensus:
1. Field staff screening
2. Formal wilderness medical training requirement of field staff
3. Mentoring & apprenticeship
4. Field staff training
5. Field staff (instructor) judgment
6. Supervision of field staff
7. Participant screening
8. Pre-course communication
9. Participant training
10. Supervision of participants
11. Emergency action plan
12. Policies and procedures
13. Critical incident stress debriefing
14. Internal incident review procedure
15. External incident review procedure
16. Internal review of safety management protocols
17. External review of safety management protocols
18. Course documentation
19. Course debriefings
20. Venue evaluation or location scouting

Table 2: Specific field-based hazards

Here is the list of field-based hazards that our Delphi panel reached through consensus:
1. Risk inherent in the program activity itself
2. Driving/Transportation
3. Environmental
4. Participant misbehavior
5. Staff incompetence
6. Medical management
7. Lack of participant supervision
8. Poor instruction
9. Equipment malfunction
10. Misalignment of program activity with program policy
11. Inappropriate staff to participant interaction/contact
12. Public interactions
13. Competition with other institutions
14. Poor nutrition and dehydration
15. Poor hygiene

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About the authors: *All are in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah. Karen Paisley, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor and coordinates the Experiential Education emphasis area (karen.paisley@health.utah.edu, 801-587-9617). Jim Sibthorp, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor and teaches courses in research methods, experiential education, and commercial recreation. Jim has been actively involved in adventure recreation instruction since 1987 (jim.sibthorp@health.utah.edu, 801-581-5940). Andy Szolosi is a doctoral student focusing on experiential education philosophy (andrew.szolosi@health.utah.edu, 801-581-7521).*

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