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Adventure Games, Initiative Problems,
Trust Activities and a Guide to Effective Leadership

Pairs Squared
Auto Tag
Merges
Twizzle
Do-Go
Whizz-Bang
Foss and Questors
Up-Chuck
Mirage
Slap
Monarch
Striker
Ricochet
Kiln

Karl Rohnke

Steve Butler

Chapter One

The Basics

To paraphrase an old saying: “It’s not *what* you play that’s important; it’s *how* you play it.” The field of Adventure is different from traditional physical education activities, from traditional methods of counseling, from traditional styles of teaching, and from the “old school” of training and professional development.

What’s the difference? Two things:

- 1) The leader/facilitator doesn’t provide all the answers to the group; primarily the participants learn from each other.
- 2) Adventure experiences intentionally contain a certain amount of spontaneous unpredictability. Spell that F–U–N.

In more traditional models of teaching and leading, the instructor is seen as the definitive source of all pertinent information. The teacher passes knowledge on, and the participants learn it. The participants, in this sense, are generally viewed as receivers rather than learners. As Adventure *facilitators*, leadership is different. Adventure leaders present activities in a way that allows the group to develop its own abilities, with guidance from the leader when appropriate.

Adventure leaders take people out of their standard frame of reference and ask them to engage in things new and different. You’re not playing volleyball, basketball or football. Adventure programming involves people hitting a beach ball as many times as possible without allowing it to touch the ground. Adventure activities ask people to *create* an animal using their bodies. Adventure leaders encourage



utilization of the same skills — cooperation, teamwork, communication, trust, decision-making, creative problem-solving — that are taught more didactically in schools, seminars and training programs. The educational outcomes may be similar, but the approach is purposefully different.

The Leader’s Role

Do not try to satisfy your vanity by teaching a great many things. Awaken people’s curiosity. It is enough to open minds; do not overload them. Put there just a spark. If there is some good inflammable stuff, it will catch fire.

— Anatole France

In Adventure, what is the optimal role for a leader in a group? Are you the center — with everything revolving around you? Are you in front directing everyone to follow you — like a

flock of geese? Are you the focus of attention? Are you, in fact, the *leader*?

This topic has raised many questions over the years. The strict definition of a leader is one who is in front guiding or directing those following behind. To some extent, an Adventure leader is conforming to this definition. When and how?

In the Beginning

In the first 15–30 minutes of a program, put yourself front-and-center to show people you know what's going on and to help put them at ease by providing a comfortable and confident persona that they can easily relate to.

Any analysis of group dynamics indicates that when a group first comes together it looks to the *leader* for direction and support. At the outset of an Adventure experience, you, as the leader, will be maintaining a high level of visibility and modeling the types of behavior you want in the group.

Your directions need to be clear and concise; your attention is focused on getting

the group involved in activities as quickly and easily as possible. You would most likely be the focus of the group's attention — if they're focusing on you they are less likely to be worrying about how others are perceiving them. Your presence provides stability, security and purpose.

You might begin by telling them something about your background and training — provide them with a reason(s) to trust. The Experiential Learning Cycle, The Full Value Contract, Challenge By Choice — are all pieces of information that may allow people to understand and feel comfortable about what they are going to do together. In many instances, giving people background information can be a wonderful lead-in. It's easy to assume that this information is boring and dull compared with the activities you want to present, and thus to ignore it. But just because it's low energy stuff doesn't mean it is ineffective.

When might this type of information *not* be useful?

How about with a group of elementary school students? At a conference where you



only have 90 minutes to present? To a gym full of teachers (50 or more) for a half day of team building?

Even in these situations, while you might not use a lengthy verbal presentation, a case could be made for including one. For the elementary students, it could give them some understanding of the behaviors appropriate for the day. At the conference, it might give the activities more meaning and put them in a context where the participants see more value in the Adventure approach beyond just the “fun and games” aspect. For the 50+ teachers, it may create some mental “buy-in” if they are at all resistant to the idea of Adventure programming.

More often than not, we start our programs with this type of introduction.

When not starting with a verbal introduction, get people actively involved as quickly as possible. Physical activity usually captures people’s attention, so movement is a good starting point. *Pairs Tag*, *Birthday Line Up*, any name games (*Name By Name*, *Toss-a-name*, *Wompum*, etc.), *Circle the Circle* are common choices to kick off a program.

What these games tend to have in common are: Simple rules, little or no equipment, no skills required and fun. They also allow you, as the leader, to join in. Being part of the group at this stage is a great way of opening the door for everyone to participate. When people see that you are involved, they are more likely to feel comfortable participating.

Over the years, I think I have started programs with almost every conceivable activity — from *Quick Name* (a.k.a. *Hustle Handle*) to *Lap Sit*, from *Human Knots* to *Porcupine Progression*, from *Pairs Tag* to *Moonball*. Each choice reflected my interpretation of what was going to start that group’s experience with the appropriate level of energy and involvement. These ideas of how to start and with what activity is not a guaranteed recipe for success. You must be able to discern for yourself what will work best for you. If you don’t like all of the activities mentioned above,

then using them as an introduction would in all likelihood be a poor choice. Consider them as examples as models, of what work well.

Moving On

As a group progresses in its development, your role changes. By presenting trust activities, you begin to establish a comfortable and secure feeling among group members. They will not need to rely solely on your influence and presence to be safe, and the group can begin to be responsible for itself.

Progressing to Initiatives and low ropes course elements focuses the group on communication, cooperation and decision-making. Again, your role lessens if you want the group members to be able to develop their own abilities. Your presence becomes one of a supporter, an encourager, a coach.

The level at which you verbalize and demonstrate this support is determined by certain variables:

- The age and maturity of the group — the more responsible people can be for themselves, the more space you can provide for them to develop on their own. A group of elementary students generally needs more coaching than a group of adults.
- The readiness of the group — some individuals and groups are more able to process their own experience. If group members are able to manage safety issues, conflict and other issues as they arise, then a facilitator provides little more than guidance, because people are developing insights and generating questions on their own.
- The length of the program — usually, a group develops better skills over time. You need to be more directive and visible in a shorter program. But if the group has time to establish its own process, your role is more of facilitation than leadership.
- The goals of the program — a day of fun and activities for an orientation requires one level of involvement; a day of team



building with a staff that is at odds with each other dictates a different approach. It's essential to understand the goals of the group so that your actions can be focused on the outcome desired.

A question to ask yourself: "From what I say and do, am I *leading* the group — helping them to learn — or *facilitating* — helping them to learn from each other?"

My (Steve) initial training and experience had been leading New Games trainings, where the leadership style was more attuned to creating and maintaining a high level of involvement for and with the participants. It was difficult to change that pattern of facilitation. In particular, presenting Initiative activities was an uncomfortable role at first — having to stand back and allow the group to work on its own with little or no input. I sometimes felt that I wasn't doing my job as the leader of the group.

As was often the case in my own personal development as a leader, new ideas and ways of doing things dawned slowly. I wanted the group to succeed so they (and I) could feel

successful. I wanted them to try it "my way" — either how I had learned it or how I perceived it to be easier for them — so that they could perhaps accomplish the task but also so that I could provide some direction and support to the group. I didn't want to sit still and observe because I didn't like the silence. I felt that I knew something — the answer, a technique, a strategy — and I wanted to share it. Sometimes I would intervene to offer a suggestion, a thought, an idea. Now I try not to.

I came to learn over the years that my interventions were not always appropriate or helpful. I would insist that my motives were nothing but the best (to help the group), but was I really working toward that goal? Did the group really need (or want) *my* help to complete their task? I came to realize that the answer was oftentimes *no*.

It took some careful observation of other leaders to recognize that my help might not be the best resource for the group. I saw other leaders "help" by not offering suggestions and hints, but by sitting back and then, during a debrief,

asking insightful questions that allowed the group to understand what had just happened. While my input might lead to a successful solution and lessen or eliminate some conflict, at the same time my input might also diminish the accomplishment of the group. Would I become a crutch, an aid, that they would come to rely on? Was I setting myself up as a leader, without whom the group could not succeed? Was my leadership and direction masking issues and opportunities for the group to learn about itself, to develop and improve its own skills?

These questions are not easy ones to answer. What may work for one group in one situation may be inappropriate for another group in the same situation. What works for one group once may not be effective at a later time because the group dynamics have changed. The central question is: Are you helping the group to learn its own lessons or are you trying to teach them your lessons? In some cases they may be the same and your input may provide important insights. The answer should be (as much as possible) that the group learns best from itself with the minimal amount of help and input from you.

You might think this point refers only to Initiatives. Not so: The same ideas apply to the entire range of Adventure programming. Even simple warm-ups and icebreakers can be presented in a way that limits rather than enhances the group's ability to make the experience its own. As leaders, your goal is to create an atmosphere of fun and learning where people have a wide range of opportunities available to them. If they like some aspect of a game that is different from what you like, their choice is more important. So long as safety issues and concerns aren't being compromised, give the group as much flexibility as you can to define the experience for itself.

You can interpret this style of leadership as being limiting. It limits your ability to influence the group's decisions and your response to problems that emerge within the group. Challenge that idea. By limiting your direct

input to the group during an activity, your facilitation can enhance the group's growth and ability to improve itself more than if you had *led* them to success.

Elements of a Successful Program

There are four basic elements of an Adventure experience. It is the goal of the Adventure facilitator to see that they all happen.

- Trust
- Communication
- Cooperation
- Fun

Trust

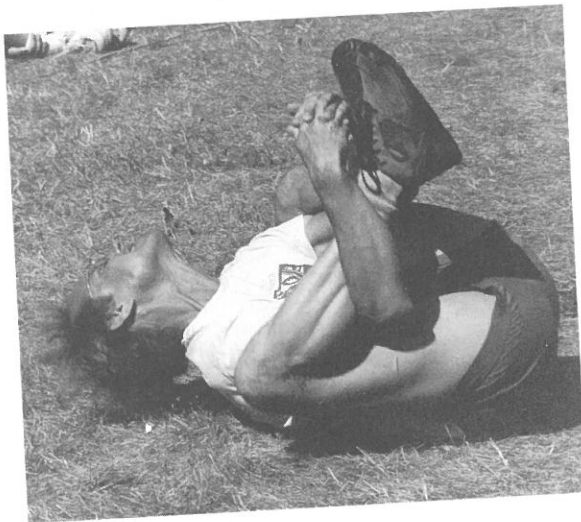
Trust is the safety key that opens the experiential door. It allows people to share pieces of themselves without fearing that they'll be laughed at or ignored. It creates opportunities for people to meet new challenges, knowing that others are there to support them. It means giving something a try, perhaps not succeeding, but knowing that the group will support additional attempts without ridicule.

Trust starts with you as the leader. From the start, if you model openness, encouragement, sensitivity and competence people will feel safe with you. They will also feel safe with and may open up to others in the group. Your role is to create an encouraging blanket of trust so that group members can learn to rely on each other. As the leader you also continuously monitor the trust to ensure that no one is hurt by the experience.

A sure-fire method to begin developing trust is to start your activity sequence by having people learn each other's names. Most people we know, ourselves included, feel somewhat intimidated by groups of people we don't know. *Toss-a-Name*, *Wompum*, *Peek-a-Who* and *Name By Name* are almost certainly to appear in the first hour of any session we lead. Name recognition develops trust.

There's no doubt that participants often look askance when we explain *Speed Rabbit*, do the *Dog Shake*, or embody the spirit of a *Gelfling*. People may feel embarrassed and uncomfortable for a while. But they participate. If you demonstrate by example that it's OK to look silly, people will feel more willing to take an emotional or physical risk. Demonstrate that you know what you're doing. Let them see your competence yet don't be afraid to look silly. Let them know you too are willing to take some risks.

Remember, people need to trust *you* first.



Communication

Communication is linked closely with trust. People working closely together need to communicate to prevent problems from arising. Communication allows people to share their viewpoints, to learn from the experiences of others, and fosters an environment where people can talk openly about their feelings.

Like trust, communication begins with you, the leader. Set a tone, help establish goals, and provide a framework for the participants. Your ability to communicate what to expect of the experience and how it works is a crucial element in making people feel included and safe.

Your *style* of communicating can be as influential as *what* you communicate. (More on *style* later.) Humor and personal warmth are

invariably more effective than a strict and belabored approach. Invite people to join; don't force them to participate. This freedom results in a greater sense of involvement and usually allows people to feel more comfortable taking on new challenges.

Use mixer-type games early in the program to establish bonds between people. *Categories*, *Nonsense Numbers*, *Invisible Partners* are examples of some fun ways to encourage people to share a little about themselves. Hearing about others, recognizing there are similarities and differences, finding something in common with someone else — all these factors can contribute to a sense of belonging. Don't underestimate the value of allowing people to get to know each other. And remember, it can (and should) be fun.

As the leader, you want to open the lines of communication. How? Listen to what people are saying. Show that you value their comments and suggestions. Ask if they have any questions before starting a game. Be open to changing a rule or adapting the action if it will allow more involvement. Try not to restrict what people do — provide opportunities for them to decide for themselves what they want to do.

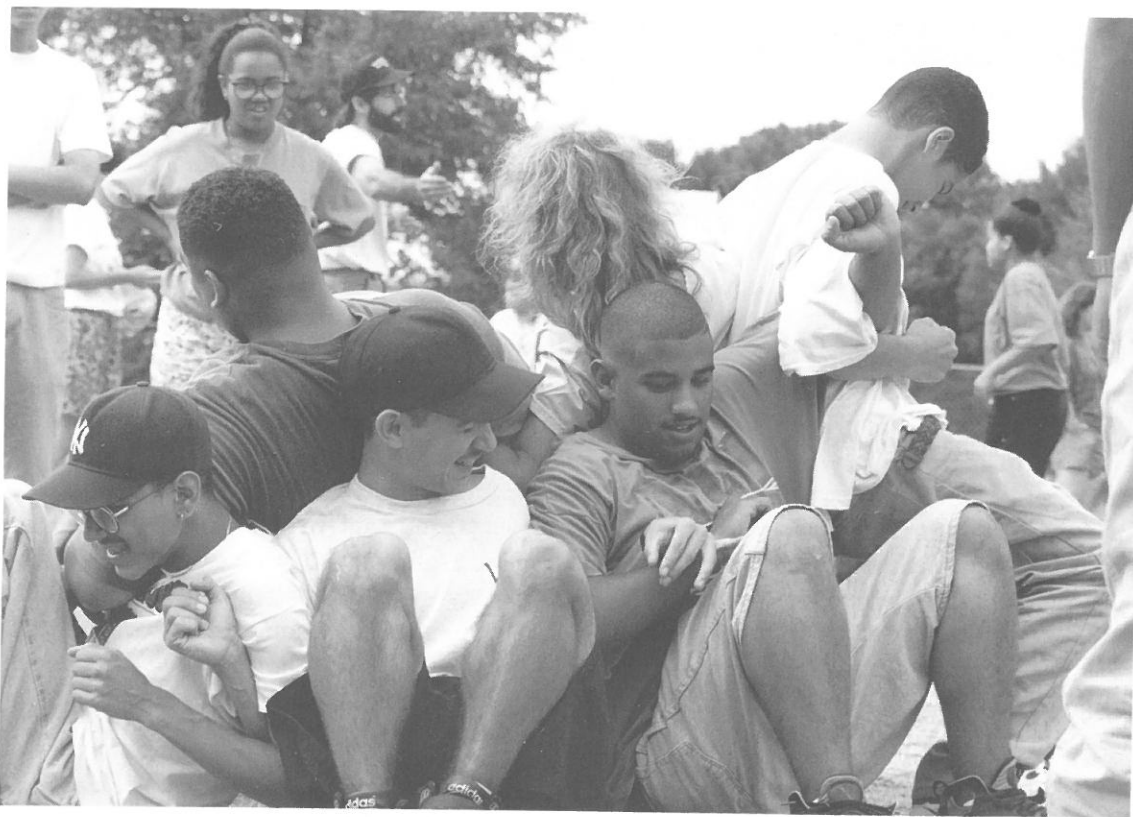
Embody the behaviors you want to see in others. People "understand" as much or more about you by watching what you do and don't do as they gather from listening to what you say.

Strive for simplicity. Keep things moving. Participate in the games. Have fun.

Cooperation

Adventure activities focus on people working and playing together. The goal is to increase each participant's ability to work as part of a group, and to develop in each person a better appreciation of what she or he can contribute.

People sometimes have the impression that because Project Adventure activities focus on cooperation, there is no competition in our programs. Competition isn't inherently bad, but we do feel that designating individuals as winners and losers isn't necessary. The



win-at-all-costs mentality causes many students to feel that they are not skilled enough to compete with their more talented peers and that physical activity is something to be avoided.

Cooperation doesn't have to replace competition. But since there are so many opportunities for people to compete and lose, why not offer some opportunities where everyone can compete and win? Competition can be structured so that everyone can feel good about their involvement. After hitting a moonball 77 consecutive times, it doesn't matter if everyone in the group hit the ball an equal number of times. The whole group takes credit for achieving the score, and even someone on the periphery of the action feels included in the group's success. Early in a program, this sense of accomplishment and success can influence profoundly the ability of the group to work together later in the program doing more challenging Initiative tasks like the *Spider's Web*.

Activities like *Moonball*, *Group Juggling* and *Warp Speed*, *Quick Line Up*, *Earthwinds* and *Birthday Line Up* provide attainable challenges for most groups. People feel good about their success. They work together, share in the accomplishment, and learn techniques that allow them to attempt more difficult problems and overcome greater risks.

Remember, though, that working together takes effort and is not always easy. It takes practice. Some people don't like to do it. Give the group time and expect some rough spots. Be there to support them when necessary, but don't give away the solutions.

Successful teams, performers and artists spend countless hours developing their skills before they can use them proficiently. Create opportunities. Provide challenges. Encourage creativity and praise effort, even when it may not produce a successful solution.

Fun

Leading Adventure programs is serious business. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. If it wasn't serious, we wouldn't be in business. What's serious about it is that you're trying to help people learn and grow. Learning and developing new skills are serious endeavors.

The unusual thing about Adventure is that it's also fun. Fun, and play, are not supposed to be serious. To most adults, fun is considered frivolous — something with little long-term value. Fun is associated with amusement, recreation and merriment, not usually with education, at least not in the traditional sense.

Fun is central to the Adventure experience. Fun is important because people are involved when they're enjoying themselves. People are motivated, their attention is more focused, their energies are higher. Fun can be an end in itself, as well as a powerful tool in an educational program.

What are some of our most favorite *fun* activities? What do we go to if the group seems sluggish, nervous, uninterested or unenthusiastic? Anything that creates action, laughter and energy. *Pairs Tag, Pairs Squared, FFEACH, Peek-a-Who, Asteroids* and *Anklebiters, Pitfall* and *Wizards & Gelflings*. These are certifiable sparklers, games that produce intensity, gaggles of giggles and that flush of satisfaction that says, "Let's do that again!"

Whether you work in a school, hospital, camp, service agency or corporation, the fun component will be necessary if your Adventure program is to succeed. Fun is intertwined in everything that we do to the extent that some might say we have too much fun. For us, however, always keeping the fun quotient high is our way of ensuring that the quality of the program is also at its highest. You can have an Adventure program without fun, but we don't think you can have a very good one.



What is Fun?



By Steve Butler

To me, fun is a feeling and therefore somewhat hard to describe. Fun is laughter, energy, imagination, sharing, risking, challenge. It's spontaneous, focused, delightful, unpredictable. Fun is hard to manufacture, but easy to recognize when happening. Fun tends to be the kind of experience that you recognize being part of, but you may have a difficult time initiating.

Fun is contagious. People want to be part of it. You may risk looking silly to be a *Speed Rabbit*; you may feel nervous wearing a blindfold in the *Pitfall*; you may feel awkward jumping in *Hop Box*, but you'll try it if it looks like fun. Remember that fact. If you can present activities so people can see the fun inherent in what's happening, their fears, anxieties and concerns will most likely seem less inhibiting.

Fun is the invitation toward active involvement. It's the welcome sign that indicates it's OK to relax. Fun creates an immediate sense of togetherness and camaraderie that is essential to the group process. Even with the name games we play to start a workshop, the emphasis is on fun. Adding a rubber chicken or a weird ball to *Toss-a-Name* injects levity. The hilarity of guessing an opponent's name in *Peek-a-Who* establishes that there can be competition without fear of losing. Fun is essential to beginning a program, class or workshop. If you want to get folks enthusiastic about Adventure, start your course with a series of activities that have a high fun quotient.

Fun in Adventure is all this and more. It's a new experience with unpredictable outcomes — it's the uncertainty of finding

your partner in *Hog Call*, the anxiety of a *Trust Fall*, the abject fear of stepping off the *Zip Wire* platform. Yet the experience is sequenced so as to produce trust and encourage involvement. You, as the leader, need to carefully prepare the group, physically, mentally and emotionally.

Fun can sometimes be hidden or seem to disappear. When a group has been working hard on an Initiative and is about to give up, fun may feel like an illusion. But fun is your tool to bring people back, to focus them again on what is happening within the group. Even in a serious debrief, highlighting some of the fun that occurred or asking people to draw a picture of what happened are ways to have participants put their struggles in perspective. With a serious set of program goals to achieve and a short time-frame, it can be easy to forget the enjoyment and focus only on the didactic learnings. Remember, when the fun disappears, people's energy and enthusiasm are often next.

It may seem difficult to justify fun during times of tight budgets, when people want value for their program dollar. But if one thing has been consistent for us over the years, it is that if the Adventure program is fun-filled, people always seem to want more. If they want more and participate more actively, the result is that they benefit more from the experience.

In all the successful programs we know, and for all the accomplished leaders we see, the one factor that remains constant is fun. It's what makes the experience come alive. It keeps people focused, engaged and connected to each other and the activities. That is why fun is not only important; *it is absolutely essential.*