

## Ease of Long Practice

How prone to doubt, how cautious are the wise!  
Homer: *Odyssey XIII*

And in Homer's poem, the wisest of the wise was Odysseus: leader, warrior-hero, and battered sea-man; strong, brave and noble, famed for his shrewdness. But it is very likely that Odysseus exercised his doubt and caution without studying the theory of risk management. He probably learnt sound judgment on the job. It became instinctive.

Would-be leaders of risky sports in New Zealand are to follow a supposedly less chancy path. The experts encourage or oblige them to adopt a fanciful and bookish approach to planning: either the Risk Analysis and Management System (RAMS), or some other similar 'planning matrix'. This will help people to become competent, safe leaders. Or will it? If you favour the notion either that leaders are born and not made, or, conversely, that zestful, sure leadership comes mainly from experience and from a love for the sports, then you might view the RAMS sceptically. As I do.

The believers in the RAMS, however, hold that important skills – 'risk identification, assessment and reduction' – can be taught and learnt. In plain English we're talking here about spotting danger, working out how nasty it is, and doing something about it.

They have a point. If confined to one sport, 'risk analysis' without the capitals may be merely a new name for an old process. As a young mountaineer, I bought and read Wilhelm Paulcke's well-known classic, *Hazards in Mountaineering*. It complemented what I was learning 'on the hill'. When, in 1973, I took the winter mountain leadership certificate, one lecturer recommended us to read *The Avalanche Enigma*. All this, I suppose, was a part of my learning about risk analysis. Similarly, the NZ Mountain Safety Council's excellent *Bushcraft* includes a few pages about staying alive: some specific and nearly graph-less common sense.

### RAMS Forms

But the RAMS-promoters take the process further. They favour a written checklist of dangers and of what we propose to do about them. These RAMS forms are remarkable. There's room for every eventuality. And so I can now transfer all that is in my head – all that I've learnt from Wilhelm Paulcke, from hundreds of other books, from half a lifetime's mountaineering and instructing – onto a sheet of paper. Rows and columns. Not only this, but filling in these RAMS forms is 'sound professional practice', and so brings me bang up to date with the law.

Reassuring, isn't it? ...

'Yes, m'lud. We did complete a RAMS form in triplicate. And it clearly listed "losing the balance" as a causal factor for a leader's loss of contact with the rock.'

'But you still went ahead with your foolish sport?'

'Yes, m'lud. The boulder was only two metres high, and we calculated odds of a-million-to-one against landing on your head.'

'Were you not aware that the figure for normal life is two-million-to-one?'

'No. We were a little out of touch with current trends.'

'All right. I propose to deal with you leniently. You will undertake five days of community service at the RAMS Enforcement Agency. And we can learn from this tragedy. We need not be disheartened. Indeed, the court has heard evidence to show that by following a Pathway to Change and by Blocking the Outcome, there's the prospect of making climbing safer than normal life.'

'Thank you, m'lud. It's an exciting concept. Climbers could lead the way in Relevant Industry Standards; they could set new norms for the whole industry.'

### Manual 27

Furthermore, to help us oldies to adjust to the received wisdom of the time, we have Manual 27, *Managing Risk in Outdoor Activities*, a serious entry-level bible, spiced with fearless research and devoid of anything so unsound as a passionate reference to the outdoors. Lurking under the label of the NZ Mountain Safety Council, Manual 27 is a safetyology textbook. It presents a 'scientific' view of leadership, one which is biased in emphasis and distorted by omission. This leadership lacks sweat, muscular strength, stamina and willpower. It knows not rebellion and wit. Unless you search very carefully, it cares not for local knowledge. How often does the book mention qualifications, such as Single Pitch Climbing Instructor? Twice, I think, briefly and almost apologetically. And how do the safetyologists catch the passion? They catch it with 'positive outcomes' and 'peak experiences', with 'magic' and with 'self-validating experiences'.

Like much else from academia, Manual 27 is all brain and no heart, all science and no art; but real leadership has a great deal of heart, art, and intuition. An intelligent instructor knows intuitively the difference between perceived risk and real risk; if they don't, then they're not bright enough to be teaching risky sports. Educationists of the 20th century have revered the quantitative and the measurable. There has been widespread scepticism about the value of intuitive thinking. How unfortunate, for this mistrust to seep into outdoor education. What a mistake, to downplay the other factors: experience, specialism, skill, ease of long practice, intuitive judgment, local knowledge, correct equipment, and sheer flair. The book does not of course omit these; its flood of science de-emphasises them, perhaps unintentionally. There is irony here: that experiential education, meaning teaching and learning relating to or derived from experience, should throw up an approach that is so uneffusive about experience.

Manual 27 is a classic of its kind. It jerks you through a carnival of bulleted lists, indents, cartoons, bold print, flowcharts, tables, graphs, tautology, cliché and sociological jargon. It is so indigestible that you fail to notice its occasional forays into plain English and sound advice. André Maurois, in *The Art of Living*, reminded us that 'the most important quality in a leader is that of being acknowledged as such'. I cannot respect a Mountain Safety Council that gives us a completed RAMS form for a visit to a fire station. Nor one which redefines English to tell us that a falling rock is a peril but not a hazard. Nor one which informs us that an 'adventure experience ... is chronologically specific in time'. I wish that this book were chronologically specific in time.

And yet, against all my anarchy, my damn reasonableness forces me to agree with the book's underlying assumption: that outdoor education should give rise to no more fatalities or injuries than normal life. I can live with this, stoically, while reserving judgment – in our increasingly cotton-woolled society – on the meaning of 'normal life'. Nor do I dispute the gist of the first three chapters, which, once you battle past the wretched jargon, merely state the obvious. What I dispute are the means of achieving excellent leadership.

### Transferable?

And what means are the theorymongers foisting upon us? Well, our careers are to start with a Risk Management Training course, and, oh good, we needn't worry if we've never been up a mountain or in a canoe, because we read in *The Education Gazette* that 'There are no prerequisites [for attending such a course] because risk management is transferable across all activities'. And every time that I read this dangerously ambiguous statement, I feel compelled to screw the *Gazette* into a ball and stamp on it.

In my experience the transfer of leadership skills between risky sports is limited. Each sport has its own techniques and poses different leadership problems.

But you get used to handling people and groups? You get used to looking for danger? Yes. The transference idea may be a slight truism, but it shouldn't be allowed to become a flattering exaggeration. It can be a dangerous trap, and folk whom I've taken canoeing will know what I mean: on lumpy rivers, well-intentioned risk analysis will not compensate for the half-knowledge of the semi-competent.

Each risky sport has its nuts and bolts of keeping people alive: technical skills and people-handling. But fitting the nuts and bolts from one sport into another is fraught with excitement. Safety in risky sports mainly filters down vertically, from specialism – from cobblers who stick to their lasts; only marginally does it filter in sideways, from generalities. Some authorities would disagree with this. They hold the sideways transfer to be central and important. Maybe their experience has differed from mine.

---

'... well-intentioned risk analysis will not compensate for the half-knowledge of the semi-competent.'

---

Depending on what you think, anyone who fills in a RAMS form to decide is either an ultrasafe, multi-purpose instructor or one who isn't fit to do the job.

### The Form-filling: Sound Professional Practice?

The sample RAMS forms in Manual 27 are a parody of leadership. Oh, the things I've never thought about! Should my daughter ever do a high trust-fall, I would now worry that she could suffer psychological and social damage from not being caught in a gender-sensitive manner.

I cannot see room for compromise and consensus on this crunch question. Either the RAMS is exemplary professional practice, or it is woolly and generalist, conveyor-belt safety, the product of an academic view of a complex human process, with the practical usefulness of Esperanto.

\*

But let us look at a few examples of where the RAMS is popping up:

*Education Gazette*, 6 May 1996.

Auckland Metropolitan College

(1) Outdoor education and physical education teacher ... A recognised qualification in risk management is essential.

To me, this is like a hospital advertising: 'Doctor wanted, must have School Certificate human biology'. A foundation course in risk management can be nothing more than a vague and abstract view through a thick mist of generalities.

From a 'person specification', October 1996:  
Nayland College

PR1 HOD Outdoor Education

The HOD is responsible for all Outdoor Education activities and must ensure that ... appropriate RAMS [forms] have been completed.

And so the contentious form-filling has become the prescribed norm.

How normal? Well, check the *EOTC Guidelines for Good Practice* (Ministry of Education, 1995). This guide trots out twelve oppressive pages of the RAMS. Whether we like it or not, the RAMS looks more permanent than Mount Cook; whether intentionally or not, it carries a lofty and self-righteous exclusivity.

\*

In New Zealand, sound professional practice is still evolving. We still have time to put the emphasis where it belongs. But if we meekly allow RAMS forms to consolidate their position as sound practice, defining our legal duty of care, we who doubt their

necessity or even distrust their reliability will not have the choice. We will be dragooned into line.

So where should the emphasis lie? What are the alternative 'tools for managing risk'? The fundamental tool is the human brain; you can lead capably, creatively, inspiringly even, without writing anything beforehand. But I am not talking about an empty brain. What is it full of? Look at it this way: if you want your car fixed, you go to a car mechanic. When you want flying lessons, you go to a flying instructor; a qualified one, if you've any sense. If you want to go canoeing, find a qualified canoeing instructor. It's as simple as that. And, provided that the qualifications are stringent enough, you will get not only a safe leader, but also one who feels for the sport and who knows the arrogant sanity of the free man or woman.

### Peer Feedback

Enough of RAMS forms. On to Chapter 5. Another stark choice, regarding excellence in leadership.

After a good day of instructing climbing, my work-mates and I used to like a hot shower, a big feed, and a beer. Or two. In the King's Head I learnt a great deal about leadership. We were, I guess, obsessed with it. I tapped into a reservoir of safety, containing a pithy layer of humour and eccentricity.

I remember ebullient, self-taught dreamers. And I recall lined faces, exquisitely laconic. They mocked the blood and the sweat, the blows and the failures. They knew the foolish and the clever, the weak and the strong. They talked of approaching columns of boiling cloud, and of climbing in socks on vertical skidpans. They told of secret nut-placements and of devious ropework. And they celebrated velvet evenings, Mow Cop silhouetted on grainy dusks, and flowing triumphs ahead of the shadow.

I am a great believer in beer feedback. And sheer know-how.

Alternatively you may prefer an emotionally safe process, with an appropriate feedback model and a trained facilitator, and so gain self-realisation, self-knowledge, self-assessment, and any other 'self's that the person-moulders approve of. Scintillating.

### Cautionary Tales

The manual holds a few realistic incident-studies, worth keeping if you throw the rest of the book away, plus a few that are petty and irritating, and doctrinaire to the point of absurdity. Although I realise that many of New Zealand's rivers and mountains are wild and remote – they are serious places – I was totally unprepared for the shock of writing a RAMS form that would anticipate and prevent my pupils being bitten by the farm dog.

Are there, one wonders, any limits to the psychological menace or the physical threats which we are to anticipate? Are there only certain breeds of dog that we need worry about? Ought we to carry a

disabling dart gun? Should we worry about the mental harm that could arise if a pupil were to bite the dog?

Incident-studies can be useful. We can learn from them, especially from accounts of real happenings. But farm-dog exercises insult our intelligence.

### Excellence in Leadership

I am not seeking a revival of rivercrossing-by-destiny. This essay is not a lament for the passing of she'll-be-right. That cavalier mind-set had to go. Neither is it a warning about the orgy of safety that is upon us, though I could give many examples. It is about how we in outdoor education join responsibly but warily in that orgy: about excellence in leadership.

By definition the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council is concerned primarily with safety. But it also has a responsibility towards the aesthetics and values of a sport whose modern origins stretch back to the 16th century, when Conrad Gesner, the eminent naturalist, wrote of ascending 'divers mountains each year' and of feasting 'the eye of body and mind on the goodly things of this earthly paradise'. Mountaineering boasts a wealth of literature unmatched by any similar field, except sailing. It is towards these books that we should direct our young



The Rev W S Green, seated, and his two Swiss companions, Ulrich Kaufmann, left, and Emil Boss. In 1882 they reached to within 200 feet of the summit of Mt Cook.

---

‘How prone to doubt, how cautious are the wise ...’

---

leaders. I do believe that the Mountain Safety Council is yet several steps removed from the thought police, and that it could be persuaded to recognise its mistake and to throw all stocks of Manual 27 down Harwood’s Hole. And if it cannot? If we accept the exclusivity of the RAMS? If we approve of the farcical incident-studies? Then we may get what we deserve: a colourless, immature and mechanical leadership which, like the four-windows matrix, has no romance and no spirituality, no elegance and no slyness, no humility and no forgiveness. No outlandish rebels. No fantasy. Just neurotic cellphone-lovers, and, often, consent forms that are afraid to acknowledge the existence of risk.

Do not overplay the theory of risk management; emphasise ease of long practice.

Leave the abstract generalities for the academics: ‘the well-documented Risk Shift Phenomenon’, ‘crisis management triangles’, ‘the four-windows matrix’, ‘five-stage causal sequence models’. Cover the specifics: loose rock, vicious stoppers, and fast-moving cyclones.

Don’t overvalue risk-management courses; run caving leadership courses, and such like, and respect those qualifications. Don’t have peer feedback; talk to your workmates. Don’t study the Profile of a Managed Crisis; go out and practise climbing self-rescue. Don’t idolise the form-filling; love canoeing. And for God’s sake acknowledge that, in the teaching of risky sports, fanatics make great leaders, and that a person with ‘a recognised risk-management qualification’ may know eff-all.

Most of all, try not to talk of ‘our industry’; but do search diligently for beauty, because vision is the dominant sense, and the impact of the outdoors is a tremendous visual one, welded to sweet movement: or it is nothing.

Homer and his fellow Greeks prized the right of the individual to speak his mind. We in New Zealand don’t have omnipotent monarchs or despotic rulers, but we do have quangos such as the Qualifications Authority, who put our eager leadership onto CD-ROMs; and we have fairly influential bodies such as the Mountain Safety Council, which embraces risk-management theory with a naive devotion. We still need to speak our individual minds.

And I simply don’t believe that the RAMS is the way to excellence in leadership, or is even a necessary component of excellence.

### **Beast of Prey**

But the odds are stacked. In a climate in which safety is a moral absolute, safety management is a beast of prey. In writing ‘Ease of Long Practice’, I am fend-

ing off the touch of a worldwide, moneymaking, self-serving growth industry. Worldwide? Remember that falling stone? A nephew of mine works as a stonemason on a beautiful 950-year-old English cathedral. At a recent seminar on safety, the lecturer sprang a question: ‘A shark in the ocean! Is it a peril? Or is it a hazard?’

‘I’ve got a question,’ said one of the older masons. ‘All this jargon you use. Is it shite? Or is it crap?’

© Pete McDonald 1998

### **Bibliography**

Fraser C 1966 *The Avalanche Enigma*. Murray, London.

Goldring R and Mullins W 1995 *Bushcraft. Outdoor Skills for the NZ Bush*. New Zealand Mountain Safety Council Inc, Wellington.

Haddock C 1993 *Managing Risks in Outdoor Activities*. New Zealand Mountain Safety Council Inc, Wellington.

Maurois A 1973 *Un Art de Vivre*. ISBN: 0-686-55484-1

Ministry of Education 1995 *Education Outside the Classroom. Guidelines for Good Practice*. Learning Media Ltd, Wellington.

Paulcke W and Dumler H, translated by Bowman E N 1973 *Hazards in Mountaineering*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

### **Acknowledgement**

‘Ease of Long Practice’ first appeared, as a slightly shorter version, in the UK quarterly, *Horizons*, Vol 14, No 3, autumn 1997.