

THE S.A.R. FIELD TEAM LEADER: A Primer

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Overview: In SAR, a Field Team Leader (FTL) occupies a unique leadership position. They are neither managers— roles filled by either the Incident Commander (IC) or Operations Manager (OM)—, nor are they team members in a hierarchical chain of command. FTLs must exercise a great deal of independence and initiative derived from their privileged position in the field. Although often confused with management, FTLs have a unique role to play in SAR operations. This article provides an overview of the Field Team Leader position, beginning with leadership and its place in the chain of command of SAR; continuing with a discussion of authority, responsibility and accountability within SAR; then focusing on decision-making and leadership in the field; exploring how FTLs make decisions; the “nuts and bolts” of FTL duties; developing FTLs, including a discussion of leadership qualities; and concluding with some observations on safety, and the dangers of hubris.

*Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow.
If you want to lead them, you must place yourself behind.
Accomplish but don't boast.
Accomplish without show, arrogance, grabbing, or forcing.
Then, when the work is complete and the job is finished,
Everybody says: "We did it!"*

—Lao Tzu,
Founder of Chinese Taoism

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Leadership is, quite simply, what is necessary to complete a task utilizing the services of others. The variables that a leader must work with are the group members, the task, and the environment. Whether the leader is appointed, elected, or rises to the occasion, his/her main functions are to keep the group safe, together, and focused on the task.

The issues faced by a SAR leader are unique in that each situation is potentially life or death. The worst thing that can happen to a leader in a more traditional situation is that he/she can lose a job; a SAR leader can lose their life or the life of another.

SAR AND THE CHAIN OF COMMAND

Managers and leaders are the decision makers in SAR. Both of these levels are necessary to the administration of a successful SAR mission. Further, especially on small teams, a qualified team member might be a manager on one mission and a leader on the next. Therefore, it is critical to understand the distinctive similarities and differences between these two levels.

Warren Bennis said: "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right thing." That is, management focuses on efficiency; gathering together everything necessary to accomplish a task. Leadership, on the other hand, focuses on effectiveness. Given what management provides, leaders are charged with accomplishing the specific task. [It has also been written, "Managers cope with complexity, leaders cope with change." My personal favorite, "Management is position, leadership is action."]

In SAR, the Incident Commander (IC), Search Manager and Operation Manager (OM) are the managers. In a field situation, SAR managers work at the strategic level. From base camp, they apply their formal system(s) to their perception of the actual situation and decide what must be done. They work mainly with structures, policies, and politics, and are accustomed to relatively unambiguous functions with precise roles, duties narrowly defined, and a formal chain-of-command. Managers, like the organizations they work for, tend to institutionalize the "status quo." Some managers will go to extreme lengths to uphold the status quo because it's a known quality and therefore seen as safe. The status quo is usually written down as the preplan, rules and regulations, procedures, checklists from classes taken, etc.

The guiding "status quo" document for SAR in the United States is the Incident Command System. The ICS is an almost universally utilized emergency management organizational guide theoretically capable of dealing with all types and sizes of both single- and multiple-jurisdiction emergency situations. However, as with virtually all systems that are designed to deal with "everyone, everywhere, every time," it has the major disadvantage of being somewhat inflexible. The ICS also has the major drawback of systems that utilize a chain-of-command in that it lends itself to more autocratic decision-making. Since the ICS was developed by many experts in many fields and has stood the test of time, ICs are usually loath to deviate from it, even if the actual situation seems to make it necessary. The tendency will usually be to either follow the written rules, or seek permission from higher authority to deviate.

The main function of all of these guidelines is to tell a manager exactly what to do, along with how, when, and in what order. To make a decision, a manager need only follow the appropriate procedures. An excellent example of this concept is documented in a quote from The Incident Command System: "Managers in the full spectrum of emergency response management need only apply the concepts to precipitate an effective organization."

Because of this, a manager is generally able to justify his/her actions or inactions as extensions of the rules. Therefore, managers need not be held officially accountable or liable as long as they religiously follow the established rules.

The fact that most SAR management decisions are determined in advance also means that the specific knowledge, experience, and judgment required to be a SAR manager is minimal. In California, a prospective search manager must complete a four-day course to be legally qualified to manage a search. Obviously, in most cases, an individual that just graduated from this class would not be the first one chosen to be in charge, but it has happened and will again.

The SAR leadership function, on the other hand, falls directly on the field team leader (FTL). In the field, FTLs work at the tactical level. Instead of the status quo, they deal with contingency and change. There are very few situations in the field that are entirely static, and can, therefore, be completely resolved by using a written set of rules. This is not to say, however, that there are no written policies and procedures for leaders. The difference is that, correctly utilized, they only provide general guidelines and direction, not textbook answers. In the field, a FTL must contend with ambiguity, uncertainty of outcome, atypical tasks, and other novel situations where the only reasonable guidelines will be his/her own knowledge, skills, experience, and judgment. Therefore, unlike a manager, an FTL can be held personally accountable and liable for his/her decisions.

For these reasons, leaders are usually considered less controllable than managers. Leaders often challenge the status quo by demonstrating initiative, taking risks, changing the way something is done, etc. They are sometimes out of step with management. Some organizations feel much more secure with a minimum number of leaders. To reassure themselves, they may attempt to fit their leaders into a management mold by attempting to codify leadership functions.

A good comparison can be made between SAR and the military. In the military, management is the task of the officers. Literally thousands of books have been written on military strategy and tactics. Officers then apply this information to their perception of the actual situation, and use the resulting data to determine what must be done. Then, they pass "what must be done" on to lower echelons. Finally, from their command posts, they oversee the operation.

As with SAR managers, the specific knowledge, experience, and judgment requirements to become an officer are minimal. Commissioning requires a 13-14 week Officer Candidate School. As with a beginning search manager, a new officer would not likely immediately be put in charge, but, since position in the chain of command is normally determined by rank, it could well happen.

In a military hierarchy or chain of command, FTLs would be the sergeants. Sergeants are told by their officers what needs to be done. Sergeants must then use their own knowledge, experience and judgment to decide how to best complete the task set before them by their officers. Finally, once troops get into the field and the bullets start flying, sergeants must carry out the plan, make alterations, etc., which generally involves making life or death decisions under extreme time and situational pressure for both themselves and their people. As with SAR FTLs, it takes years to accumulate the specialized knowledge, experience, and judgment to become a good sergeant. A newly promoted sergeant might immediately be put in charge, but, because of the wealth of refined skills it took to reach that rank, it could easily be justified.

Most adults tend to have unconsciously and by training internalized the tenets of management [status quo] rather than those of leadership [contingency and change]. It is the rule rather than the exception to be taught, especially at work, that actions or inactions affirming the status quo are preferred because they usually result in the safest, easiest, and most comfortable choices being made. Most children and young people are socialized, both at home and at school, to abide by the status quo, and that, if the question becomes deviating from the status quo or doing nothing, that there is less risk in doing nothing. Individuals who wish to become FTLs must to a greater or lesser degree recognize and resist these tendencies.

These differences between management and leadership are exceedingly critical in an unstructured wilderness situation, particularly if management attempts to make leadership decisions, or vice versa. In my experience, the former is significantly more universal than the latter. Most of the ICs I have known have been excellent managers, but few have had the outdoor skills, experience, and judgment necessary to be an FTL. Yet some of these same ICs seem to feel that field operations should be directed rather than supported from base camp, and that they somehow have the ability to make what might turn out to be a life or death decision for teams in the field.

"Dirty Harry" said, "A man's got to know his limitations." Managers need to be accountable for management decisions, and leaders for leadership decisions. Managers are usually not comfortable making leadership-type decisions because most of these decisions are open-ended. Conversely, leaders are normally not comfortable making management-type decisions because most of these decisions are proscribed. It's very interesting

to note, however, that virtually no one on a mission will question the fact that base camp managers should make base camp decisions. Nevertheless, base camp managers will sometimes reserve the right to make whatever leadership decisions they deem appropriate.

General George Patton was probably a difficult person to work for, but he would have been an excellent SAR manager. He clearly understood his limitations as a manager when he said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity." (Theodore Roosevelt was a little more explicit when he said, "The best executive is one who has sense enough to pick good people to do what he wants done, and self restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it.") These aphorisms are applicable to both managers and leaders. If base camp management wants the field team to do, or not do, something, the FTL would be told what it is. Then, it would be up to the FTL to decide if it can be done, and, if so, how and when it will be done, and, if not, what alternatives are available. Base camp management might make suggestions, but the decision would rest with the FTL, because he/she is the expert on scene. Conversely, if an FTL wants something from base camp, he or she would call in and indicate what is needed. It would then be up to base camp management to decide if it could be provided, how and when to get it to the field team, and, if it can't be provided, what alternatives would be available. The FTL might make suggestions, but the decision would rest with base camp management.

It is worth observing that an Operation Manager can and should be an exception to the manager/leader dualism. The main task of the OM is to coordinate all on-scene activities that are directly involved with the mission. For that reason, and if properly utilized, an "independent" OM can arguably be the most important individual on a SAR mission. In the chain of command, the OM is technically a manager. But in addition to his training and experience in management functions, an OM will normally have also accumulated a considerable amount of training and experience as a FTL. This individual can therefore provide a "buffer" between managers and leaders; someone who, because he "speaks both languages", will most likely have credibility with both. Managers will be more likely to support the conclusions of the OM because he will be seen as having the whole picture, while the FTLs will be much more likely to accept the OM's judgment given that the OM has "been there, done that." Also, because of direct involvement with the mission, an OM will always be informed and physically present in base camp.

From my perspective, it is unfortunate that some ICs have chosen to combine the OM position with their own. An IC does not have time to adequately take on these extra responsibilities. He/she has too many other duties specific to the IC position that are over and above managing the actual operation, such as coordinating the investigation, conducting interviews, keeping the media and the general public informed, liaison and coordination with federal, state, and local entities, maintaining contact with relatives, etc.

Most importantly, an IC's duties might take him/her away from, and even out of communication with, base camp. This might also occur if an IC, who is normally a deputy sheriff or other peace officer, has not been relieved of all his/her other law enforcement responsibilities before assuming the IC task. If the IC and OM positions have been combined, and the IC is out of communication, who will then make the decisions? I have seen situations where the base camp radio operator has been put in the position of making IC decisions. The bottom line is that both of these positions require continuity, undivided attention, and minute-by-minute decisions. An IC cannot afford to be distracted by OM duties, or vice versa.

In some cases, an IC might attempt to enjoy the best of both worlds by appointing an OM who will do what he/she is told. In the absence of the IC, the tendency will then be for that OM to take action based on what he/she thinks the IC would have done under similar circumstances rather than addressing the specific situation at hand. A "follower" OM might also put off making a decision until the IC is available—a delay which, especially in a critical situation, would likely compromise safety. This mode of inaction will further squander precious time because, once the IC returns, he/she will have to be briefed before a decision can be made and action taken.

Since the most critical aspects of SAR "leadership" occur in the field, and that leadership is exercised by Field Team Leaders, this paper will highlight the "job" of the FTL, and take up management issues only to the extent that they might affect field team leadership.

AUTHORITY, RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN SAR

The SAR leadership function consists of three critical and allied elements: authority, responsibility, and accountability. An FTL must be delegated and agree to assume authority, knowingly take responsibility, and willingly accept accountability. There is no way an FTL can be effective without all of these essentials. It would be like trying to sit comfortably on a three-legged chair with one or two of the legs missing.

Authority. Authority translates into the power to take charge of a group, or any part of one, and make enforceable decisions regarding any aspect of its assigned tasks. Authority itself does not have to be specifically delegated. It can instead be automatically delegated with the task. But, to delegate any authority, the manager/leader must first have it. And before accepting authority, the manager/leader must ensure that the superior in fact has it to delegate.

In SAR, authority must be delegated, because one person cannot be everywhere or do it all. Delegation also provides the delegator with more time for planning and organization, improves communication, stimulates creativity and creative problem solving, allows more significant contributions from others, increases trust levels, creates a sense of personal accomplishment in delegates, hopefully reduces stress, and educates future leaders.

There are three major forms of authority that relate directly to SAR. "Legitimate authority" is based on a leader's position in the chain of command. "Expert authority" refers to his/her knowledge, experience, and judgment ability, while "referent authority" is defined as an individual's acceptance as a FTL by other team members.

Both managers and FTLs are delegated their legitimate authority via the chain of command. FTLs are selected by the OM, who was chosen by the IC, who was appointed by the controlling agency, who was given his SAR authority by the county board of supervisors, who was empowered by the state, etc. At each level, individuals in charge have the absolute authority to choose whomever they wish in any manner they choose. However, for their own credibility and liability, it behooves each of these individuals to pick the best available person for each management/leadership position.

The presence of written policies and procedures makes the manager's task mostly predictable. Therefore, since they will only be delegated the authority to follow said policies and procedures, managers are generally chosen based, in preferential order, on their legitimate, referent, and expert authority. Because of the unpredictable nature of their tasks, FTLs, by contrast, have no prescribed policies and procedures, so their selection will usually be based, in descending order, on their expert, referent, and legitimate authority.

There are six basic ways to exercise authority; of these only three can be seriously applied to SAR. The first applicable style is "authoritarian." The FTL makes the decision alone using only the information he/she possesses, or after obtaining additional information from subordinates or superiors. The role of the subordinate is limited to providing specific information requested by the FTL. It does not include analyzing or solving the problem. As a matter of fact, the FTL might not even describe the actual problem to the subordinate. The authoritarian style is more efficient in that it requires a group member to follow the directions of an FTL who has and exercises complete authority and control.

The second viable style is called "consultive." The FTL describes the problem to the group as a whole or individuals within the group. Then, the FTL listens to their opinions and suggestions for its solution. Finally, utilizing this information along with his/her own, the FTL makes the decision. The consultive style is more effective because it provides the FTL with more information, but it also requires group members to follow the directions of an FTL who exercises complete authority and control.

"Delegating" is the third workable style. FTLs can re-delegate all or part of their authority to their more mature and experienced team members. The FTL might first appoint a qualified assistant, who would be delegated the authority to take over the team if he becomes incapacitated. A team member who is intimately familiar with the area might be delegated the authority to lead the team to the victim. Leadership of the medical aspects of the mission might be turned over to the senior medical team member. Also, if the FTL decides to split a team during the mission, he/she must delegate leadership authority to the most qualified member of the new team. In each case, the FTL is giving up all or part of his/her decision-making authority to the delegatee.

The fourth form of authority is known as "democratic." This style is inappropriate for SAR because it delegates leadership to the group itself, rather than to an individual leader. The FTL would bring the problem to the team where it would be discussed. Then the team would decide what to do, normally by a majority vote. The leader would have only one vote, just like any other team member, and must be willing to accept the decision of the group whether he/she agrees with it or not.

The fifth style is authority derived by "consensus," a currently popular variant of the democratic method. In our politically correct society of today, decision by consensus is "in." The basic premises of this theory are that (1) the process takes precedence in decision-making, and must meet the interpersonal needs of the group as well as addressing the needs of the situation, (2) groups always make better decisions than individuals, (3) the decision must be unanimous--or no one may block consensus--for a decision to be made. The leader becomes a neutral facilitator, whose primary task is to guide the group in achieving this consensus.

Decisions by consensus have no place in the SAR decision-making process, especially in the field. Achieving consensus takes much longer than any other method. And consensus decisions represent an agreed upon answer, rather than the situationally best answer. Group members don't have to believe that the decision is the

soundest one that could have been made at the time and under the circumstances, or even that it will work. They only have to be able to “live” or “go along” with the decision. An FTL who has personal experience with consensus decision making would most likely agree with former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, when she described it as, “the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values, and policies in search of something in which no one believes, but to which no one objects; the process of avoiding the very issues that have to be solved, merely because you cannot get agreement on the way ahead.”

A sixth style of exercising authority is “laizze faire.” It also has no application to SAR. Laizze faire means that there is no formal leadership or group. Each individual does whatever he/she thinks is most appropriate at any moment in any given situation.

It seems to be generally accepted that, to be consistent, a leader must adopt one, and only one, of the available leadership styles. In SAR, this is patently untrue and unwise. All aspects of SAR leadership activities, including leadership styles, are situationally driven. Since situations will virtually always be at least slightly different, it follows that no single leadership style will be appropriate in each case. An FTL must, therefore, be familiar with the characteristics of each leadership style and then, after evaluating the situation, be able to apply whichever is most suitable at that specific time. An FTL might very well utilize several leadership styles interchangeably during a single mission.

Time is the most important variable that will determine the leadership style to be utilized in a specific situation. The skill level of the FTL is, however, a close second. For example, in an emergency, life or death situation where time is critical, an authoritarian FTL who knows what to do would be the most effective and efficient combination of leadership qualifications and style. If time is not the most critical element, then utilizing a more democratic style and/or a less qualified FTL becomes more feasible since there will be more time to make a decision and more individuals involved in making it.

Another common misconception is that team members will normally prefer a leadership style that leans towards consultive or democratic. There are many individuals, however, who expect a more authoritarian style, and will consider both consultive and democratic styles to be an abdication of leadership responsibility. Others, because of a lack of experience, are also likely to prefer a more directive leadership style from their FTLs.

Responsibility. Responsibility is considerably easier to define. With specific authority comes a corresponding responsibility. Relying almost totally on his/her personal knowledge, experience, and judgment, a FTL’s primary responsibility is to take whatever actions/inactions are or become necessary to get their team into the field and back to base safely. (The second part of an FTL’s responsibility is rescuing the victim, but this is secondary to the “prime directive.”)

Accountability. Accountability relates to the ethical and legal obligations that are inherent when an FTL accepts authority and responsibility. Accountability has two major differences from both authority and responsibility. First, both authority and responsibility travel from the top to the bottom of the chain of command, while accountability moves in the opposite direction. Second, authority and responsibility are delegated; accountability cannot be delegated because it comes with the position.

ICs/OLs have virtually no accountability for any of their actions/inactions as long as the plan is followed exactly. A manager is only accountable for any additions to, deletions from, or other modifications of the plan. If the manager follows the plan, accountability will then move up to the next level, which will usually be whoever formulated and/or approved the plan. The major IC/OL accountability concern is selecting the FTL. If it can be demonstrated that a reasonable person would have picked a different one, then at least some of the accountability for a problem will, and should, be transferred directly to the IC/OL.

The search for accountability begins, and usually ends, with the FTL. Since the FTL won't have an official plan to follow, and is also the responsible individual on scene, he/she can be held personally accountable for each of their actions/inactions, along with those of their team. This does not mean that the FTL is automatically “guilty” of anything. It means that, if a problem occurs, virtually everything he/she did or didn't do will come under close scrutiny.

An FTL is like the captain of a ship. Several years ago, a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier went aground in San Francisco Bay. At the time, the vessel was under the control of a pilot who was maneuvering it to its dock. The pilot had been delegated, by the ship's captain, the authority to control the ship and the responsibility to pilot the vessel safely to its mooring. The pilot was certified, experienced, familiar with the area, and his presence was required by law. Therefore, one would expect that the pilot must have been held accountable for the grounding. Not so. The captain was relieved of his command and virtually forced to retire from the Navy. How could this happen? Quite simply, the captain could delegate authority to do something, and responsibility to get it done, but, because he was

the highest-ranking individual on scene, he can never delegate accountability for what happens, or doesn't happen, on board. Similarly, neither can a captain transfer accountability upward through the chain of command. An admiral may be in overall command of a fleet, but is not the captain of the ship.

DECISION-MAKING, AND THE PROBLEMS OF “GROUPTHINK” AND “GROUPSHIFT”

Human beings must make decisions. Even if an individual refuses to make a decision, he or she is in fact making a decision not to decide, and then it will be made by others or by circumstances.

The main function of an FTL is to make calm, confident, reasoned, practical, and enforceable decisions in an organized, positive manner, utilizing ambiguous, incomplete, and changing information within a constantly evolving environment. In order to do this, an FTL must develop a practical decision-making process that will allow him/her to be able to efficiently and effectively get accurate information, organize it, and then use it to make decisions in what will often be a life or death situation. He/she must also be knowledgeable enough about the process to refrain from basing decisions on social pressure, culture, habit, emotions, or by default.

The FTL must then accept accountability for decisions made and the resulting actions/inactions of team members. Unfortunately, there are some individuals who cannot even accept responsibility for their own personal decisions. They will never be effective leaders at any level.

Individual or Group Decision-Making

Individuals or groups can make decisions. Individual decision-making is the simplest, quickest, most predictable, and most straightforward method. Accountability is quite clear. On the other hand, individual decisions will possibly be biased, limited to the knowledge and ideas of only one individual, and might have difficulty gaining group acceptance. Therefore, an individual decision-maker must possess superior knowledge, experience, common sense, judgment and leadership skills.

Group decision-making, however, is not so simple. A group is two or more interacting and interdependent individuals who have come together to accomplish a particular task. People join groups for stability, acknowledgment and prestige, self-esteem, belonging, acquisition of power and authority, and the achievement of group goals. The size and make-up of a group further complicates the issue. As a general rule, larger groups are more adept at information gathering, while smaller groups are superior at completing tasks, and homogeneous groups are less productive than heterogeneous ones.

A group can provide more complete and unbiased information, knowledge, ideas, opinions, options, and expertise, greater acceptance of a decision, inspiration to a member to produce a better result than he or she would have alone, the opportunity to learn from others, and the ability to minimize individual responsibility and accountability. On the other hand, it will take much longer to make a decision. One or more members can dominate groups because individuals sometimes get lazy when in a group and let others do the work. Further, group decisions are the result of compromise, especially in "consensus" decision-making where large compromises are often necessary to achieve consensus. And perhaps most significantly, "groupthink" and "groupshift," can seriously distort the decision-making process.

Groupthink (or concurrence theory) is a particularly insidious and, in SAR, a potentially dangerous aberration of consensus decision-making. Irving Janus, the originator of the concept, describes groupthink as “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the member’s striving for unanimity overrides their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.”

There is nothing wrong with a cohesive group. Members are more likely to remain in a cohesive group, and they tend to work harder and enjoy themselves more. Most importantly, they understand the critical part that internal debate plays in a group decision-making process. In a cohesive in-group, however, members may fall under the sway of the group. They may exhibit a sense of invulnerability by generally believing that since the group is inherently virtuous and has good intentions, it will always make the best and/or right decision. Because of the resultant belief in this moral superiority, the group can do no wrong. “We’re good and competent people involved in an important task, and as long as we are dedicated to the group and work together, everything will be okay.” This delusion of invulnerability encourages risky behavior by creating excess optimism. Risks associated with the group’s decisions will not be adequately judged. Fundamental contingency plans might be deemed unnecessary. Unfortunately, this belief will usually persist even if persuasive evidence is available that suggests the group is in fact wrong.

In addition, the group is likely to be insulated, —that is, it will be specialized and/or separated from outside sources of information and/or input. Further, any sources of outside information and input that are available, but do not agree with current group mores, will most likely be belittled or discredited. Outside, expert advice will only be utilized if it supports the position of the leadership and/or group. The group might even begin to meet in secret and have rigid confidentiality rules. As this “siege mentality” continues to develop, it becomes “us against them.”

It becomes groupthink at its worst if a cohesive in-group is combined with an authoritarian, charismatic leader who is not impartial or amenable to having his/her point of view challenged, and is not willing to voluntarily accept responsibility or accountability for his/her actions or inactions. The most identifiable characteristic of this type of leader is that he/she will bring up an issue, then immediately express a personal opinion concerning it. At that point, any argument tends to revolve around whether or not the leader is right, rather than whether the leader’s preferred alternative is the best one. Effective decision-making procedures go by the wayside. The group experiences “tunnel vision.” Other alternatives will not be explored, or will only be superficially evaluated. The search for information will be cursory and incomplete, and the only information gathered will support the preferred decision(s). Hazards, consequences, costs, etc will be minimized, or maybe not even mentioned. The possibility of positive outcomes will be overstated. The goal of concurrence will supersede the pragmatic evaluation of alternative courses of action. If the group is operating in a stressful situation, such as under time pressure, the leader’s solution will usually be adopted because group members will want to minimize their stress, along with their responsibility and accountability, by having the decision made as soon as possible. Since the solution was the leader’s idea, the group transfers responsibility and accountability to the leader. Since the decision was “ratified” by the group, the leader considers the group responsible and accountable.

Maintaining unanimity (or at least the appearance of unanimity), along with amicable (no arguing), congenial (be nice) relationships with fellow group members becomes consciously or subconsciously more important than arriving at good decisions. Therefore, group members begin to “self censor.” A group member may initially exhibit skepticism, resistance, disagreement, etc., but, when confronted with opposition from the group leader and/or a significant number of others, he/she will be expected to conform. Conformity is measured either by agreement or silence. Individuals who persistently express a different view from that of leadership and/or a majority of the group will be labeled as uncooperative and made to feel at least uncomfortable. It becomes easier to conform to the group and then complain to individuals both in and outside the group afterward rather than continue the fight.

If a group member can’t or won’t self-censor, “direct pressure” can then be applied. I’m sure almost everyone has heard a group leader or prominent group member make “power statements” like: “Let’s just get the plan adopted. We’ll take care of the details later.” Or, “I’m positive that ‘Joe’ doesn’t want to get in the way of progress.” Or, “We have reached agreement haven’t we?” My personal favorite (in SAR language) is, “The sheriff, SAR coordinator, etc. really wants to see this happen, and will be very disappointed if it doesn’t.” Group members may also try to privately convince a dissenter of the error of his/her ways, or they might even try to “gang up” against him/her. Failing all this, a member might be discredited, excluded, stereotyped as a troublemaker, etc., usually in front of the group. This provides the dual purpose of both punishing the errant member, putting non conformists under enough public pressure when they do dissent that they eventually will be forced to self censor, and/or serving notice on other members as to what happens to those who don’t “go along to get along.” Some group members might even attempt to “mindguard.” This is an attempt to shield the group leader(s) or the main group from uncooperative members and/or only pass on information that conforms to the leader’s or the group’s bias.

Groupthink can exist at all levels of management and leadership. Managers and leaders can minimize groupthink by being impartial, e.g. not stating their preferences on an issue until all other group members have presented theirs, assigning the group’s most vocal member to be a “devil’s advocate” during all discussions, encouraging group members to express their disagreements and suggest alternatives, getting input from outside experts, encouraging group members to seek input from individuals outside the group, and adopting and using an effective group decision-making procedure. And it is often helpful to postpone final approval of a decision until it can be reviewed at a later time, especially if the decision is an important one. (Delay can also be fun. According to the Greek historian Herodotus in 450 BC, the ancient Persians always reconsidered their serious decisions “under the influence of wine.” Obviously this strategy is not appropriate during call-outs.)

“Groupshift” is another serious group decision-making concern. Many people seem to believe that a group exercises a moderating influence on its members. But in fact, groups tend to make more risky or more cautious decisions than the sum of the individuals involved. If, before discussion, the beliefs of each individual group member on a particular issue are averaged, and this average is then placed on a continuum between “risky” and “cautious”, it will usually be discovered that the decision made will be either more risky or more cautious than the original average. After a discussion, group members tend to alter their opinion in the same direction as the group average. For example, if the group average is on the risky side, then those who were individually more cautious will

usually move towards risky. Most interesting, however, is that those who were initially risky will tend to become more risky. Overall, there will be a "risky shift." And if the original average was cautious, the same mechanism will usually move the group in the other direction producing a "cautious shift."

This can be explained in several ways. Being a group member spreads accountability and allows each team member to rationalize the taking of greater or lesser risks. If the average of the group is toward risky, discussion will favor the risky alternative. Since individuals tend to compare themselves and their beliefs with others in a group, they will tend to move in the direction of the majority. Also, if a risky individual finds that there are people in the group that are more risky, he will likely compensate by becoming at least a little more risky.

Field Team Leader Perogatives

Managers are usually forced by the nature of their tasks into one of the group decision-making modes. Snowshoe Thompson indicated that "only flaming assholes search [rescue] plan alone." Virtually all SAR literature supports this viewpoint. Leaders, on the other hand, tend to utilize individual decision-making.

In the field, decision-making is the responsibility of the appointed FTL. Group decision-making, either by majority vote or consensus, is applicable only to organizational decisions made at team business meetings and management decisions made at base camp. This is not to say, however, that it is inappropriate for an FTL to consult with other team members and/or knowledgeable people, if time permits. (The operative words here are "consult" and "if time permits." To consult is to ask the "advice or opinion" of another. Deciding whether or not "time permits" is solely the responsibility of the FTL.) Utilizing consultive decision-making gives the FTL access to more information on which to base each decision. It also increases the team's commitment by involving more members in the decision. For this to be successful, however, the team members or other individuals consulted must be knowledgeable, capable, experienced, and work well with each other. Also, the FTL must be willing to seriously listen to and consider any input provided. Utilizing this method, however, does not in any way obligate the FTL to follow any advice given. It is still up to him/her to make the final decision.

Ideally, everyone on the team should be included in these consultations, even the newest member. Consultations, however, should never take place in the presence of either the victim or anyone not officially affiliated with the team, especially the media. In an emergency situation, outsiders automatically consider the SAR team to be a well-trained, professional organization, and expect that the FTL knows exactly what to do in any imaginable SAR situation. Having team members seemingly arguing with the FTL about the right course of action is not a confidence builder for either the victim or the public.

There will, however, be instances when there is no time for discussion, and/or the FTL doesn't feel that consultive decision-making is appropriate. During these times, the FTL must take on a more directive style. Under time pressure, team members must be willing and able to follow the FTL's directions without question. Unfortunately, some believe that the directing style equates to utilizing demeaning or abusive language along with threats and intimidation. This is not the case. If this does occur, it is the fault of the individual leader, not the leadership style.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Each FTL must have in place a decision-making process. This process must become familiar enough to be automatic. Then, instead of wasting time trying to consciously remember, for example, that the step that follows gathering information is identifying and rating alternatives, etc, he/she will be able to move from one step to the next without consciously thinking about the process itself.

1. Is there is a problem?

The controlling agency, usually the county sheriff's department, is responsible for problem evaluation. The county sheriff will usually appoint a SAR Coordinator who will make the initial determination. The coordinator will then either become the Incident Commander or appoint another sheriff's representative to the task.

A problem demands immediate attention, whereas a situation does not. The coordinator will investigate each incident report and determine whether it is a problem [immediate action] or a situation [wait and see]. If the situation is not yet a problem, the coordinator will usually determine when and/or under what conditions it will become one. He/she usually has an assessment form that, when completed and combined with any other appropriate objective or subjective data, will provide a satisfactory evaluation of SAR urgency.

Once it is determined that a problem does exist, it must be specifically identified. However, the problem statements of the IC and an FTL are virtually always going to be different. The IC's problem statement would be relatively simple, e.g. "We have a 12-year-old, mentally-retarded male missing in the Mt. Whitney area. We need to find and evacuate him." The FTL's problem statement would have a much more critical proviso. His statement would read, "There is a 12-year-old, mentally-retarded male is missing in the Mt. Whitney area. I, as a FTL, must get my team into and out of the field safely, and, without violating this prime directive, find the victim and successfully evacuate him."

2. Is a solution possible?

A solution is always possible, but might not always be practical. The question, "Do we have or can we get the necessary resources (e.g. management/leadership, personnel, equipment, logistics, etc) to safely, efficiently, and effectively solve the identified problem in a reasonable amount of time?" must be answered by both the IC and the FTL. Not surprisingly, since these two individuals have different perspectives, each might answer this question differently.

The IC must, of necessity, take a more political and impersonal approach to solving the problem. SAR is an official governmental task that has been delegated to him/her by the controlling authority. This means that, regardless of any emotions or concerns attached to a specific mission, it is now a part of the IC's paid job, and must be done if at all possible. Further, an IC has his/her professional reputation on the line with every mission. Since SAR is often a duty delegated by the controlling agency to a member of the organization who is on the way up, there can be considerable pressure applied to complete the mission successfully. Lastly, especially in smaller organizations, an IC usually has little or no practical outdoor experience. Therefore, his/her knowledge of what has to be done in the field will often be minimal. To make up for this limitation, the controlling agency and the IC must give up at least some control by utilizing an outside, experienced SAR team as the best way to accomplish the practical aspects the mission.

Since the field team will be assigned the actual rescue task, the FTL must, also of necessity, take a more pragmatic and personal approach. The FTL's primary responsibility is to get his/her team into the field and back to base safely. He/she must objectively balance this criteria with what support is available in deciding whether a proposed solution is feasible. Arguably, this will be the most important decision an FTL will make.

Once briefed, the FTL must then clearly and concisely explain to the IC the reasons he/she believes that the proposed solution is feasible or not. Generally, if the answer is no, the reasons will relate to the FTL's safety issues. First, the FTL might determine that he/she is not capable enough that day. An FTL might be having personal issues that are distracting, not physically or emotionally up to the demands of the mission, having an off day, etc. An FTL might feel that members of the team might have some of the same limitations that day, or that the team composition is not an adequate mix for the requirements of the mission. An FTL might decide that the situation--e.g. the terrain, weather, etc.--is too hazardous. Lastly, an FTL might also decide that a solution is not immediately possible, but will be feasible later when more experienced/specialized leadership and/or team membership is present, more information has been gathered, the weather has changed and/or other objective hazards have become manageable, more specialized equipment becomes available, etc.

The IC then has two choices. He/she might ignore these concerns and immediately replace the FTL with a different one who is willing to attempt the task with what is already in place. But, unless the original FTL's concerns were his/her own qualifications, this course of action would be very risky with regards to both credibility and liability, especially if the concerns involved safety.

Better is an IC who will listen, seriously consider, and address the issues presented by the FTL. This, however, does not mean that the IC must accept all or any of the FTL's conclusions. If a person goes to a doctor and either doesn't like or agree with the diagnosis, he/she is free to elicit a second opinion, or even a third if necessary to break a tie, or gather additional information. While seeking other opinions, the IC must be careful not to fall into the trap of only looking for facts and/or opinions that advocate his or her personal beliefs, and ignoring information that does not.

Finally, the IC must decide whether to initiate the mission with the assets available, wait until whatever has been deemed necessary is available, or not respond.

3. Develop a general plan of action.

A general plan provides the FTL with a framework/progression that can be used to gauge the team's progress towards realizing its ultimate goal. Before a decision is made, it can be evaluated in terms of the general

plan. Decisions can then be made that will both solve the immediate problem and also advance the general plan. Without a general plan, decisions might be made aimlessly and may even contradict each other. As with all plans, this one must be made with the idea of "hoping for the best, but planning for the worst."

Each general plan must be subject to change. Contingencies will always arise. Things will go wrong. One of an FTL's major tasks is to continually reevaluate the plan to hopefully eliminate surprises. An FTL must almost constantly ask him/herself the question "What if....?" The answers to these questions will then become part of the plan.

4. Gather information.

A decision is only as good as the information utilized to make it, along with the willingness of the FTL to apply an open mind towards evaluating it. An FTL supplementing his/her own knowledge, when possible, with accurate, comprehensive, and relevant information from informed others, especially those who will be most impacted by the decision(s), forms the basis of the SAR decision-making process in the field.

A tendency in information gathering is attempting to accumulate too much information. Getting all the facts is impossible mainly because there isn't enough time. If too much time is taken, implementation will be delayed. Also, too much information cannot be managed or assessed adequately, and, because of the resultant mental fatigue, some of it will be forgotten before it can be applied. So, knowing that whatever information gathered is bound to be incomplete, an FTL must use his/her experience and judgment to determine just how much information will be necessary to make an informed and reasoned decision in the time available.

There is also a tendency for the human mind to accept initial, or what appears to be obvious, information as true and then use it as a yardstick to determine the reliability of future data. Care should also be taken to avoid only using information that supports a preconceived position or solution, while avoiding facts that do not, and then attempting to pass these biases on to team members by asking leading questions with the intent of confirming these beliefs.

Lastly, since the chosen alternative will be implemented in the future, a reliable-as-possible prediction of the immediate and long-term future will be necessary. This prediction could include weather, personnel and/or equipment available, available time, etc.

5. Identify and rate alternatives.

From the information gathered, identify as many alternatives as possible within the constraints of time, personnel, equipment, etc. Then, the positive and negative consequences of each alternative, along with the likelihood of their occurrence, must be determined. In SAR, these consequences will usually entail some degree of risk. It is, however, a necessary part of SAR to take some risks, but is inappropriate to take any that are unnecessary, have an appreciable chance for a catastrophic outcome, do not directly contribute to the successful completion of the mission, or are for the wrong reasons, e.g. desperation, fear, anger, desire for respect, etc. Lastly, each identified risk must be evaluated in light of the predicted future.

It must then be determined which of the alternatives are viable. Some will eliminate themselves because they are unsafe, impractical, impossible under the existing conditions, etc. An alternative should not be eliminated simply because it was selected previously in a similar situation and turned out to be inadequate. The present situation might be just different enough to make the alternative viable.

Next, the viable alternatives must be ranked in order of preference. Each decision might have different priorities depending on the immediate situation, e.g. safety, speed, simplicity, practicality, etc. The FTL will decide which priority will be utilized.

After ranking the alternatives, the FTL must pick the one he/she thinks is best. Sometimes the best choice is obvious. Often, however, there might be more than one alternative that could achieve the objective. In this case, the pluses and minuses of each are usually so similar that, even though it might be more difficult to choose between the alternatives, the one chosen will not be as critical. For this type of situation, an FTL must develop his or her own "tie breaker." In my case, I choose whichever alternative seems to allow me the most flexibility to choose again later. The FTL might also discover that the preferred alternative might not be possible on that mission or at that time because of objective or subjective hazards, time constraints, etc. The FTL should not try to force it; it is better to just go on to the next one.

Should doing nothing be included as an alternative? For an FTL, the answer is, very rarely, if ever. If a team does nothing, it will likely at least appear that the FTL does not know what to do. Theodore Roosevelt said it best, "In a moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing; the worst thing you can do is nothing."

On the other hand, an FTL should never make a decision just to be perceived as someone who knows what to do, then simply hope for the best. Instead, the FTL must generate and evaluate more and hopefully better alternatives.

There will, however, be times when a FTL must wait for another situation to resolve itself before the chosen alternative can be implemented. Instead of doing nothing, the FTL can keep team members, and others as necessary, occupied with other tasks that can creatively fill the time. For example, if the team is waiting for a litter, some members can be sent down the hill to help the litter team, others can clear the trail of larger, loose rocks, still others can start a fire for its warming and psychological effect, cook a group meal, etc. The medical team can do things like take vitals more often than necessary, take a more detailed medical history than required, talk to the victim using topics that came up in the medical history, etc. The necessity or relative value of the tasks is not as important as generating a feeling within the team that everyone is contributing something to the overall group effort, and, at least subconsciously, assuring the victim that everything possible is being done.

There are some, however, who believe that by doing nothing, accountability is somehow avoided. This is not the case. There are errors of commission, that is, an FTL did something he shouldn't have done, as well as errors of omission, that is, not doing something that should have been done or doing nothing. FTLs are accountable for both kinds of errors.

6. Make the decision, by selecting the most appropriate alternative(s).

When the time comes to make a decision, it must be made! A FTL must be decisive! Avoiding or putting off decisions allows them to accumulate, which so complicates the issue that it defeats the purpose of having a decision-making process. Good decision-making is a flow from one decision to the next, ad infinitum.

Because there is a process of decision-making, some incorrectly think that each decision is made in a vacuum, that is, each decision stands alone and that only an individual's imagination limits the available alternatives. In reality, there is a flow of individual decisions that cannot exist apart from each other. Each decision made by a FTL flows from others he/she has made previously. Then, each new decision made defines the parameters of future decisions by making them possible or not. In other words, viable alternatives will be determined by the results of previous decisions. Viable alternatives will also be determined by the perceived needs for the future. Decision-making is like playing chess: it's not enough to simply anticipate the next decision; it is necessary to be anticipating several decisions after that one.

Making the decision is often considered the most difficult step in the process, mainly because of an FTL's fear that the decision made will be the "wrong" one. This fear is natural, but it cannot be allowed to get in the way of making a decision. Unfortunately, decisions don't come with guarantees. An FTL cannot worry excessively about whether a decision is "right" or "wrong," because there will be no absolutely "right" or "wrong" decisions. If there were, decision-making would be simple because, once a team leader selected the "right" one, then, by definition, the best outcome would be the result. In reality, however, circumstances sometimes radically change, and the "right" decision could result in the worst outcome. Conversely, the "wrong" decision could result in the best outcome. All an FTL can do is make the best decision that can be made at the time and under the circumstances, and then move on to the next one.

Sometimes it is difficult for an FTL to change a previous decision if actions have already been taken in support of the original choice. Most people don't want to think, or have others think, they have to move "backwards." But it is much better to retrace ones steps than fall off the proverbial cliff.

Since every SAR mission is potentially a life or death situation, it is appropriate to inject some honest pessimism into the mix. It behooves an FTL to evaluate worse case scenarios first. In that way, it is easier, in the beginning, to eliminate any alternative that has too high a probability of catastrophic results.

The FTL must also openly accept accountability for each and every decision. FTLs sometimes, either consciously or unconsciously, attempt to place this accountability elsewhere. For example, a field situation has developed to the point where a decision has to be made as to whether or not to move a victim. The FTL decides there is time for consultation and asks the team for input. After this discussion, the FTL might say, "Well, since the team feels that we should move the victim, that's what we will do;" or, "John here thinks we should not move the victim, and since he is the most experienced at extrication, that's what we will do." The FTL would be making the actual decision, but would also be attempting to transfer the accountability elsewhere. This cannot help but make team members think that the FTL is not confident enough in the outcome to take personal responsibility for the decision. It would be much better for the FTL to say something to the effect, "I thank you all for your input. This is what we're going to do." The FTL is then positively utilizing authority, carrying out responsibility, and accepting full accountability.

7. Carry it out.

It is then the FTL's task to see that any tasks made necessary by his/her decisions are carried out in a safe, responsible, and timely manner. Assuming that the major responsibilities have already been delegated within the team, the FTLs must tell these individuals what needs to be done and in what order, then supervise the overall operation, and not get caught up in the details of the plan.

8. Constantly reevaluate.

It would be reassuring if an FTL knew that, just because he/she religiously followed a decision-making procedure, the resulting decision would be the best one. The FTL must be self confident and flexible enough to change the plan. No decision is irrevocable!

Decisions are based on the FTL's best prediction of future events. However, since the future will never be entirely predictable, errors are bound to occur. Information might be incorrect and/or misinterpreted, personnel and/or equipment might no longer be available, tasks might not be able to be completed within the original time frame or at all, etc.

9. Other considerations.

In order for an FTL's decision making to be timely and effective, there are some basic concepts that should be considered:

— *All decisions are made based on assumptions concerning future events.*

Always remember the basis of the verb "to assume," which is "to make an ass out of u and me." A FTL must be constantly aware that assumptions of future events form the basis of all decisions. Continually question these assumptions, even after a decision is made. If an assumption turns out to be incorrect, or the situation changes, then make new assumptions.

— *Don't make decisions that don't need to be made.*

This is micromanagement. After good training and adequate experience, team members learn how specific tasks are most efficiently and effectively done. Follow Patton's advice: if a FTL wants base management to utilize this delegation model with him/her, the same model must be used with individual team members.

As a closely related concept, don't make decisions that don't need to be made yet. An FTL might start thinking too far into the future. Then, when the time comes to implement the decision that was made, the situation might have changed to the extent that the solution is no longer applicable. It's much better to follow the old maxim of not crossing any bridges before you get there.

— *Don't make decisions that are not yours to make.*

An FTL's authority, responsibility, and accountability begin and end with the activities of the team in the field. Therefore, an FTL must not attempt to make decisions that are reserved for the IC/OL. This is not to say, however, that he/she cannot attempt to influence those decisions. Since FTLs are the field experts, it is their responsibility to question the IC/OL if they feel that the decision is incorrect or out of their purview. If this doesn't happen and the situation turns out badly, the question from the IC/OL to the FTL will become, "Why didn't you tell us?", a question to which there will be no good answer.

Fortunately, however, even though skilled IC/OLs rely primarily upon written rules, they are not total automatons. They, too, care. Most also realize that there will be exceptions to the rules, and, more importantly, will be willing to accept the accountability that results from making the necessary changes. IC/OLs who are not at all flexible might also discover that more and more of their FTLs will be contacting them after the fact requesting "forgiveness" rather than "permission."

An FTL cannot dismiss out of hand the fact that a considerable amount of work and thought by experts went into creating and updating the plan. In other words, the IC/OL might be right. An FTL, no matter how experienced, does not have all the answers. Even if the FTL does in fact have the right answer from the field perspective, the personnel, equipment, etc. necessary to carry out this plan might be unavailable, or not available on a timely basis. Therefore, the FTL must be willing to work with the IC/OL to determine the best decision, under the circumstances.

Once the give-and-take is over and a decision has been made by the IC/OL, however, the FTL must not only follow the directions, but also actively support the decision within the field team. Team members need to sincerely believe that they are “doing the right thing.” It is not a great confidence builder if an FTL announces, for example, “This is not the best way to do this, but we will follow the IC/OL's directions because he/she is in charge.” It also doesn't take a great stretch of the imagination to realize that an FTL who consistently does this is tacitly giving his permission to treat his directions in the same way. The worst result of this behavior, however, is that team members might begin to believe that, since their FTL does not support the IC/OL, he will not support them either.

There might come a time when an FTL can't convince the IC/OL that their decision is a serious mistake, it's not their decision to make, the protocols should be amended on this occasion, or they should come to a compromise. Then the FTL must make a decision with far-reaching consequences. If a FTL decides to go his or her own way, no matter how it turns out, he or she will likely be forever damned. Some kind of action will virtually always be taken. If things don't turn out well, direct and public action will be taken against the “offending” FTL. Even if things turn out well, action will still be taken; it just won't be as direct and/or public. The justification will be that the FTL violated protocol by not following directions. If the fact that the mission was successful is brought up, the IC/OL's first reaction will likely be, “That's true, but how do we know things wouldn't have turned out better if the FTL had followed protocol.” (The fact that things could have turned out worse will normally not be an issue.) Closely following will be the second reaction, “We can't give people the idea they can ignore our directions.” The bottom line, however, is that the FTL is the expert who is on scene and, as such, is accountable. The FTL must balance these negative consequences with his/her on-site evaluation of the situation and primary goal of getting the team in and out safely. If there is a question or lawsuit, the defenses of “I didn't know” and/or “I was just following orders” will not work.

— *Don't make decisions that are no longer yours to make.*

At the beginning of a mission, an FTL's field authority is absolute. An FTL might then delegate decision-making authority in specific areas of the mission to the team's best specialists. Delegation means trust. It's a public admission by the FTL that there is a team member who, for whatever reason, either knows more or is in a better position to make decisions about a specific part of the operation. The FTL must then allow the team member to freely exercise the authority delegated.

Only in a most extreme situation should an FTL personally and publicly overrule a decision made by another team member who has been delegated the authority to make it. Even if the team member is in fact wrong, in most cases, an FTL can get this individual to compromise or change his/her decision by skillfully asking leading questions and/or making suggestions. If an FTL begins this process, however, he must be open to having his own mind changed. Again, no FTL is always right.

— *Don't automatically deny or accede to “gut feelings.”*

A “gut feeling,” otherwise known as intuition, is an intense emotional and/or physical reaction that can occur especially towards the end of a decision-making process. It is generally assumed--often incorrectly--that the purpose of these feelings is to tell an FTL that something important is not being considered. The closer the FTL comes to making the decision, the more intense the feelings might become. These feelings often lead an FTL to believe that, even though it was identified as the best utilizing the decision-making process, the decision about to be made might not be the best one that could be made under the circumstances. And a decision-maker might further reason, if only the missing piece of the puzzle could somehow be discovered, everything would all of a sudden be all right. As a worst-case scenario, if this piece of information or thought-process is not found, an FTL might succumb to gut feelings and make a different decision, one that “feels” better, rather than the one that “looks” right.

It is my belief, however, that gut feelings can be explained in other ways. For example, if an FTL is all of a sudden faced with an especially difficult decision, his/her gut feelings could instead be an unconscious attempt to either avoid or postpone the decision. Other causative factors for this type of gut feeling would be physical and/or psychological fatigue, sleep deprivation, extreme stress, or fear.

Time is virtually always the limiting factor in coming to terms with gut feelings. If there is time to reevaluate, do so, but put a limit on it. To determine what might be “missing,” an FTL is limited to reevaluating the situation internally and with other team members and/or base camp. If there is no time to do this, implement the original decision. Unless it was discovered what was missing, the decision that was made utilizing the formal decision-making process will usually remain the best one that could have been made under the circumstances.

These concerns notwithstanding, gut feelings do have a place in decision-making, if only infrequently and when adequately processed. There is nothing wrong with “sensing” the presence of a crevasse, for example, and then not hesitating to probe the terrain.

— *As much as possible, avoid "snap decisions."*

A "snap decision" is one that must be made with very little time for formal consideration. It is usually necessitated by emergency life or death situations that have never been previously encountered either at all or under the same circumstances. A fully qualified FTL who is constantly thinking and planning ahead and, most importantly, is familiar with his/her decision-making process will minimize the necessity for, and/or the possible consequences of, this type of decision.

No matter what the time pressure, however, some form of the decision-making process can be utilized, even if it has to be radically shortened. During a crisis situation, time seems to slow while thought processes seem to accelerate. It's amazing how much of the process can be completed in the few seconds available. The resulting decision will then more closely meet the criteria of being the best one that could have been made under the circumstances because the formal decision-making process will have been at least partially followed.

— *Make decisions based on what is right, not who is right.*

A considerable amount of direct or indirect pressure can be placed on an FTL to base a decision, not on his/her evaluation of the situation, but on what someone else thinks or would do, just because of who that person is. "Who is right," as opposed to "what is right," is a political consideration, and definitely not in the purview of an FTL.

DUTIES OF THE FIELD TEAM LEADERS.

Being a FTL entails certain specific task requirements that are normally carried out in a definite order. Problems result in callouts, resulting in the assembly of SAR teams, field preparations, deployment, then demobilization and debriefing, and finally paperwork. This section provides an overview of each of these aspects of a SAR mission in terms of the duties and responsibilities of the field team leader.

1. The Situation:

(a). The FTL will be thoroughly briefed by the Incident Commander/Operation Manager regarding the mission to include, but not be limited to, the overall objectives, any special restrictions and/or requirements, and the team's specific objectives. Very often, problems in the field can be traced directly back to missed information and/or misunderstandings during the briefing.

Good listening skills are critical. The FTL must:

- (1) pay close attention and listen carefully,
- (2) take detailed notes and make drawings, as necessary,
- (3) ask questions, or repeat his/her understanding of what was said to clear up any misunderstandings,
- (4) not interrupt the briefer, and
- (5) not initiate or participate in horseplay, extraneous conversation, or any other behavior that distracts others or detracts from the purposes of the briefing.

After the briefing, each FTL must make a final decision as to whether or not he/she is qualified to and capable of leading this particular mission.

2. The Team and Team Members:

The FTL will:

(a). Be directly involved with base camp management in the selection of his or her team. He will know as much as possible about the experience, capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, medical and psychological limitations, etc. of each team member in order to be able to compare these qualifications with the requirements of the mission, keeping in mind that a team will always be limited by the capabilities of the individuals in it. Each team member must be qualified to, and capable of, completing the mission. Exceeding abilities is one of the most frequent causes of accidents.

A personal evaluation of each team member's level of expertise and preparedness should have already been made by each FTL. Expertise can be judged by evaluating the team member's application and/or resume, talking to the member about his or her specific expertise, interviewing other FTLs and team members, and personally observing the team member on trainings and other missions.

(b). Break down the mission into individual, manageable parts that each assigned team member has both the expertise and willingness to complete. An FTL does not want to delegate a task to a team member who does not yet have the ability to complete it, nor does he want to supervise too closely a member who has already clearly demonstrated that he/she has the ability to complete the task to be assigned.

An FTL also doesn't want to consistently assign the same task to the same team member. The obvious advantage of doing this is that the team member will become an expert at this specific task. However, this benefit is more than offset by the fact that team members will become less flexible, and eventually bored. Further, a team of specialists falls apart if one of the specialists is unavailable and there is no one else to complete that task.

3. Preparation:

The FTL will:

(a). Brief team members concerning the mission, individual tasks, safety issues, required equipment, unusual conditions, etc. The FTL will ensure that each team member knows his or her task(s), generally how each task fits into the overall assignment, and that enough time has been assigned for completion. He will reiterate that team safety is the most important concern and that any team member that believes that safety is being compromised in any way must report this to the FTL.

Good communication skills are critical. The FTL must:

- (1) make sure the information is complete, words are chosen carefully, and the team members are listening [control horseplay, extraneous conversation, etc],
- (2) talk slowly, clearly, and concisely,
- (3) have team members take notes, and,
- (4) encourage questions,
- (5) If there is any question as to whether or not a team member understands the information, have him/her repeat it.

Never assume that just because an FTL completes a perfect briefing that team members will always remember what was said and/or correctly do what he/she was told. At this level also, miscommunication is a common cause of serious accidents.

(b). Know the identity, location, and capabilities of the most competent team members so that the team can most effectively utilize the expertise of each.

(1) Determine and announce to the group who will take charge in case he/she becomes incapacitated. There must be an immediate and smooth transfer of authority, especially in a crisis.

This is not necessarily the same as appointing an assistant team leader. An ATL should only be appointed if one is necessary, e.g. extensive and/or complex task, large group, etc. Each ATL is one less team member. If you do appoint an ATL, assign specific responsibilities, and then let him/her "surprise you with their ingenuity." If, however, a ATL is appointed, that individual also automatically becomes the second-in-command.

(2). Determine who will physically lead the group, and who will "sweep," and insure that both have a functioning radio.

(3). Delegate specific authority to other team members as deemed appropriate.

(c). Ready the team for the assignment. This can include, but not be limited to, obtaining radios, maps, team first kit, climbing gear and other items of team equipment, along with assuring that each team member is properly equipped for time of day, weather, terrain, etc. and that this equipment is in good condition.

4. The Assigned Task(s):

The FTL will:

(a). Move team quickly out of base to its assigned area. It is essential that a FTL personally and at all times knows the team's current location, where it is going, the safest, quickest, and easiest way to get there, approximately how long will it take, and alternate/escape routes. Very little will damage a team's confidence in an FTL faster than hearing him/her ask directions of another team member. However, even though a FTL's credibility would be of necessity damaged by not being familiar with the area, it is much better (along with being safer) for him/her to ask directions or assign another team member to guide the group than it is to attempt it without adequate knowledge.

(b). Utilize his/her knowledge, experience, judgment, flexibility, courage, etc. by continually thinking ahead, anticipating problems, reevaluating the situation and the environment to identify new alternatives, and making any changes considered necessary to meet the demands of a fluid situation.

(c). Throughout the mission, monitor the physical and mental condition of all team members. Make sure they are drinking, eating, and staying warm and dry. This becomes much more critical at night, under inclement conditions, or with inexperienced team members. One way to do this is for the FTL to insist that the team take a short break after a predetermined time period. During this break, the FTL can initiate a head count and check on team members' condition. A good condition check consists of talking to each team member or listening to a part of his/her conversation with another. Team members should also be checking on each other and the FTL. In addition, these hourly breaks allow for clothing adjustments, snacks, medical issues, questions, exchanges of information, etc.

(d). Keep the team together physically. Minimum team size should be three. In case of an emergency, this allows one team member to go for help, while the other can remain with the injured member. A team member must never be left alone. If a team member becomes separated, the mission immediately changes to a search for the missing member, and remains so until that person is found. Also, team members must be told that, if it becomes necessary for any reason or at any time for someone to leave the team, the FTL must be notified beforehand.

If it becomes necessary to split the group, each new team must be strong enough—leadership, team members, equipment, etc.—to deal with any emergency. The same procedure utilized in the formation of the original team must be followed. If the team is being split for a limited period of time, and its goal remains the same as the original team, the FTL should make this decision, then notify base. If the team will not regroup, and/or will be assuming a different goal, then base camp, as the overall planning unit, should at least be consulted.

(e). Keep the group together mentally. Conflicts and/or disagreements will occasionally occur, even in the most cohesive groups. If these differences are directly related to the mission, the FTL must mediate and decide. If the differences are personal, the FTL cannot allow them to distract the team from its mission. On the other hand, these issues cannot be totally ignored because the worst case scenario would have other team members taking sides, which would threaten the cohesion of the group, maybe at a critical time. Therefore, the FTL must insist that unresolved conflicts of any type be put on hold. These issues can then be discussed and evaluated at the critique after the mission or between the individuals involved after the team is released.

(f). Maintain contact with base camp for updates on the current situation and changes in assignment. The FTL must keep base informed as to the team's position, condition, progress, intentions, etc.

(g). Maintain a high level of situational awareness by not becoming directly involved in any of the hands-on details of the mission. A FTL involved in detail cannot be aware of his team's overall situation. If a team member requires direct assistance, assign someone else to provide it. It may, however, become necessary in some instances, -e.g. not enough team members--for the FTL to provide some direct assistance. If so, the FTL should pick the simplest task that takes the shortest period of time.

Sustain this high level of awareness throughout the entire mission, especially towards the end when the pressure eases. For example, on the hike back to base without a victim, a FTL might begin evaluating his/her performance on the mission, what he/she is going to do at home, etc. This will distract him/her from the primary mission of getting the team safely back to base.

(h). Once the team reaches the scene, assign the most qualified medical person the responsibility of caring for the victim. This Medical Team Leader must then physically remain with the victim until he/she is released to the ambulance, hospital, etc. The FTL's main task then becomes getting the MTL the personnel, equipment, etc. deemed necessary to adequately evaluate, stabilize, and, if necessary, package, the victim.

(i). The MTL, in consultation with the FTL, will then decide whether or not evacuation is necessary, and based on victim status, weather, terrain, distance, personnel and equipment available, etc., which evacuation method is preferred. Base must then be consulted to determine if this method is available in a reasonable amount of time, and, if not, what viable alternatives exist.

(j). Try to keep team members busy. If it's a technical rescue, this is usually not a problem, as there never seems to be enough team members available. If not, an FTL might have to be creative, even resorting to "make-work" jobs. If the situation is extremely stressful, keeping busy helps control fear and anxiety by giving the mind something else to think about.

(k). Complete the evacuation, utilizing the safest and quickest available method. Remain constantly alert for any situational changes that might affect it.

5. Back at Base:

The FTL will:

- (a). Release the victim to a responsible medical authority.
- (b). Complete a numbers and condition check of his/her team members.
- (c). Conduct a mission debrief and team critique.

As soon as possible after reaching base, or at any time requested, each FTL will make his/her team available to base camp management for a mission debrief. Ideally, before this debrief, the FTL will find a quiet, secluded spot to gather his/her team for a team critique.

The main goal of a mission debrief is to determine exactly and to what degree a team completed its field assignment. The information presented by the FTL will then be combined with data from the other field teams to determine exactly what was accomplished during a specific time period and at what cost. This is especially important in multi-day missions. Subjects included will be area covered, difficulties encountered such as weather, fatigue, hazards, injuries, equipment problems, etc., accidents, incidents, and any ideas and/or recommendations regarding future operations in that area.

Overall, it is my firm belief that the one item that is consistently either overlooked, understated, and/or misinterpreted in a debrief is what are commonly called "incidents." These have also been described as "near misses" or "close calls." An incident is an accident that didn't quite happen. Being involved in an accident normally results in physical and/or property damage. An incident, on the other hand, has no immediate tragic aftermath, but if time, position, personnel, etc. had been even slightly different, the results would likely have been catastrophic.

The worst aspect of an incident is that, instead of immediately evaluating it with the intent of keeping it from happening again—as would be done with an accident—there is a tendency to, consciously or unconsciously, treat it as a one-time event that is somehow heroic. For example, at the debrief, team member #1 says "I was climbing up the chute when all of a sudden..." Team member #2 then relates, "Yeah, I was behind you, looked up..." If the incident doesn't warrant epic treatment, team members might begin to describe and exaggerate the humorous aspects. The common thread of all the accounts, however, will be "We came tha-a-a-t close to [something horrible]! But, that's OK because we got away with it."

In fact, however, something extremely serious did happen because team members were put into a situation where they were "tha-a-a-t close to [something horrible]!" Rather than glamorizing or minimizing the incident, the FTL needs to be asking everyone involved, "How did that happen, and what can we do to keep it from happening again?" Specific questions need to be asked and answered, such as, "Why was that specific route picked, was there a safer way or a better time, were there any warning signs, was anything overlooked, etc.?" Close examination of an incident usually uncovers something that the FTL should have seen or considered, but didn't.

The primary purposes of a team critique are to honestly determine what went well with the team's part of a mission; ascertain what did not; and decide what might be done to improve the response next time. The FTL will describe a chronology of events to team, e.g. briefing, preparation, approach, individual FTL and team member performance, etc. Then the FTL will become the group facilitator, rather than the leader. The team will then openly discuss and evaluate all of the selected parts of the mission.

Determining what went well is relatively easy because the responses will usually be positive. Also, beginning a critique with this topic puts the process in a positive light.

Ascertaining what went wrong is much more tricky. Unless done correctly, there is a danger of making a fellow team member feel angry, ashamed, inadequate, etc. The FTL or team member must only give constructive criticism in a positive manner. It is not constructive criticism if the FTL or team member's intent is to embarrass or demean another team member. When giving criticism, the most common error is getting too personal. The team member giving the critique can minimize this by:

- (1) using only "I"-type statements, e.g. "I think..., It seems to me that..., " etc.,
- (2) focusing on a particular behavior in a specific situation, not on the team member,
- (3) remaining in the present, rather than bringing up the past,
- (4) identifying others by their titles or jobs,
- (5) discussing positive and negative consequences rather than telling others what they should or shouldn't do,
- (6) including only behaviors that can be changed, and
- (7) openly and enthusiastically inviting constructive criticism of his/her own actions/inactions.

When receiving criticism, the most common mistake is taking it too personally. To minimize this, a team member must:

- (1) insist that the individual providing the critique follow the above listed concepts, and
- (2) do everything possible to avoid becoming defensive.

The last part of the team critique revolves around looking for improvements. A list of suggested improvements would ideally be developed and presented to team management for consideration. Then, this information would be shared and discussed with other FTLs at a team leader meeting and the entire team at a team meeting. Unfortunately, some teams automatically assume that just because something went well, it couldn't have gone better. There are very few things that couldn't be improved.

If the mission was extremely stressful, each team member should be offered at least a critical incident stress debrief by a counselor experienced in the technique.

(d). Complete any official reports considered necessary by Incident Command.

6. At home:

(a) In addition to any reports submitted officially, it can be very helpful for each manager and leader to sit down and describe his/her part in the mission in writing. In case there is ever a question or a lawsuit, it is much better to have a written record of the incident. Memory will not be sufficient, because lawsuits can be filed years after the incident.

IDENTIFYING AND DEVELOPING FIELD TEAM LEADERS

When an individual initially joins a team, he/she will need, for obvious reasons, to be told exactly what to do, when to do it, etc. This individual will also require close supervision and constant feedback as to whether or not he/she is completing their tasks adequately. At the next stage, a team member will have gained enough skill, experience, and confidence to be trusted to adequately complete specific task(s) without close supervision. Feedback will be required, but not as much or as detailed. The third stage might find a team member becoming involved with creating plans and ideas and maybe even becoming an official part of the decision-making process within a team. An individual at this level might also begin to have less experienced team members ask him/her questions. During the fourth stage, the prospective leader might be placed in charge of a small group of specialized team members and delegated responsibility for tasks he/she has previously demonstrated the ability to complete. Feedback will be directed more towards group performance. At this level, a team member could also be qualified to be an assistant team leader. The fifth, and last, level is that of FTL.

Prerequisites

To be a safe and therefore successful FTL, the most critical requirement, by far, is a sincere desire for that responsibility. But, even desire won't be enough if it's in place for the wrong reason(s). Ideally, a team member will choose to lead for internally generated reasons, such as providing a specialized SAR service, improving skills, etc. Unfortunately a team member might choose field team leadership for external reasons, e.g. because the team member thinks that's what is expected, it's the position accorded the most status on the team, everyone else is doing it, the power to tell others what to do, etc. Even this, however, might be defensible, but only as long as the externally motivated leader is happy with the "title" and does not actually try to lead teams in the field.

In the final analysis, however, field team leadership is a choice. It cannot, and should not, be the goal of every team member. Not wanting to be an FTL is not a character flaw. Therefore, care also needs to be taken to insure that team members who do not choose this option are not in any way excluded or singled out because of this decision.

Next, a team member must already possess the requisite abilities in all the specific SAR tasks he/she might be asked to complete. Then, he/she must demonstrate the physical ability, intelligence, knowledge, skills, experience, and judgment necessary for a leadership trainee. Evaluation of physical ability, intelligence, knowledge, skills, and experience is quantitative, so these qualities are the easiest to assess. Judgment and desire, however, are qualitative measurements and therefore much more difficult to evaluate. The team training authority should determine specific requirements in each of these areas, and each potential FTL can be tested and/or observed to accurately determine whether or not he/she is qualified.

Readiness for leadership training begins with physical ability, e.g. endurance, strength, agility, etc. Physically fit individuals feel better, are more capable and self-assured, handle pressure better, work longer and harder, and recover more rapidly than those who are not. It can be measured by time and motion studies, e.g. how long it takes for the team member to complete designated physical tasks along with how well he/she completes these tasks.

Intelligence is the ability and desire to think, learn, understand, remember, etc. Knowledge is information. Intelligence will be utilized to accumulate, evaluate, and apply specific knowledge. Both intelligence and knowledge will be combined with practice to develop required skills. Intelligence and leadership knowledge can both be evaluated with oral and/or written examinations, while leadership skills are assessed by a practical test. A prospective FTL should master the above before proceeding to the next level, because, as Vernon Law said, "Experience is the hardest teacher. It gives the test first and the lesson afterwards."

Experience is a form of practical knowledge and skill that is learned through personal observation and involvement. All prospective leaders must already have extensive and intensive field and SAR experience. Unfortunately, all individuals with this experience will not necessarily become good leaders. A prospective SAR leader must demonstrate the ability and willingness to religiously evaluate, integrate, and learn from each individual experience.

In SAR, experience consists of performing various tasks in the field under actual conditions, either during training or on missions. When an individual initially has a SAR experience, he will respond to it based on his intelligence, knowledge, skills, and any related prior experience. To learn from the experience, which is the initial leadership skill, he must evaluate it with the specific intention of determining whether or not the response was the most appropriate under the circumstances. During this evaluation process, the individual might also talk to and/or read about others who have had similar experiences to discover how they reacted. From this evaluation and study, the individual will develop a generalized set of priorities predicting what he might do the next time a similar situation presents itself.

Then, after a similar experience has presented itself and been dealt with utilizing the original experience as a model, that newest situation, response, and result can be compared and contrasted with the original, and the overall prediction fine tuned, and so on. Every presenting situation will be at least slightly different from all that have occurred previously. It could be a different sequence of events, environmental conditions, personnel, management/leadership, equipment, etc. The key is to determine what effect the difference(s) had on the presenting situation. Thus is judgment developed.

Evaluating previous experience is more difficult. It can objectively be measured by time spent performing various SAR-related tasks under different conditions. For a subjective measurement, a prospective SAR leader could be assigned an experienced mentor who would accompany him/her on trainings and missions, and evaluate afterwards.

Judgment is at the top of the leadership abilities pyramid. Judgment was best described in the fourth century AD by St. Augustine in a prayer. He wrote, "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Once an individual has accumulated, evaluated, and integrated enough experiences, he can begin to use the results to accurately predict future events. This is where the whole begins to exceed the sum of its parts. Developing good judgment is a lifelong process, and even then an individual will not approach perfection.

There is no way for anyone in one lifetime to accumulate and correctly evaluate enough experiences to predict with 100% accuracy what will happen in a given situation. Therefore, it is very difficult to objectively or subjectively measure judgment. One good way is to create SAR scenarios for a prospective FTL to evaluate based on his own experience. Then the evaluator(s) would discuss the team member's judgment, not based on whether it was right or wrong, but on whether or not it was workable. In the field, a mentor could evaluate a trainee's judgment ability based on real-life situations.

Training Program

Before a field team leadership-training program can begin, the controlling agency must determine specific prerequisites for entry and requirements for graduation. Further, post-graduate requirements necessary to maintain certification must be created. Then the agency must develop and provide the specific training and evaluation necessary to meet the requirements. The sponsoring agency can utilize SAR team expertise to perform any of these steps, but it will still be accountable for the results. A team should never be sent into the field without a FTL who at least meets these qualifications.

One of the most important decisions that must initially be made is whether the primary goal of the training program will be to train competent leaders or provide equal opportunity. If the primary goal is to train competent leaders, requirements will be formulated without reference to who will or won't qualify. An equal opportunity approach will necessitate that requirements be written with the idea of allowing as many as possible to qualify.

An excellent example of a training program that does not reference "who will or won't qualify" is the medical profession. Prospective doctors are expected to first fulfill their schooling requirements, then complete a

residency and maybe a specialty, etc. Anyone who does not meet each and every requirement successfully is dropped from the program.

The opposite end of the spectrum,--i.e. "allowing as many as is humanly possible to qualify,"-- is illustrated by the secondary education system in the United States. For many years, state governments have required different tests that are ostensibly designed to determine whether or not a student has achieved an academic level sufficient to justify graduation from high school. These tests usually take two forms. The first is to allow individual school districts to create a relatively easy test that almost everyone can pass. Then, those who fail are given intensive remediation and allowed to take the same test as many times as necessary to pass. The second technique is a little subtler. The state will create its own statewide test. The tests themselves are usually a good measure of what knowledge and skills a high school graduate should have. Unfortunately, what then happens is that state officials become concerned that too many students won't be able to pass this test. So, instead of putting up with the public pressure that would result from a great many students failing, the decision will be made to "test the test." The statistics generated by this method will then be utilized to determine the passing score. The score will more than likely be represented as a percentile [how a student did in relation to all other students] rather than a percentage [how the student actually scored on the test]. Finally, other methods will be created to allow those who still couldn't pass the test to complete the requirements for a diploma.

An example of a "middle ground" program is the military. The Armed Services created adequate tests but made the minimum score so low that most recruits could pass. Once an individual signs on the dotted line, however, requirements become much stricter.

There seems to be considerable pressure in some SAR teams to allow as many as possible to qualify. Leadership might be made part of a "career ladder," where ultimate success is measured by attaining leadership status. Then, if team members are not allowed on the "top rung," they will get discouraged and drift away. Some feel that, since SAR is mostly a volunteer function, we cannot compete with other organizations that are paying their leaders. Therefore, we have to qualify whomever we can get. Others don't want to be personally responsible for turning anyone away because of their fear of being perceived as the "bad guy" or not "politically correct."

It is my sincere belief, however, that it is much better to create a challenging leadership program consisting of specific requirements that are fairly, firmly, and consistently applied. Team members seriously interested in leadership will rise to the occasion.

In any case, a field team leadership-training program will usually begin with classroom instruction. Issues, such as those included in this piece, will be discussed and analyzed. Topics will include, but not be limited to, working on a personal leadership/decision-making model, reading first-hand accounts of SAR missions and/or other expeditions to learn how other leaders reacted to different situations along with their rationales, discover how FTLs/teams describe good and bad leadership, along with their reasons, etc. While vicarious experience is not as exciting as the real thing, it is still experience and can therefore be utilized in making future judgments when in a similar situation. By the end of this class, the prospective FTL will have created a personal leadership and decision-making model, and, most importantly, will hopefully have accumulated enough information to make an informed decision as to whether or not team leadership is a goal he/she wishes to pursue.

Next, while on trainings and missions, the trainees will observe different FTLs to see how they do things. The trainees will be encouraged to ask questions, but not to limit these questions to the actual leader. Trainees should talk to others on the field team and get their opinions, especially regarding how they define good leadership. They will take this opportunity to vicariously test their personal leadership and decision-making models and decide whether each would hold up in actual practice, and, if not, make the necessary changes. These observations would not have to be limited to SAR leaders. Trainees will then be asked to take on added responsibility within a field team during training missions, beginning with providing input and becoming part of the decision-making process. The next step will be to become an assistant team leader, and, finally, an FTL on training teams. The trainees will obtain feedback from other team members and supervising FTLs, and use all of this information and experience to again test and modify their individual leadership and decision-making models. It would also be helpful for trainees to take on leadership responsibility within the SAR team organization, such as committee and other administrative assignments, run for office, become a committee chairperson, etc.

It is crucial that any trainee not take on a direct leadership role on an actual mission until the training staff determines he/she is able. Each individual trainee must also be able to unequivocally answer "Yes!" to the following three questions:

1. Am I willing, able, and qualified to be identified as and actually be a field team leader?
2. Am I ready to accept the most important obligation of leadership; that is, to be the individual that my team members, the victim(s), and all others directly or indirectly involved in the field will look to for strength and direction, especially in a crisis?

3. Am I willing and able to make, and be personally accountable for, life or death decisions?

Some might think this a little harsh. I don't. This is not a game we're playing. The most junior assistant leader in the chain of command might all of a sudden find him/herself in charge of the entire field team in a hazardous situation. Then what? This is the "What if....?" question that everyone in the chain of command needs to be constantly asking, because it can and does happen!

Leadership in the field can be carried out at either the field team or the specialty team level. A FTL's major task is to coordinate the efforts of his/her team members with those of base camp in order to carry out their field team's part of the overall plan. Specialty teams are born if the FTL decides it is necessary to split the team into two or more groups, each with a specific task. The specialty team leader then coordinates the efforts of his/her team members with those of the FTL.

A trainee's initial leadership assignment will ideally be within a specialty team. If the team member is a climber, he/she could become the assistant team leader for the climbing aspect of a mission. That way, he/she will already be familiar with the necessary knowledge and skills for the specialty, and can concentrate more on the leadership aspects.

If all goes well, leadership of a specialty team would be a trainee's next step on the ladder. This will likely be his/her first experience dealing directly with the stresses involved in actually being in charge. This will also be when the trainee truly discovers whether or not he/she has what it takes to become a FTL. It is always helpful on a trainee's first few experiences to have an experienced FTL along to provide advice and support as necessary.

If a specialty team leader decides to move on, the next step would be assistant field team leader. This will introduce the individual to the greater scope of activities required of a FTL. The final step in the process would be FTL. In this case, it is necessary for a trainee to have an experienced FTL along on his/her first few experiences to provide advice and support as necessary.

Selection

For each mission, qualified FTL can be selected, elected, or rise to the occasion. The main advantage of selection is that it allows the FTL to be picked on the basis of qualifications. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. Selection will usually be made by the IC or the OM. Individual managers will normally be granted considerable latitude to utilize their own personal preferences in the selection. Also, since team members have no input into this decision, the selected FTL might not have unqualified team support.

Election by team members means that the FTL will have more team member support. But, as in any election, an FTL might be elected for reasons other than their qualifications. Also, some team members might act like political lobbyists and demand a "pay back" for their support. Lastly, it is time consuming for team members to elect a FTL for each mission.

These two methods could be combined to provide what might be the "best of both worlds." Team members could elect qualified team members to the position of FTL, and a list of these members then presented to the IC or OM. It would then be up to this individual to choose a FTL for each mission from that list.

Because of the chain of command, an FTL "rising to the occasion" would apply to SAR only if there was only one FTL qualified member on the field team, and that individual became incapacitated. It might also occur if the team is utilizing any type of consensus decision-making. This is an undesirable situation that can neither be predicted nor controlled. Normally, the most knowledgeable and experienced team member would be the one to "rise to the occasion."

Simply having a specific skill, especially if that skill is limited to a single environment, does not make one a leader at any level. For example, while climbing excellence is certainly a prerequisite for climbing leadership, it alone does not qualify an individual to be a climbing leader. Climbing leadership is a skill in and of itself. Specialized leadership knowledge, skills, and experience are necessary to turn a climber into a climbing leader.

Further, just because an individual is a qualified climbing leader would not make him an FTL, because this level of team leadership is also a skill in and of itself. Different from a specialty leader, an FTL must be an expert in many different activities, e.g. mountaineering, search, EMS, extrication, evacuation, etc., in all local environments. In other words, he must already have mastered all the necessary aspects of the specific skills and environments described in the SAR team's mission statement before attempting to become a FTL.

To carry this a step further, some think that, if the main aspect of a rescue involves climbing and there are two qualified FTLs available, the one who is the best climber should be the FTL. Very little could be further from the truth. There is a concept in economics called the "law of comparative advantage." It generally states that everyone should do what they're best at. Following this law would dictate that the best climber should be climbing.

Therefore, the best climber should be the specialty leader in charge of the climbing aspect, and the other should be the FTL. Anything else would be a waste of talent.

There is also a danger that an IC/OM might consciously or unconsciously pick his FTLs because of their willingness to be figureheads and accept virtually all direction from said manager. This allows an IC/OM to directly control the field operation but avoid responsibility or accountability concerns. FTLs who are willing to accept this outside control must understand that their legitimacy and credibility will be open to question because their authority was not seriously delegated. Responsibility and accountability, however, always come with the FTL position. This could easily become a life-or-death concern if the FTL is ever out of communication with the manager who is actually making the decisions. If the situation is extremely stressful, the FTL might panic or withdraw. Or, instead of making decisions based on their own interpretation of the situation, FTLs in this situation might lose situational awareness by attempting to make the same decision they think the mentor would have made, or put off the decision until the mentor is available.

Another interesting manipulation that might occur is an individual team member might decide to be an “undercover team leader.” I first came across this situation with my high school groups. One of the first parts of orientation week was breaking a fourteen-person group into two seven-person teams. These teams were then allowed to select their own specialty team leader. On the trips, it became evident in many cases that the selected leader was not the one actually in charge of the team. I began paying closer attention to the selection process and discovered that, in teams that had the most ineffective leaders, there had almost always been another individual who had taken charge of the selection process. This individual had nominated the successful team leader and did everything possible to have him/her elected. He/she then became the person the elected leader always listened to when a decision had to be made. This allowed an individual to make leadership decisions without any authority, responsibility, and/or accountability. I stopped this by allowing the team to choose their leader as they had before. Then the team was asked to decide who had provided the most input into the selection process. That individual was then appointed as the specialty team leader.

In very rare cases, a team member might openly attempt to take control of a team from its appointed FTL. This is most likely to occur in a stressful situation if a less qualified FTL is placed over a more qualified one, or the “more qualified” individual imagines this is the case. It can also occur if a team member believes that the leader is mentally or physically incapacitated but won't voluntarily relinquish authority. This can be allowed only under the most extraordinary of circumstances. Anyone who attempts to or does this should be considered guilty of insubordination until proven innocent.

LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

In addition to the leadership qualities previously mentioned, FTLs must be able to

Demonstrate self-confidence: Self-confidence is a FTL's sincere belief that he/she will behave appropriately and correctly in any situation. It is also the ability to make difficult decisions and take risks with a clear understanding that, in order to produce the desired results, the team must risk failure. Self-confidence is grounded in a FTL's competence and belief in his/her capabilities, along with a sincere desire to instill the same quality in other team members. It is not boasting. Self-confidence is demonstrated as actions, boasting by words.

The easiest and most obvious way to demonstrate self-confidence is to “walk the talk;” that is “decisively say what you're going to do, then do exactly what you said.” Obviously the situation will sometimes change to the extent that doing exactly “what you said” would be inappropriate. Then an FTL must make the necessary change(s) and “walk that talk.”

Self-confidence is not the same as self-importance. A self-important FTL sincerely believes that, because of his/her knowledge, skills, experience, etc., the specific task at hand cannot properly be accomplished without him/her. His/her self-image is attached securely to the belief that he/she is absolutely essential to the success of the team, mission, etc. And, if he/she were not on scene, the consequences would likely be catastrophic. In time, this FTL might even convince other team members of his/her indispensability. The worst case scenario would be for team members to then come to the conclusion that mission success will be guaranteed by this FTL's presence. This allows team members to use this FTL as an excuse not to train and or prepare seriously. After all, they conclude, “It doesn't matter. Joe will be there and he will take care of it.”

In fact, no one at any level on the team is indispensable. Further, no one should be allowed to think he/she is, or that any other single individual is, either.

Demonstrate Initiative: Initiative is the capacity to be a self-starter. A FTL with this ability will be able to take appropriate action(s) without definite directions if the situation changes, or an unforeseen opportunity presents itself. Simply put, initiative is the ability to act appropriately without specific instructions from the chain of command.

In the field, communication with base camp might be cut off at any time and for any length of time. When this occurs, team members rightly expect the FTL to be able to safely continue or terminate the mission without base camp's direction and control. Further, if an opportunity presents itself that is practical, doable, will result in a savings of time and/or effort, and contributes to mission success, the FTL must be willing to act. This is the classic case of properly and appropriately asking for forgiveness later instead of permission now.

Base camp managers, whether they consciously realize it or not, also value this ability. The picture of an FTL, whom the IC is personally responsible for placing in that position, frozen in place with uncertainty in a hazardous situation just because he doesn't know or can't decide what to do without outside help should suffice for justification. Traditionally, however, managers tend to discourage FTLs from making any decisions on their own. If an FTL takes the initiative, base camp management will usually question the time or specific situation chosen. That's all right, however, as long as they don't question the necessity of initiative. It would be a poor base camp manager indeed that would send a FTL into the field who was incapable of effectively operating without specific direction from base camp.

Earn Trust and Confidence: FTLs must inspire trust and confidence both up and down the chain of command. The optimal way to earn the trust and confidence of team members is to demonstrate trust in them. Giving team members appropriate direction, demanding assignments, the necessary resources and freedom to successfully complete these tasks, and encouraging dissent if there is time best accomplish this. Creating an exemplary training program most easily does this. All training programs teach knowledge and skills. Exemplary training programs also teach initiative. Initiative, as previously mentioned, is the ability to successfully complete an assigned task with minimal or no direct supervision. Initiative is a quality that is not limited to FTLs. It is demonstrated by a FTL, however, by his adherence to Patton and Roosevelt's advice. A training program that does not stress initiative can be identified by its self-important FTLs who say such things as, "My team can't do it without me," or "I have to watch them every minute." Team members must be trained to use their initiative, and, more importantly, that it's all right to do so.

An FTL must treat each team member as he/she would like to be treated. Each team member must be treated as an individual, by appreciating individual differences; and as a group member, by recognizing each individual's unique contribution to the group effort. Don't talk down to them. Consult with your team whenever possible. By words and deeds, demonstrate to the team a sincere belief that a FTL's primary function is team member safety. When the team does well, let them know publicly, and not with just a statement such as "Way to go." When they don't, acknowledge them for what they have done well, while suggesting changes and/or improvements. Let team members know they are making a difference.

The way a FTL phrases his/her directives is important. "We" and "us" statements are much more effective than those utilizing "I" or "you," regardless of an FTL's style. An example of an appropriate directive is, "This is what we're going to do." Most team members would prefer to hear that rather than, "This is what I want you to do," or "This is what you're going to do." The former phrase indicates that the FTL considers him/herself a part of the group; the latter becomes a conscious or subconscious way separating him/herself from the rest of the group. "Let's stay in sight of each other," will gain the same physical result as, "Stay in sight of me," but, the former will be much more effective.

Also, a directive prefaced with a question, "Will you...., would you mind...., how about....," etc., is psychologically much easier to follow, because it's not in the form of an order. Also, since asking a question leaves room for an answer, phrasing a directive in this manner could be an unspoken and time-efficient way for a FTL to say that there is time for limited discussion. Conversely, a directive without a preface would then indicate a state of increased urgency that requires a no-questions-asked, immediate response.

Some, especially more authoritarian-minded individuals, however, might say that this type of "psychology" has nothing to do with field team leadership; that team members must follow orders no matter how worded or expressed. They forget that most SAR team members are volunteers, and volunteers don't have to follow anyone's orders. As a matter of fact, a significant part of a FTL's task is to get team members, who do not have to follow directions, to do so voluntarily and enthusiastically.

Everyone on the team must believe that the FTL is the best he/she can be at that time, and is constantly working to become better. Team members deserve nothing less. To do this, a FTL must first know the other team members personally and insure that the other team members know him/her. The FTL must attend meetings,

trainings, missions, social events, etc. with other team members. That way, he/she will better understand the strengths and weaknesses of each team member, and, at some level, be able to predict the behavior of each in certain situations. And this process will also allow team members to learn similar things about the FTL. This knowledge will allow the FTL to more accurately match objectives and tasks with team members who possess the knowledge, skills, experience, and judgment to successfully complete them. Achieving success in this way normally inspires team members to train for, and attempt, even more demanding tasks, regardless of the obstacles encountered, and so on. Further successes inspire even more confidence. The main goal of this process, however, is not to teach that an objective will always be successfully achieved, but to create a "can do" attitude in the minds of team members.

An FTL should demonstrate a sincere sense of humor recognizing that the ability to laugh at themselves is the most effective use of that humor. Humor and laughter can serve as a harmless distraction, for both team members and victims. Humor can even defuse anger and fear. It is highly contagious, and can quickly pass its benefits to others. Physically, it has been shown to reduce hormones that cause stress, diminish pain, and contribute to muscle relaxation. Humor, however, must not be used as a put-down or to hurt other team members. Don't laugh at another team member or make fun of his/her beliefs.

The FTL must never take personal credit for anything that happens on a mission. Credit must always be passed on to the individuals who did the work, that is, the team. The accountability for any mistakes made on the mission, however, remains with the FTL. Any attempt to shift accountability down the chain of command to the team or up to base camp management is completely inappropriate.

Leadership status must never be utilized to consciously advance a FTL's personal agenda. Recognition and advancement are the most common issues that might appear on a FTL's personal agenda. Unfortunately, this is sometimes a difficult concept to understand because results such as these are also a natural by-product of successful leadership. The key phrases here are "consciously advance" and "natural by-product." The difference is obvious. If a FTL does decide to consciously advance his/her personal agenda, however, he/she should at least understand that opportunities for such things as advancement and recognition could come from subordinates as well as superiors. The following is an excerpt from a conversation between an employee being considered for a promotion and a supervisor contained in a book by E.E. "Doc" Smith. Employee: "To get promoted fast, a man can either be enough of a boot-licker to be pulled up from on high, or he can be shoved up by the men he is working with." Supervisor: "The first technique is so universally used that the possibility of the second did not occur to me." Confederate Colonel Albert G. Jenkins of the 8th Virginia Cavalry put it another way: "For it is our subordinates, not our superiors, who raise us to the dizzyest of professional heights, and it is our subordinates who can and will, if we deserve it, bury us in the deepest mire of disgrace."

An FTL must not reinforce criticisms, lay blame, ridicule or embarrass team members publicly, or take advantage of any of their superstitions, weaknesses, and/or fears. All confidences with management/team members must be kept, unless they become safety issues. Even then, an FTL must never officially or unofficially reveal an individual manager/team member as a source.

The specific action that will probably cause the most damage to trust and confidence, however, is lying. Team members might not agree with or even like the FTL, but they must believe him/her. Lying is making an untrue statement with the "intent to deceive." Therefore, if a FTL makes what he/she sincerely believes to be a true statement, without any intent to deceive, it becomes a mistake, not a lie. As previously mentioned, mistakes are allowed, with the caveat that each mistake must be discovered, admitted, rectified, and, ideally, not made again.

Abraham Lincoln accurately described the major practical problem with lying when he said: "No one has a good enough memory to be a successful liar." A lie is an attempt to tell another what you think he/she wants to hear. Since every individual and situation is different, different lies will usually have to be fabricated for each. Add to this the stress, confusion, etc. of a SAR situation, and the problem becomes one of remembering which lie was told to whom.

The only thing that a human being will consistently remember is what actually happened, e.g. the truth. An added complication here, however, is that what actually happened will be interpreted differently by different people because the relevant facts will be filtered through the biases, perceptions, experiences, etc. of each individual. This is all right, as long as the facts themselves remain the same.

The worst lie an FTL can perpetrate--the one that will never be forgotten or forgiven--is to make a statement, give an order, etc., have base camp and/or the team take action on it, and afterwards deny giving it; or, conversely, not making a statement or giving an order and then insisting that he/she did. A different variation of this would be for an FTL to tell a team member to do "whatever you think best" in a situation, and then either not later support the team member's decision or deny that the directive had been given. A third variant of this lie is for an FTL to insinuate that base camp/the team member did not correctly interpret the statement or order. Lastly, an FTL might make a commitment that he/she can't or has no intention of keeping.

Bluffing is another form of lying. If a FTL is wrong, does not know what to do, where he is, etc., he must publicly acknowledge that fact. He must not carry on in the hopes that no one will notice, the situation will resolve itself, the answer will become obvious later, etc. An excellent example of bluffing occurs when a FTL who is not familiar with the area is not willing to consult with someone who does. It is much easier and better to admit ignorance now than be forced to acknowledge guilt later.

At the field team level, lying might sometimes be utilized as motivation, e.g. it's only a mile, 15 minutes, etc. Some think "white lies" like these are harmless, but, in fact, they can cause some unexpected negative results. In the first place, motivational lies only have short-term benefits. It's not going to take very long for team members to realize that, whenever this FTL makes this kind of statement, it will probably be a lie. This might make team members consciously or unconsciously more reticent about asking these types of questions, and, later, other questions.

With lying, motivation for the lie is much less important than the fact of it. Therefore, if a questionable situation arises in the future, one of the questions I, as a team member, would have to ask myself would be, "Joe usually lies about distance and time, what is the likelihood he would lie about this also?" Lastly, lying by a FTL at any level is tacit permission for other team members to do the same.

Gaining the trust and confidence of Incident Command and/or Operation Management is no different but can be more difficult because of the added dimension of the dissimilar philosophies of management and leadership. Initially, since management relies mainly on written documents, it is important for a FTL to first look good on paper. Document and communicate a sufficient level of knowledge, skills, and experience, and initiative to at least meet requirements and, thus, inspire confidence in your leadership abilities. Then develop a cooperative working relationship with management by being available for leadership assignments on trainings and missions.

Given a choice, however, it is much more important to gain the trust and confidence of team members than management.

Develop and Demonstrate Self-Discipline: A self-disciplined FTL remains in control of his/her emotions. No one wants to work under an FTL who might lose control in a crucial situation. This attribute is most clearly demonstrated by the ability to remain outwardly calm, no matter what the situation or how he/she really feels. At times, this can be extremely difficult. Negative emotions such as fear, anger, frustration, etc. will always be a part of a FTL's life. The task is to insure that they do not escape control and inappropriately surface. This does not mean that a FTL should not show emotion. It must, however, be appropriate to the situation.

Fear is the most dangerous, intense, wide-ranging, debilitating, difficult to control, and contagious negative emotion of all. In fact, the underlying cause of most other negative emotions will probably be fear. For example, if a FTL becomes angry and/or frustrated when informed that the helicopter will be two hours late, these emotions will not usually be based on the fact that the helicopter will be tardy, but on the fear that, because of this, team members will be exposed for an extra two hours, the victim's condition might worsen, etc.

Fear, at some level, exists in every FTL on every mission. Not being at least equal to the demands of the situation will most likely be the greatest one. More specific fears might include the unknown, ridicule, reprisal, legal actions, letting others down, etc. But, in the mind of an inexperienced team member, the FTL is not supposed to be afraid. To a team member with experience, the FTL is supposed to have enough control to not show it. If a FTL does show fear, all other team members will become more frightened just because he/she is, even if they don't know what it is they're afraid of.

Response to fear can range from complete withdrawal to absolute panic, physical collapse to manic behavior, caution to recklessness, etc. It is difficult to manage, because if it escapes control for even a short time, it can quickly escalate in a geometric progression. It is extremely contagious because it can be passed quickly and easily from person to person.

The signs and symptoms of fear in oneself include a more rapid pulse, tension, sweaty palms and soles of the feet, dry mouth, and "butterflies." It is most noticeably revealed to others by changes in the pitch, timbre, and/or tempo of the voice, wide eyes and/or dilated pupils, shaking, irritability, belligerence, confusion, forgetfulness, mistakes, and inability to concentrate.

Anxiety (stress) is the little brother of fear. The signs and symptoms are virtually the same as for fear, but exist at a much lower level. It also differs from fear in that it is unconscious, and more likely to persist for a longer span of time. Because it is less intense, it is not likely to be as debilitating. As a matter of fact, mild to moderate levels of anxiety are usually considered a natural and appropriate reaction to a stressful situation. It can help an FTL to perform at peak effectiveness by increasing his/her awareness. It can also be an effective measure of the importance attached to the specific situation, e.g. a higher level of anxiety means the presenting situation is more personally significant. Out of control anxiety, however, becomes fear.

Team members are going to have their own fears and anxieties, which must also be kept under control. However, they are much more likely to control theirs if they see the FTL in control of his/hers. Calm behavior is almost as contagious as fear. However, FTLs cannot allow themselves to be so concerned about combating stress in team members that they don't notice their own symptoms. A worse case scenario is a FTL that, because he/she is the leader, either won't or can't admit, even to him/herself, that he/she is even subject to stress. An FTL, in fact, is subject to much more stress than a team member because, in addition to all the mission stresses, he/she has all the stresses attached to their position.

Admit Mistakes: All FTLs are going to make mistakes. A mistake, however, is not an indication of weakness; it is, instead, a sign of being human. A FTL attempting to conceal, blame others, or punish himself for a mistake is the only weakness. Each of these actions are distractions as well as being counterproductive in that they tend to cause a FTL to avoid or postpone future decisions for fear of making another mistake. The bottom line, however, is that everyone makes mistakes. A good FTL will learn from each and every one. A poor one will make the same mistakes again and again. However, a FTL should never admit he made a mistake until convinced that is the case. Group pressure should never be the sole determinant.

Mistakes must be recognized, admitted, and rectified as soon as possible. These actions relegate the mistake to the past and the FTL can then move on. Inability or unwillingness to do this makes the mistake a part of the future. A FTL must be willing and able to admit his/her mistakes to the team. Otherwise, team members will not admit theirs. In addition, a FTL must be willing and able to acknowledge to the team that he/she does not have all the answers. Lastly, a FTL must be willing and able to forgive himself for his mistakes, and other team members for theirs.

Richard Needham summarized it all when he said, "Strong people make as many and as ghastly mistakes as weak people. The difference is that strong people admit them, laugh at them, and learn from them. That's how they became strong."

An extremely serious mistake would be to try to make it policy not to allow FTLs to make mistakes and maybe even exact punishment if they do. This would be the same as saying: "Don't do anything differently or take any risks, no matter what the situation." In other words, "Don't do anything new!" Unfortunately, the world does not stand still. Equipment and techniques change. SAR teams must always be evaluating their ways of doing things so that more efficient and effective approaches can be adopted, and obsolete procedures can be eliminated.

Be a Role Model: During every minute of any activity, an FTL is being observed and evaluated by at least one other team member. In this, he will be judged, not on what he/she says, but on what he/she does. A FTL must always act with that reality in mind. He must set realistic and consistent expectations, behaviors, attitudes, and performance standards, and use these to lead by example. He must insist on quality, and need never accept second best or allow short cuts. Lastly, he must make personal sacrifices and be capable of growth and change.

As a role model, an FTL must not be a hypocrite. He must be subject to the same team protocols as any other team member. He must also be willing and able to follow any rules he makes for his team.

More importantly, when not the FTL, he/she must be an outstanding team member. If a FTL expects to be obeyed as the leader, he must willingly and enthusiastically obey other team members when they lead. Also, the way a qualified FTL acts while a team member directly affects his credibility. If he is disrespectful, arrogant, argumentative, etc., while a team member, he is giving team members tacit permission to act that way when he is the FTL. Team members who eventually wish to become FTLs should also pay close attention to this and establish their reputations accordingly.

Be a good teacher: The FTL must openly, voluntarily, and enthusiastically share knowledge and experience with other team members. He/she will use this role to not only create qualified team members, but also to produce new leaders. Also, even though he/she is a teacher, an FTL must also be life-long learner, and cannot rest on his/her laurels; he/she can never know too much. Learning must be treated as a religion.

SAFETY FOR ALL

Incident Command and each FTL must sincerely believe that

- (1) Safety is the most critical team consideration,
- (2) Prevention is the most significant safety role, and

- (3) Safety must be regarded as an attitude, because official safety policies and procedures become irrelevant if every team member, especially the FTL, does not believe in them.

Specifically, Incident Command must insure that:

- a. Competent leadership is available for every mission. No team member shall be placed in a position of responsibility for the safety of others without adequate training.
- b. All necessary equipment, supplies, manpower, etc. necessary for the safe completion of the mission is available.

Specifically, the FTL must insure that:

- a. All team safety policies and procedures are followed regardless of the ability of the individual team member and/or the mission involved. All others who take part in a training/mission in any way must comply with all team safety policies and procedures.
- b. The safety of the team is considered paramount, even more important than that of the victim. The FTL must be considered the most important team member, because, assuming that he/she is the most qualified team member, his/her presence will be the best guarantee of group safety. Encourage team members to watch out for each other.
- c. No team member is left alone.
- d. No team member is allowed to participate in a mission without the specific permission of the FTL.
- e. All team members agree to follow the FTL's directions. If a team member refuses to follow instructions, that person must be immediately relieved.
- f. Time of exposure to risky situations is minimized, but not to the extent that it compromises safety.
- g. If there is more than one viable alternative, each of which would produce virtually the same results, the one judged to be the safest is utilized.
- h. All team members are willing and able to clearly communicate with each other.
- i. Each team member is familiar with and able to cope with any environmental situation likely to be encountered during the mission.
- j. Each team member has all equipment necessary to participate in the specific mission and knows how to use it.
- k. Each team member is protected by safety devices and techniques in situations where appropriate. If a team member desires special protection, it must be provided, if available and feasible, regardless of the situation.
- l. All team and personal equipment is checked before, during, and after each use. The use of equipment shall not exceed its expressed design limits.
- m. First aid and other medical equipment and materials applicable to the situation are present during all activities, and team members are trained in its proper use.
- n. All accidents and incidents are reported to the appropriate supervisor as soon as possible.
- o. All team members understand that the emerging situation might necessitate policies and/or procedures more stringent than those listed above.

DANGERS OF HUBRIS IN THE FIELD

There are a number of so-called Cardinal Sins that must be conscientiously avoided if one is to be a safe and successful FTL. These include violating the "prime directive," confusing cause with effect, putting determination ahead of consequences, over-confidence, ignorance, abuse of authority, falling prey to distractions and indulging in rationalization. This section examines these misunderstandings, delusions, and failings of hubris as they impact FTLs.

Prime Directive. The primary "cardinal sin" is for a FTL to forget, even for an instant, that primary loyalty resides in self and the team. All thoughts and actions must be directed towards this "prime directive." The victim got himself into his predicament; the SAR team didn't. A SAR team's task is to do its best to get him safely home, but not at the cost of the life of a team member.

Cause and Effect. There is a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the relationship between cause and effect. The problem is compounded by the fact that most of the experts in the field don't seem to have a clear idea

themselves. The dictionary definition of “cause” is “any event, circumstance, or condition that brings about a result [effect].” An “effect” is something that “directly follows or occurs by reason of a cause.”

There seems to be a long-standing tendency in the mountaineering, backpacking, etc. communities to minimize the subjective causes of accidents/incidents, while maximizing the objective components. The American Alpine Club's publication Accidents in North American Mountaineering is a good case in point. This publication lists “Immediate Causes” and “Contributory Causes” as the two classifications of causes for accidents/incidents. Over the years, Accidents has consistently listed “fall or slip on rock” and “slip on snow or ice” as the two most common “immediate causes” of accidents/incidents. I submit that neither of these are causes at all; each is instead an effect. The actual “cause(s)” of these two scenarios will usually be listed under “contributory causes.” For example, one or more of the listed “contributory causes,” such as “climbing unroped, exceeding abilities, which is also included as an “immediate cause--inadequate equipment/clothing, placed no/inadequate protection,” etc. will become the immediate cause, and the fall or slip will become the effect. Avalanche is another scenario that is listed as an “immediate cause.” But it is a well-known fact that the vast majority of individuals caught in an avalanche triggered it themselves. Therefore, the avalanche is the effect, while such things as ignorance, overconfidence, exceeding abilities, etc. are the causes.

The bottom line is that, in most cases, people generally get themselves into trouble. But, in SAR, an FTL who gets into trouble does the same to his/her teammates.

Determination. This equates to the philosophy of “do or die.” This philosophy manifests itself in an overwhelming desire to please others by living up to their real or imagined expectations. This attitude is most commonly demonstrated in SAR by an overwhelming need to reach and/or rescue the victim. This goal might become the FTL's personal measure of success or failure, e.g. “We are the point of the spear. All these agencies and individuals are depending on us to come through. We can't let them down,” or “We've worked so hard to get this far, and we're almost there,” or “If we don't make it, we'll be chastised,” etc. An FTL will sometimes expose the team to unnecessary life-threatening situations to achieve this goal. This is SAR's variation of “summit fever.” In the words of Kenny Rogers, however, an FTL must “know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em, know when to walk away, know when to run.” In most cases, it takes more courage to retreat than it would to continue, especially with a group.

Determination can also be manifested in an FTL's obsession with keeping to a schedule. A time and sequence schedule is a critical part of the planning process; however, it is erroneous to believe that these schedules must be kept at all costs. Unexpected things usually happen during missions, and, when they do, the FTL must be willing to alter the schedule. All schedules must be considered extremely tentative. There is, however, one schedule item that should not be considered tentative and that is “turn around time.” If it was considered necessary during the planning process to include a turn around time, the team should be turned around at that time, mainly for the reasons described in the previous paragraph. It's amazing how the reports describing the causes of so many serious accidents list “failure to adhere to turn around time” as one of the major factors.

Overconfidence. “In fact, life or death crises don't happen that often in outdoor pursuits or SAR. The most dangerous aspect of mountaineering [or SAR] is the drive to the trailhead.” Statements like this comfort those of us who pursue these types of activities. However, even a casual look at publications such as Accidents in North American Mountaineering will demonstrate that life or death situations do happen.

Overconfidence can take many different forms, such as a FTL who:

---Considers overconfidence as optimism.

— Believes he/she leads a charmed life: e.g., imagining that nothing can happen to him/her or anyone who is with them, or deluding oneself into thinking that accidents always happen to others, etc. A FTL can carry this a step further with the belief that participation in an altruistic task, such as SAR, somehow confers special protection. The assumption that everything is and will continue to be all right leads to complacency and even denial concerning the hazards of the mission, along with a tendency to underestimate risks and/or overestimate capabilities.

A variation of this scenario is a FTL who believes that, just because he/she has experienced a certain scenario several times and nothing unpleasant happened, nothing ever will. The unexpected can always happen. In the event of an accident, the fact of having done the same thing many times before becomes not a defense but an aggravating factor.

— Violates any of the safety rules.

— Accepts a leadership position knowing that its requirements will exceed his/her ability. While on a mission, a FTL can make the same mistake if he/she reacts to an unexpected situation by exceeding his/her personal level of competence, attempts to take a group where the FTL has never been before, etc.

— Assesses a situation based on his/her own capabilities and desires, rather than those of the other team members, thus causing less experienced and/or less skilled team members to exceed their abilities. Weaker team members will often not speak up if they are getting in over their heads for fear of negative group reaction. This can carryover into the future if team members believe that, just because they completed something at the FTL's level, they are now qualified to do the same on their own. A FTL might also change a route or routine, not because the change is beneficial to the mission, but to reduce boredom or repetition.

— Believes that there is “safety in numbers” and, therefore, a larger group is safer than a smaller one. In fact, a larger group is not as safe, because more people mean more exposure. Further, given the perception of increased safety, individual group members might become more daring. Lastly, being in a group makes it easier to not question and simply “follow the leader” since more team members are doing it.

— Allow team members without adequate knowledge, skills, experience, and/or the proper clothing and equipment to participate in a mission.

— Believes that better equipment, more training and experience, etc. reduces the level of risk on a mission. In fact, relative risk remains virtually the same, or might even increase, because this prior preparation allows team members to justify the taking of more and/or greater risks.

— Makes observations and decisions that confirm beliefs and desires already held. If a FTL wants the chute to be a safe climbing route, the tendency might be to only see the aspects that make it safe, and either not see, or ignore, whatever contradicts that view.

Ignorance. This is the lack of the requisite knowledge, skills, experience, and/or judgment necessary to be in the field and/or make life-or-death leadership decisions for a SAR team on a mission. If the sponsoring agency develops a comprehensive training program and insists that it be followed, ignorance should not be much of an issue for either FTLs or team members.

Ignorance should not be confused with overconfidence. For example, if an FTL does not know what equipment and/or skills will be necessary to resolve a situation, that is ignorance. If, however, the FTL knows what equipment and/or skills are necessary for the situation, and they are not available, but he/she then attempts to resolve the situation anyway, that is overconfidence.

The worst-case scenario regarding ignorance is a FTL who, after a mission, and whether or not something went wrong, has to say to himself, “If I had only known...!”

Abuse of Authority. The selected FTL must be willing and able to accept leadership authority. He must be confident in his ability to take charge of the team, be willing and able to accept the responsibility and accountability that come with this authority, and fully understand that acceptance might well mean having to make critical life-or-death decisions under time pressure in stressful, hazardous situations. A FTL must accept Socrates’ tenet, “If you cannot [or will not] enforce, do not command.”

Ideally, the FTL will make this decision before management asks. This saves time. Also, if a FTL has to take time to think about it, the other team members may develop a confidence problem. The best time for a team leader to make this decision is between the page and arrival at base.

Also, management must understand that the individual team leader is the best judge of what he can or cannot do at a given time and/or in a given situation. Therefore, the prospective FTL must be allowed to make the final decision as to whether to accept leadership authority. At best, management only knows what the individual is capable of doing. If the team member is rated at 5.14, but is having a 5.7 day, he/she needs to refuse. Also, the team member, regardless of management’s beliefs, might not think he is the best person for that particular job.

The reasons for a refusal, however, are irrelevant and no one else's business but the FTL's. Base camp management must simply thank him/her for being honest and select someone else, remembering that any individual who has been forced into a leadership position can never truly be responsible or held accountable for what happens with his team. It is inexcusable for management to attempt to coerce, manipulate, or in any other way try to make an FTL change his/her mind once the decision has been made. Such statements or intimations as, “you can do it; we can't do it without you; if you don't accept, it will be a long time before you're selected again; it's your responsibility; you're the best we have; you're letting the team, victim, etc. down; you'll hate yourself in the morning; etc.” are inappropriate as well as dangerous.

Once FTL authority has been delegated, each assigned team member must be allowed to decide whether he/she can work under that individual. Each individual team member must be ready to follow directions, sometimes

without question. If a team member does not feel he can follow the directions of the appointed FTL, or will do so only grudgingly, he/she should not be allowed on that team. This team member would likely split the team into factions that would end up working against each other. In the military, there is a saying that is also applicable to SAR, "Better a bad commander than a divided command."

Lastly, authority must be exercised. Failure to exercise delegated authority is in itself an abuse of authority. This exercise of authority is determined primarily by a FTL's personal leadership style, which is defined as the specific amount of control, assistance, and motivation he provides, along with the amount of individual group member participation that is allowed in decision-making.

Distractions. A FTL has to concentrate on the entire field situation. Anything that causes him/her to narrow his focus to a part of the situation or something that has nothing to do with the situation must be avoided.

A FTL might give up situational awareness and become too directly involved in a minor part of the operation. He might begin performing first aid, setting up ropes, cleaning up, etc. He might also fixate on one aspect of the mission, e.g. the weather, at the expense of total situational awareness.

One of the classic examples of the loss of situational awareness because of a distraction occurred on Eastern Airlines Flight 401 over the Florida Everglades on December 29, 1972. This aircraft, a Lockheed L1011, was in the landing pattern for Miami International Airport. When the pilot attempted to lower the aircraft's landing gear, the indicator for the nose gear failed to light. The captain gave directions to his other two crewmen to evaluate the system and determine if there was a malfunction in the system and the nose gear was actually down. These attempts were unsuccessful so the captain, a 30,000+-hour pilot, ordered the first officer to place the aircraft on auto pilot. He then began working on the system himself. This preoccupation with the landing light distracted the captain and the rest of the crew to the extent that none of them were monitoring the instruments. As a result, none of the crew noticed that, instead of level flight at 2,000 feet, the aircraft was in a 200-foot-per-minute descent. Seven seconds before impact, the first officer said over the intercom, "We did something to the altitude." The captain's last words four seconds later were, "Hey, what's happening here?" The lack of emergency communication with the tower or radical control movements indicated that the plane was flown into the ground. Ninety-eight people died.

Another distraction is personal issues that have nothing to do with the SAR situation. These are usually in the form of "promises" that represent a need to please others. Examples of promises are, "I'll be home before 9:00." or "I'll be to work on time," etc. The more a FTL thinks about his promises, the less time there is for situational awareness. Also, if it begins to appear that a promise might not be able to be kept, he might consciously or unconsciously alter aspects of the mission for the sole purpose of being able to keep them. For example, a FTL might attempt to hurry things. Hurrying virtually always involves taking greater risks. Ideally, a FTL with this type of commitment will not accept a leadership position on that specific mission. Further, he will hopefully notify the appointed FTL of his situation so an informed decision can be made as to whether or not this individual should be sent into the field or kept at base camp.

A third distraction is spending too much time evaluating future courses-of-actions and/or decisions. This is one of my greatest faults as a team leader. Since I am very familiar with most of the situations and areas where my team will be required to respond, I sometimes tend to unconsciously spend too much time in the future, incorrectly assuming that the present will take care of itself, as it usually does. Competent team members usually bring me back to the present with a question or a comment. This can also be a situation where new, relatively inexperienced team members can be extremely helpful. Because of the newness of each situation, they tend to live mostly in the present, and are therefore especially good at bringing a FTL back to reality.

Other distractions could be physical and mental fatigue, fear in its many forms, boredom, lack of sleep, inadequate food and/or water, intoxication, pain, injury, and/or illness.

Rationalization. It is critical for a FTL to lead in the real world. A situation cannot be changed or made to go away just because a leader wishes it to, hopes it will, or can give several reasons why it shouldn't exist at this time and/or place. For example, if, on the way to a victim, a team comes to an unstable snow slope, the FTL must not attempt to justify crossing the slope without placing protection by saying, "We have to take this risk because the victim is in critical condition and time is an issue," or, if the weather is deteriorating, "This looks like a bad storm, but since storms are not common at this time or year, this one won't last long so we can continue."

Further, since it is always difficult to make a decision under pressure, especially time pressure, the tendency might be to make the decision quickly, then rationalize it by exaggerating the possible favorable outcomes, and minimizing, or even not mentioning, any negative possibilities. This rationalizing, especially if it's done in front of the group, can make it more difficult to change the decision later.

CONCLUSION

Well, have I given you all the answers? Do you now know everything there is to know about field team leadership? I sure hope not! That was not the purpose of this piece. In fact, I sincerely hope that this piece has generated some questions that current and future FTLs will take the time and effort to answer.

The initial reason for this essay was to fill what I perceived to be a void in SAR literature. Very little seems to have been written on the subject of field team leadership⁰ in general, and FTLs in particular, and what has been published appears to barely scratch the surface of the subject. Secondly, it was my desire to provide a "skeleton" on which other field team leaders could build. The last, and most important, motivation was to hopefully provide a starting point from which to begin a constructive debate on the subject. Ideally, as others suggest improvements, this will become a "living document."

Do what you can,
With what you have,
Where you are.

-Theodore Roosevelt

And then, let the chips fall where they may.

-Unknown