**Scenario 1 - Group dynamics in the canyons**

In 2012, I took a canyoneering leadership course in a small town in northern Australia. There were only 3 of us in the course - myself and two locals who were training to become guides for Ben, the course instructor. I knew this was going to be a very demanding course - with long physical days in conditions that push my comfort zone.

I quickly found that I was at a disadvantage, or rather, the other two students had a home-field advantage. They knew the canyons, and then knew all of the gear that the instructor had. I had about 15 years of life experience and outdoor decision making experience on them, but they had the local knowledge. Much of the course was scenario-based, as it was a leadership course, so we were often given tasks to accomplish as a team.

Immediately I noticed my disadvantage. We were told to go to the gear garage and pack out for South Creek. In order to do that, I needed to know the beta for the canyon - what lengths of rope we needed and how many. I also needed to know what ropes were available in the gear garage. But, when I asked for that information, the other two students, Jack and Eric, said “don’t worry, we’ve got it”. In a canyon, you often rappel single strand, and don’t use the full length of the rope, so you stuff the rope in a floating rope bag so you don’t end up with a giant mess of rope. I looked in the backpacks they had packed and saw coiled ropes.

“Shouldn’t we bag the long ropes?” I asked. “No…” Eric said, cryptically.

“I think we should bag the longer ropes at least” I said.

“No. You’ll see. This is the way we do it.” Eric replied as he walked out the door.

It was clear right then that I was not an equal player.

That day, our task was to move as efficiently as possible through the canyon. Ben, the instructor, stopped us and gave us a scenario: “ok, suddenly there’s a flash flood, and you can’t continue down canyon. You need to get your party out.”

I assumed the three of us would discuss a plan. But Jack started traversing above the rim with a rope. “Shouldn’t you be tied in?” I asked. He ignored me. Ben (the instructor) then told him he couldn’t go over there without an anchor. Jack threw the end of the rope to Eric, who put him on belay. Eric, however, was not anchored in. “Guys,” I said, “if Jack falls in, he’s just going to bring Eric with him”. That fell on deaf ears. Eventually Jack came back and considered going a different way - up a steep slope. “Are you sure that rope’s going to make it?” I asked. Jack and Eric continued with their plan as if I wasn’t there. “Why aren’t we using the longer rope?” I asked. “It’s right here”. Nothing. “Guys! Why don’t we use the longer rope?” Finally I handed them the longer rope, which they begrudgingly used. They climbed out, using the full length of the rope to reach the top. Ben could see the obvious dynamic going on. At that point I had given up trying to engage with them, and was sitting waiting for them to give me instructions. Ben looked at me and asked what I was thinking. “Oh, lots of things”, I said. He pressed me for details, but I answered “nothing that adds value right now”. I was furious about the way this team exercise had gone. I was furious with being ignored and my experience completely discounted, and I was especially mad that our team had done really poorly at a task, which reflected on my performance in the class, yet none of it was in my control. They never mentioned that it was a good thing they had used the longer rope.

Later that same day, we approached a section of the canyon that was constricted, with high water flow and two recirculating hydraulics. We were told that we needed to rig a way to get students across safely. I was already nervous about moving through this water - it was just beyond the edge of my comfort zone. Jack and Eric started discussing a plan, and started rigging. I was not part of this plan. When I asked why they were rigging a fixed system, Eric said “you’ll see”. I pushed back. This water was terrifying and there was no way I was going to be on a fixed rope and risk getting stuck and drowning. “Why isn’t this rigged with a releasable system? What if someone swings into that flow?”. Eric responded “we have this second line we can go in and get them.” “There’s no way you’re going to do a direct rescue on a fixed system in that flow.” I argued. “We need to put this on a releasable system.” Eric froze. He didn’t have a logical answer, so his response was “You’ll see”. I looked at Ben, the instructor, and said “I’m not coming down there on a fixed system.” Ben then stepped in and explained to Eric that I was right - that there was no way to do a direct rescue on a fixed system in that kind of flow. Ben had Eric change his system over to something more appropriate for the context, and we all descended that section. For me, though, it was too late. I was already fearful of the water, and my trust was totally eroded through that interaction. The rest of that section I didn’t learn anything - I was terrified, and it took everything in me to just make it out.

Finally, towards the end of the day in a more benign section of canyon, I was tasked with rigging a simple anchor. I pulled a rats nest of a rope out of the backpack, and wasted a ton of time trying to find the ends of the rope and tidy it. It took me a while to build the anchor as a result. When everyone had rappelled and I pulled the rope, Ben said to me “that took too long. You need to be faster than that.” I was irate. I explained to him that I had had no input in anything that happened the entire day. I was frustrated that I did poorly on the anchor because the rope hadn’t been bagged, because Jack and Eric weren’t interested in my opinion that morning. I told Ben that I was willing to tell them my frustration if he gave me a venue to do it.

So, once we were away from the noise of the canyon, Ben masterfully facilitated a debrief, that gave me the opportunity to express my frustration, and my need to be a part of the conversation, and a part of the decision making process. Things improved from there. It remained clear to me that my experiences and knowledge did not hold the value that theirs did, but they at least made physical space for me to be part of the conversations.

**Reflections on Scenario 1**

I’ve spent a lot of time reflecting on this experience. It was the hardest 10 days of my life. I had never experienced being completely invisible before. The frustration with that impacted my ability to do well in the course, but more importantly, it eroded my trust. Things that would have been challenging became endlessly frustrating, and things that would have made me nervous became terrifying, on the edge of dangerous. I don’t know what would have happened had I not spoken up in the big water scenario. I’d like to think that Ben, the instructor, would have had an eye out for me and made sure I didn’t get hurt. But I wonder if the social dynamics were so strong that he would have missed those cues - not a judgment on him, but on the way these dynamics work. Jack and Eric are really, really nice guys. That made this all the more perplexing. The only thing I can attribute this behavior to is deeply embedded gender bias. As a woman, I was so irrelevant to them that they didn’t even notice that they were ignoring me, or totally devaluing my experience. I gave some advice to Ben, who is also a great guy, on ways to mitigate this in the future:

* Openly acknowledge the male-dominant culture and talk about the ways it manifests into a negative environment. Talk about how it can negatively impact men (not just women). Talk about it within the guide community, and talk about it in courses and with teams.
* Talk about it from a risk management lens. During my course, there were a number of errors that would have happened had I not been so forceful. There would have been real risk if I hadn't been so demanding of a different system in South Creek. I'm confident that I did not have the skills or knowledge to get across that pool on my own, and would have gotten into real trouble on a fixed system. In a technical environment, an inclusive team is critical for everyone's safety. Talk about that.
* Discuss the role implicit bias has in the canyoning community, and how it can impact everyone's experiences. Often character gets conflated with bias, which makes individuals take offense at the idea that they may have implicit bias because they interpret it as a character judgment, which it is not.
* Make a specific effort to invite women (and other underrepresented groups) to share the experience they bring to the table. Repeat it because men will hear it and retain it from you (or other men) more clearly than they will from the woman. That's not a judgment - its implicit bias. Men need to play a role in openly valuing the experience and knowledge that individuals (who happen to be women) bring to the table. This doesn't mean singling them out. It means paying extra close attention and making an effort to make sure they are heard.
* Incorporate a half-day teamwork and communication module at the beginning of the course
* Incorporate a mid-point check-in within the course. The debrief Ben facilitated at my request helped a lot, but that likely wouldn’t have happened had I not requested it.

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**Scenario 2 - Bailing off The Chief**

Last summer we took a group of 6 participants up to Squamish after they completed a multipitch climbing course. There were 4 leaders and 6 participants. Unfortunately, it had rained hard the day before we arrived, so we spent the first day cragging at the smoke bluffs while the chief dried out. On the 2nd day, to make up for a lost first day of multipitch, we decided that we’d climb the Chief - 2 teams (a team of 2 and a team of 3) would climb the apron (the lower 5 pitches) on a route called Diedre, 2 other teams (a team of 2 and a team of 3) on a parallel route called Over the Rainbow. Once we got to Broadway Ledge, 1 team of 2 would continue over to Memorial Ledge, climb Memorial Crack, and finish up the Squamish Buttress. One team of 3 would continue from Broadway Ledge over to Echelon Wall, and summit via a climb called Ultimate Everything. The remaining team of 2 and team of 3 would climb Butt Lite, the easiest route up the Chief.

We had a strong group of participants. Most of them learned more advanced things than normally taught in the class, and they really impressed us. We had one participant, Meg, who we were a little concerned about. She was a strong climber with a great attitude, but she had less stamina than the others, and she was a bit uncoordinated physically.

Everyone was excited to get on a big multipitch, and we started with a 5:30am alpine start. I had agreed to generally be sweep. We broke into our separate parties to climb different routes, and we planned to all meet up on Broadway Ledge before continuing up our routes, and again meet up at the summit before hiking down together. We also had walkie talkies to stay in touch. We anticipated a fun, well-orchestrated day where we could have a whole group experience without clogging up any individual route.

We hiked up to the base of the Apron. Meg was a bit behind the others, but smiling the whole way. We roped up, and John’s team of 3 headed up Diedre while Joe’s team of 3 headed up Over The Rainbow. I then started leading up the first pitch of Diedre, while Sandra started leading the first pitch of Over the Rainbow, with Meg belaying him. Although the rock had had a day to dry out, there was still some seeping in places. It wasn’t a big deal, but it added a little bit of spice to the climb.

We all successfully made it to Broadway Ledge, where we grouped up and ate a very early lunch. The Squamish Buttress team left with John, and the Ultimate Everything Team left with Sandra. Joe and I packed everything up and got ready to climb Butt Lite. Joe would lead first with a team of 3, since I was the designated sweep. We put Meg on that team because she seemed a bit tired, and we thought she’d benefit from a team of 3 where she didn’t have to lead as many pitches. Joe began climbing with another student belaying, and Meg waiting.

As Joe climbed, Meg approached me to say she was concerned that she was holding everyone back, and maybe she should just hike off (which was an option from Broadway Ledge). I assured her that we were doing fine time-wise, and she was doing a great job. She then shared that she was just completely exhausted, and she wasn’t confident that she could move safely on rock, or belay safely. Quickly, I chatted with the participant who was supposed to be on my rope, explained to them the situation, and added them to Joe’s rope team, so that I could walk off with Meg. While it wasn’t possible to communicate this to Joe, the participants were briefed on the plan, and would be able to communicate to him once they reached him. Joe reached his anchor, and yelled down “on belay!” and the other two participants began to climb. I hiked off with Meg.

On the hike off, Meg was relentlessly apologetic, but I explained to her that I had climbed the chief before, and I would rather everyone make safe decisions. She said that she had pulled a hamstring on Pitch 4 but it hadn’t bothered her - probably because of the adrenaline - and it was now starting to hurt on the hike out. We returned to the car, had a snack, and then went to the rec center to relax in the hot tub. Meg’s spirits lifted, and we all enjoyed stories during a late dinner after everyone else had returned.

**Reflections on Scenario 2**

This trip overall went well, but upon debriefing, the leaders believe there were some emotional factors we overlooked that contributed to Meg’s exhaustion:

* Although Meg was a strong climber and had led single-pitch climbs that were more difficult than Over the Rainbow, she only had climbed one route that was more than two pitches, and that was R&D in Leavenworth, which doesn’t have a lot of exposure. Over The Rainbow is 5 long exposed slab pitches. She mentioned the exposure several times on the climb, but being in such a strong group, was reluctant to let on that it terrified her.
* The second pitch of Over The Rainbow, which was the first pitch that Meg led, had an 18” waterflow that needed to be stepped over - this was residual seepage from the rain earlier in the week. This particular spot was steep slab with no hands. Meg was very nervous making this move on lead, but Sandra encouraged her, knowing that she had the skills to do this. Meg made the move without falling. Around this time, I looked over from Diedre and could see Meg, and smiled and waved at her. She dutifully smiled and waved back, despite her fear, because this was supposed to be fun. When she belayed Sandra up, Sandra high-fived her and reaffirmed that she knew she’d crush that pitch.
* Sandra led the third pitch which finishes over a roof that looks improbable from afar. On this pitch, especially towards the bottom, the climber cannot see their belayer, so Meg felt alone on steep slab climbing towards an improbable roof. As she approached the roof, she could see Sandra in the trees, and Sandra gave her good tips for easily overcoming the roof.
* Sandra’s positivity and encouragement didn’t leave much room for Meg to opt out of leading the 4th pitch, so she did, despite her fears snowballing. The 4th pitch has an undercling arch that the climber traverses, and just before mounting the top of the arch, there’s a single bolt to protect the move. Meg was so fearful of falling and swinging that she pulled a hamstring as she strained to clip the bolt. Not able to communicate with her belayer, she continued on to the top of the pitch. With so much adrenaline, it seemed her hamstring was fine.

By the time Sandra and Meg reached Broadway Ledge, Meg was completely exhausted, and we believe that at least half of that exhaustion was mental exhaustion from 5 pitches (3 hours) of compounding fears. We think that if we had done a better job of acknowledging and mitigating her fears, she might have had the energy to climb the full route. But as leaders, we were focused on Meg’s physical ability to climb, and we were excited to share with her one of our favorite climbs. We had no doubt that she’d be able to do it. We knew she was the weakest of the group, but the group was so advanced that we didn’t really think much of it.

We came up with a few things we could have done better:

* We could have framed leading as optional. We started early enough that we didn’t need to swing leads for efficiency. Certainly that’s preferable, but we could have discussed options with our teams and allowed the participants to choose the routes they wanted to lead.
* We could have started the day with a check in, and the leaders could have modeled honest disclosure. One of us could have said “I’m feeling nervous about the 9th pitch - it always gets my heart going! But I know it will be fine, there’s just that one move I always hate. I’ll probably put in extra pro even though I know I don’t need to” Creating a space in an advanced group where its ok to not be so advanced is an important pressure valve for people who may be nervous
* Encouragement is good, but asking “how was that pitch for you?” would have given Meg the space to discuss her fears, rather than unintentionally telling her she’s having a great time. Sandra might have learned that she wasn’t really having fun, and maybe shouldn’t lead the 4th pitch. We could have avoided Meg’s pulled hamstring if she hadn’t led that pitch. The problem was not her physical readiness - it was that she seized up out of fear.
* We were all blinded by how advanced the group was, and didn’t think of extenuating circumstances (such as seeping rock) as anything to be concerned about. A focus on what the trip was relative to the students’ experience might have led Sandra to verify that Meg was ok leading across the seep before having her lead that pitch.

There were a few things we did well that worked in our favor, and probably prevented a bigger problem, or even a high-angle rescue.

* We sequenced ourselves well, with a designated sweep. This allowed us to make quick adjustments in a way that ensured everyone was accounted for, and communication could be orderly.
* Our planned stop and regroup at Broadway Ledge gave everyone (including Meg) a break and a chance to think about next steps and adjust plans as needed. Without that space, if we had just powered through to the next pitch, Meg might not have spoken up, and we could have gotten into trouble halfway up the route.