

## **Creating and Maintaining Safe Learning/Working Environments in the Field**

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### **Some Abbreviations:**

SLE- Safe Learning Environment

I-team- Instructor Team

### **What is a SLE**

A group culture that emphasizes:

- Effective Communication
- Physical and Emotional Safety of All Group Members
- Mutual Respect
- Shared Responsibility for the Group's Wellbeing-

### **Why are SLE's important?**

Accidents happen- often because of challenging conditions, inadequate preparation, but nearly every accident involves poor communication. Poor communication often results from the lack of a robust SLE. In addition, good SLEs make for much more enjoyable field experiences when you're living and working in the field 24/7.

### **Ingredients for a SLE**

Articulate A Shared Purpose

- Share your goals/vision
- Develop shared group goals with I-team and participants

Support Individual Group Member's Needs

- Humans need to feel valued/loved, physically and emotionally safe, have a sense of power/autonomy, exp fun, hope, joy
- Build genuine connections with your group, listen to them,

Build a Clear Structure

- Plan/schedule your course/expedition
- Define and maintain clear roles, expectations, and behavioral norms

**(Some) Best Practices-** Use these to create and maintain a SLE

1. Establish & Maintain Clear Goals, Roles, Expectations, Behavioral Norms
2. Brief and Debrief Your I-team and Group Often
3. Invite and Give Feedback
4. Practice Active Listening
5. Address Issues that Come Up
6. Role-model the Behavior You Expect

### **1. Establish and Maintain Goals/Roles/Expectation/ Behavioral Norms**

- Do this EARLY- remember you have the most influence at the very beginning.
- Get buy-in- you want your entire group bought into your idea of a SLE; invite them to participate in developing group goals and community norms.
- First Impressions Matter! - Be welcoming, use positive body language, eye contact, etc...., immediately start role-modeling good communication, good listening, etc... Take yourself very seriously when you present all this (you can ease up later on). Learn your student's names as fast as you can.
- Meet with your both your I-team and your group separately to discuss these things.

#### **A Sample First I-team Meeting Outline**

- Take time for everyone to briefly introduce themselves to each other
- Discuss strengths and weaknesses. What support do your co-leaders need?
- Discuss (and even write down) everyone's personal and professional goals. What are your goals as a leader team? Incorporate any feedback received from previous courses or trips.
- How will you communicate as an instructor team? Will you check-in at least once a day? every few days?
- Be open to giving and receiving feedback: how, when
- Start giving each other feedback now. How will you resolve conflict should it come up?
- Plan out the first few days of the course, including the Student Orientation Meeting
- Delegate logistical and curricular tasks.
- What are the anticipated challenges and hazards of this class/trip? What are your plans in case of an emergency?

#### **A Sample Group Orientation Meeting Outline**

- Introduction/ Opening Activities- simple name game or fun intros
- Vision and Goals of the course/expedition (instructor perspective)
- Where are we going/ What are we doing?
- Roles, expectations, behavioral norms (instructor perspective)
- Specific Issues to address: non-negotiable rules, drugs/alcohol, harassment, exclusive relationships, expulsion policies, etc.
- Facilitate a group brainstorm of shared goals and ideas for how to create a group culture that supports one another.
- Schedule/Day 1-3 plan
- Questions?

- Final Fun teambuilding activity

\*\*\*[Go here to see a much more detailed version of this.](#) The first time you give a thorough roles/expectations/behavior talk can be challenging. By all means use the exact language in the linked example to help you get through it!

## **2. Brief and De-brief with your I-team and group often**

Groups operate more safely when they are frequently briefed on what to expect and debriefed to reflect and make improvements for future group tasks. Brief at the start of the day or activity or when your plans change. Debrief whenever it can help the group learn to perform better and especially after challenging or traumatic experiences. I usually debrief long trips we go on with the entire group. I often debrief with my I-team every day.

Strive to incorporate these core ingredients into your briefings:

- What are we doing?
- When are we doing it? (What's the timetable?)
- Who is doing it? (What are our roles?)
- What hazards can we anticipate?
- How will we manage those hazards?
- What gear do we need?
- How and when will we make decisions?
- How is everyone doing? What concerns do you have?
- What feedback do you have?
- What is our plan if someone becomes ill or injured or lost?
- Have I been understood?
- Is anyone not ready?

Strive to incorporate these core ingredients into your de-briefings:

- How did that go?
- What did we do well? What can we improve upon?
- How is everyone doing? What concerns do you have?
- What feedback do you have for me?
- Here is feedback I have for you:
- How should we approach this differently next time?

## **3. Invite and Give Feedback**

- Feedback helps us see our strengths and identify areas for growth: both help groups function more safely.
- Give LOTS of Positive Feedback!! Research shows we thrive off of positive feedback
- Structure it in into meetings throughout the course
- Give feedback often, Invite feedback often

When **GIVING** feedback:

- Be timely, but wait for the appropriate time and place
- Be specific- give examples
- Be growth-oriented
- Use “I” statements: “When you did this, I think the result was....”
- Take time to focus on person’s strengths
- Emphasize the future. “Next time, could you ...”
- Be prepared to deal with a person’s reaction

When **RECEIVING** feedback:

- View feedback as information, not definition
- Use active listening skills (e.g. paraphrasing what you heard from the sender, etc..)
- Ask for more specific information if needed
- Be honest about how the feedback hits you and share it with the sender
- Acknowledge the sender:
  - “I appreciate you bringing this up”
  - “I know it can be really difficult to give feedback to your instructors”
  - “I will really think about what you said”
  - “I’ll really try to address your concern in the future”

#### **4. Practice Active Listening**

The practice of active listening can help you build a healthy group learning community but also can significantly reduce the likelihood of accidents. When you are actively listening to someone, you are supporting people to think out loud. This builds trust, group intelligence, and greater awareness of a situation or issue. It also helps leaders (and their groups) make safer decisions.

Active listening requires that you:

- be present with your speaker
- do much more listening than speaking.
- make eye contact and use positive body language.
- focus on understanding what someone is saying, not on mentally preparing a response.
- avoid interrupting, debating, and quick, preconceived responses.

The two cornerstone skills of active listening are Paraphrasing and Drawing People Out.

#### **Paraphrasing**

When you paraphrase someone, you say back to the speaker what you think the speaker said in your own words. This is the most straightforward way to demonstrate to a speaker that his or her thoughts were heard and understood. Though simple, paraphrasing is powerful! When done well, it is non-judgmental and enables people to feel that their ideas are respected.

To strengthen a speaker’s trust that you really “got” what they were saying, consider prefacing any paraphrasing with comments like:

- “It sounds like you’re saying.....”
- “Let me see if I’m understanding you.... ”
- “Is this what you mean?. .....

When you have finished any paraphrasing, check with your speaker. You might say, “Did I get it?” or look for other verbal or non-verbal clues that indicate they feel understood. If they don’t, ask for more clarification until you understand what they are saying.

### Drawing People Out

When drawing someone out, ask open-ended non-directive questions. This helps the speaker clarify and refine their thoughts. Here are some common ways to draw someone out:

- “Can you say more about that?”
- “Tell me more”
- “What’s coming up for you now?”
- “Can you give me an example?”
- “How so?”
- “What matters to you about that?”

### Setting a tone that invites good listening reduces the probability of accidents

A good leader sets a tone in which participants and co-leaders feel they can speak up, question and share observations without fear of reprisal. Do this by frequently checking in with your instructor team and student group. Strive to follow these guidelines:

- Give adequate time for discussions to avoid giving the impression that your group has nothing to contribute.
- Make eye contact.
- Listen to your team member’s responses without interrupting or “talking over” them.
- Ask: “Are you getting enough direction from me about what you need to be doing?”
- Say “If anyone disagrees, please speak up.”
- Beware giving the impression that you’re really not looking for input. Instead of saying, “Okay - you’ve all done this before. Ready to go?”, ask “Hey is anyone not ready?”
- Be aware that silence can be mistaken for agreement. Take the time and create the space for everyone to express their concerns.

### 5. Address Issues That Come Up

- Just Do It! I NEVER want to address conflict. You have much to gain. Not only will you reduce the likelihood of accidents, when you step in and acknowledge there’s conflict and put time and energy toward resolving it, you often generate enormous respect from the group for you and the I-team.
- Conflict in a group often arises when:
  - Roles and expectations are unclear
  - Information is inadequately communicated or misunderstood
  - Individual needs are not being met
  - Roles and expectations need to be modified

- Commitment to a SLE is not universally held
- See suggested conflict resolution recipe

### A Recipe for Resolving Conflict or Addressing Concerns/Problems with a student

- Approach your student or co-instructor with warmth and respect (think connection before correction).
  - Greet them normally: “Hey, how’s it going..”
- Identify what you are noticing or wanting to talk with them about
  - “I have been noticing.... and I was hoping to talk to you about it.”
  - “I noticed.... and I was hoping we could check in and see how things are going for you..”
- Invite them to talk with you at a time that works for both of you
  - “Could we take a little time to meet right after dinner tonight?. .”
- At your meeting, state your goal/purpose in talking with them right away
  - “Thanks for meeting with me.
  - “I wanted to bring ‘this’ up to make sure:
    - you are getting what you need to feel good about this class”
    - you, the other students, and the purpose of this course are all supported.”
    - ...from experience, I know little things have the tendency to become big things, so I wanted to talk with you before that happens”
- Take the time to listen, listen, and listen some more. Draw them out and be open to their feedback.
  - “How is this course going for you?”
  - “Do you have any thoughts about what is going on?”
  - “Is there anything that would be helpful for me to know?”
  - “What feedback do you have for me or the instructor team?”
- Take one or several of the following actions:
  - Make a request: (ie. ask them to refrain from \_\_\_\_\_ while on the course)
  - Clarify your expectations and/or goals for the course. If they are not meeting your expectations or hindering your goals, specify which one(s) they aren’t meeting. Suggest ways they could meet your expectations the next time this situation arises. Don’t be afraid to say: “We need everyone to follow these expectations in order to create a safe learning environment for everyone”
  - Educate your students about the ramifications of their actions, etc.
  - Engage in collaborative problem solving with your student(s).
  - Agree to meet again and discuss the issue more.
- When wrapping up your conversation,
  - Make a plan for checking in again.
  - Let them know that you are here for them.
  - Appreciate them and thank them for talking with you.

### 6. Role-Model the Behavior You Expect

- Actions speak louder than words. Enough said

### **Common Mistakes I've Made And/or Seen**

- Focusing mainly on “hard skills” and not “soft”/ people skills
- Skipping or minimizing first meetings with staff or group
- Not taking the time to build connections (rapport) with your I-team & group
- Avoiding taking responsibility for conflict
- Feeling “too tired” to brief your group esp. at the end of a trip
- One instructor says one thing, the other something different, leading to chaos
- Breaking the rules because “you’re the instructor/leader”
- Assuming that silence = agreement
- Not deliberately reflecting after an experience and changing your style/tone to adapt to new groups and challenges-One thing I’m working on right now is [incorporating more inclusive language into how I interact with students](#).

### **A Few Resources**

- [The NOLS Leadership Educator Notebook](#) has a lot of good stuff in it
- UCSC has an [Experiential Leadership Program](#). You can consult with the director to help you practice/learn more of these skills. She might also be able to host trainings for you, your staff, or even your student groups.
- See the [UC Field Safety Manual](#).
- Attend the [Wilderness Risk Management Conference](#), which is held once a year.
- Feel free to email with questions, scenarios, etc.: Chris Lay, [cml@ucsc.edu](mailto:cml@ucsc.edu).