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FACTORS INFLUENCING PARTICIPANTS' TRUST IN OUTDOOR ORGANIZATIONS AND OUTDOOR LEADERS

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Trust plays a critical role in the field of outdoor education. The building of trust among participants is a common goal of outdoor educators (Honchalk, 1982; Smith, Roland, Hanes, & Hoyt, 1992; Fox & Mick, 1996) and is believed to influence learning outcomes (Rotter, 1967). The absence of trust in one's leader may result in unrealized goals and lack of productivity (Kramer & Cook, 2004). The purpose of the current study was to explore, through action research, how trust is established between consumers and outdoor organizations and between participants in outdoor programs and their outdoor leaders. The identification of possible determinants of trust benefits both practitioner and organization by providing a list of positive and negative behaviors that may influence both interpersonal and organizational trust development and retention.

A panel of six experts developed an extensive list of factors they believed influenced participants' trust in outdoor organizations and outdoor leaders. Through nominal grouping, two separate instruments were created: the organizational trust questionnaire (34 total items, consisting of 17 positive and 17 negative) and the outdoor leader trust questionnaire (44 items, consisting of 22 positive and 22 negative). The questionnaires asked participants to rate the extent to which each item had an impact on their trust in an outdoor organization or an outdoor leader, respectively. Data were collected in two university outdoor education programs, one in the west and one in the southeast, during the fall of 2004 and spring and summer of 2005.

Based on mean scores, the five most and least influential items were identified with respect to building and eroding trust in outdoor organizations and outdoor leaders. This cut-off was supported by repeated measures analyses indicating significant differences between the sets of most and least influential items ($p<.05$).

For outdoor organizations, the factors with the greatest impact on both the development and erosion of trust involved safety issues, cleanliness of facilities, and organization of staff and information. Factors with the least influence included, primarily, marketing issues – testimonials, brochure quality, etc. Word of mouth was very important, but somewhat outside the control of the organization. Therefore, it may be more important for outdoor organizations to attend to the concrete dimensions of their program than to the more esoteric dimensions; a well-run and safe program should speak for itself.

For outdoor leaders, results support the importance of the technical skills needed to lead a safe outing with respect to building trust but also suggest the potential impact of a lack of process-oriented interpersonal skills on the erosion of trust. Although an outdoor leader may be an excellent climber, for example, he or she may still lose participants' trust by not communicating

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effectively or by behaving hypocritically. Outdoor leaders should give considerable attention to developing effective interpersonal skills.

Limitations of this study include the exploratory nature of the instruments; the sample of university outdoor education students, which may not be representative of other outdoor programs; and the exploratory nature of this study, which precluded explicit hypothesis testing.

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