

The National Affective Abilities Survey

By Mandi Baker, PhD

The National Affective Abilities study proudly supported by the Australian Camps Association and the department of Jobs, Regions and Precincts, Victorian State Government

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Executive Summary

Outdoor leaders' capabilities to connect with others in meaningful ways is at the heart of outdoor experience delivery. The social and emotional skills outdoor leaders require and draw on to make these connections are called Affective Abilities. This report summarises the results from a national survey ($n=351$) about the Affective Abilities that Australian outdoor leaders see as necessary and most useful. The results of this survey suggest that effective communication is seen as the single most important and frequently used Affective Ability. Followed by learning from experiences and role modeling desired behaviour. This study reveals that outdoor leaders drew on Affective Abilities frequently (up to 79% of their day) and intensively over their careers. This report discusses the emotional demand that outdoor leaders experience and concludes with strategies for keeping great leaders leading.

Rationale

Increasingly employers are emphasising the need for graduates to be equipped with people skills that will enable them to be effective in the workplace (Mitchel et al., 2010; Robles, 2012). A recent report by Deloitte (2017) suggests that two-thirds of all jobs will be people-skill intensive in 2030, current demand for people skills exceed supply by up to 45%, and a quarter of employers have difficulty filling entry-level positions because applicants lack people skills. They also suggest that Australian businesses spend an estimated \$4 billion dollars on training and another \$7 billion on recruitment to employ staff with the people skills required to perform job-related tasks (Deloitte, 2017). Alternatively, McCrindle (2018) reports that parents and teachers want to “future proof” students by developing stronger people and leadership skills. The intention is to prepare the next generation for a future where technology and automation will make the majority of work focused on interpersonal interactions and connections.

The need for increased and sophisticated people skills is identified in the outdoor field (Breunig, Cashel, Martin & Wagstaff, 2006; Hayashi & Ewert, 2006; Shooter, Sibthorp & Paisley, 2009). One of the greatest challenges voiced is that of recruiting and retaining staff with

high levels of Affective Abilities (e.g., personal and people skills). Evidence suggests that staffing issues are significantly influenced by the emotional demands of contact-level roles (McLean, et al., 2019). In fact the UPLOADS research on incidents in the outdoors suggest that one of the “most frequently identified contributory factors” of critical incidents was “activity participant mental condition” (McLean et al., 2019, p.32). Leader and/or facilitator roles rely on the ability to effectively connect with and relate to many stakeholders in the delivery of outdoor experience. While outdoor leaders draw on a collection of skills, knowledge and abilities, Affective Abilities appear to be essential, require sophisticated cognitive processing and have effects on employees’ wellbeing. The results of this survey suggest that emotional demands on employees in these roles are both frequent and intense. Hence, concerns about emotional fatigue and burnout must be considered in relation to the challenges of retaining valuable staff and their on-going performance (Baker, 2020).

Managers should be mindful of the emotional demands and development of Affective Abilities in their strategies to deliver pinnacle participant experiences while retaining and supporting their front-line staff to thrive.

Soft Skills, Deloitte (2017)



2/3

jobs will be soft skill intensive by 2030



Soft skills of employees could increase revenue by more than

\$90K



Demand for soft skills exceeds supply by up to

45%



<1%

Australians report having any softskills on their LinkedIn

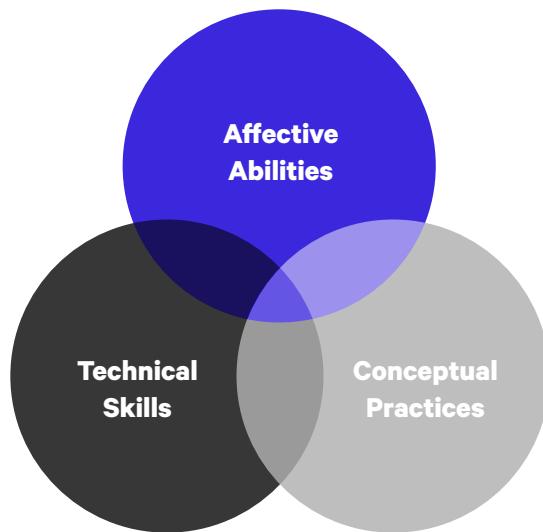


1/4

of employers have difficulty filling entry-level vacancies because applicants lack soft skills

Overview of Affective Abilities

Baker and O'Brien (2019) suggest that outdoor leaders draw on three fluid, important and different knowledges; Technical Skills, Conceptual Practices and Affective Abilities.



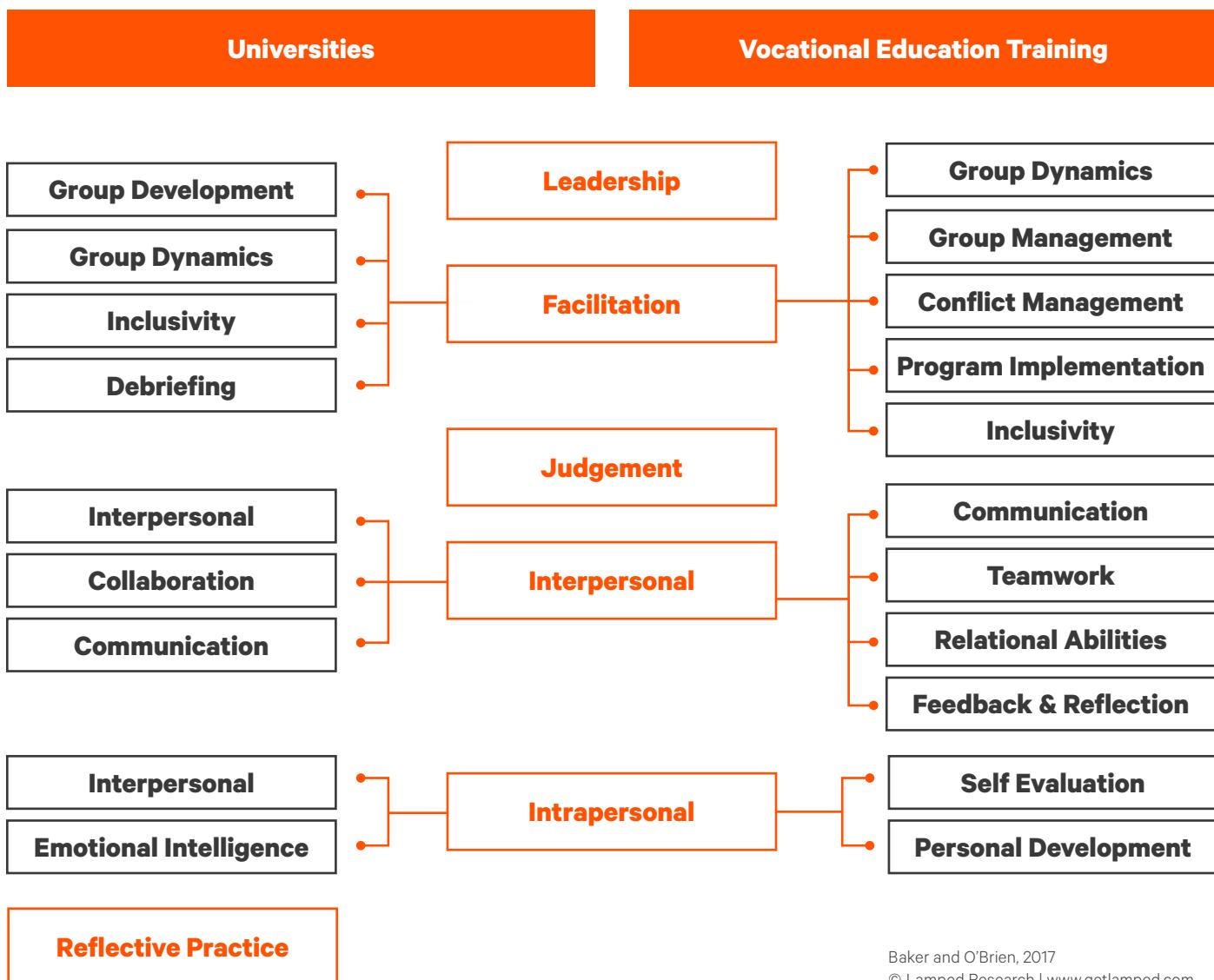
Technical Skills are the tangible or manual skills required to perform an outdoor activity to a standard level of competency (e.g., canoeing strokes, knot tying or top-rope set-up).

Conceptual Practices are the application of concepts and/or knowledge needed or supportive of delivering an outdoor experience (e.g., pedagogies, values, philosophies, program design or critical thinking).

Affective Abilities are defined as the interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities required to influence the development of positive relationships (e.g., debriefing, communication or collaboration) (Baker & O'Brien, 2019).

Baker and O'Brien (2019) found five themes attributed to Affective Abilities (AA) that outdoor leaders were being taught in Australian tertiary education related courses, with a sixth for universities. These included: Leadership, Facilitation, Judgement, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Reflective Practices. The table below outlines these themes and their related sub-themes.

Affective Abilities



Baker and O'Brien, 2017
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This research framed the core concepts that the National Affective Abilities survey was founded on. For further information please see Baker and O'Brien (2019).

Method

This study was conducted with a mixed method integrated survey (n=351) which collected numeric and textual data about the Affective Abilities that outdoor leaders perceived as most common, necessary and frequently used in the delivery of outdoor experiences.

The national survey interpreted the themes outlined by Baker and O'Brien (2019) into nine related and action-based terms;

- Role modelling
- Facilitation personal connections between participants
- Building/maintaining relationships with others
- Managing conflict
- Decision making
- Collaborating with others (peers, managers, stakeholders)
- Communicating effectively
- Managing one's own emotions and values
- Learning from Experience

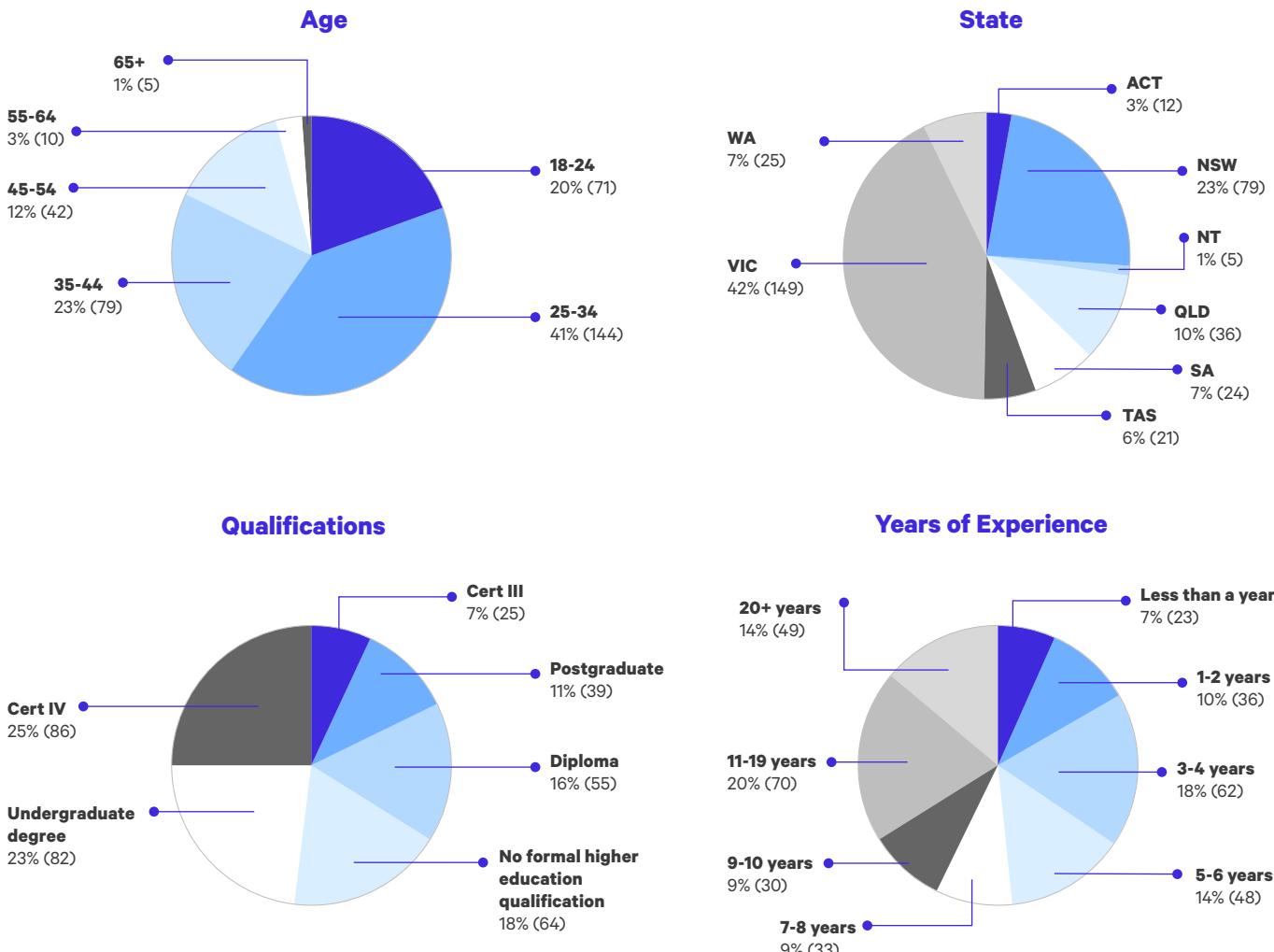
Survey responses were collected between January and August of 2019. Quantitative results have been analysed, for this preliminary report, using descriptive statistics. Qualitative results have been analysed thematically.

Survey Respondent Characteristics

Survey respondents were 51% male and 49% female. There was good representation of all states and territories, levels of education, qualifications, years of experience and roles fulfilled in outdoor sectors.

The following graphs illustrate respondent characteristics.

Graph 1 – Survey respondent characteristics



Most respondents were aged between 25-34 years old (41%) and 35-44 years old (23%). The majority of the respondents were full-time permanent employees (56%) with most of the remaining respondents employed casually (24%) followed by part-time employees (12%) and volunteers (8%).

Respondents, overwhelmingly, were employed in Victoria (42%). This reflects the high numbers of outdoor experience providers and levels of active governing bodies located in Victoria. Respondents from New South Wales (23%) and Queensland (10%) also provide substantial quantity of responses. Western Australia (7%), South Australia (7%) and Tasmania (6%) fell just short of the needed threshold of responses for analysis of their individual states. They have, therefore, be grouped with

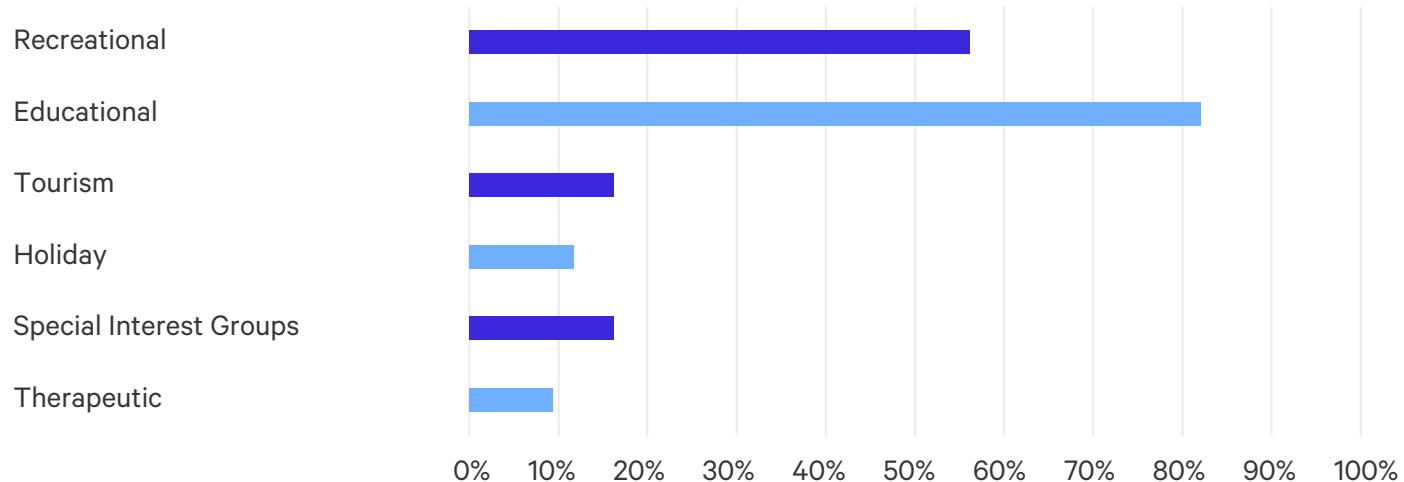
other states for the purposes of this report. Australian Capital Territory (3%) and Northern Territory (1%) had a low number of responses. The state groups for analysis in this report are WA and NT, ACT with NSW, SA and Tasmania.

There was good representation across all the categories for levels of education and years of experience. The only area where responses were low were for Cert III and those working less than a year. The majority of respondents reported receiving 1-2 weeks of training (38%) or 3-4 weeks of training (27%). It is of note that 18% reported receiving no staff training.

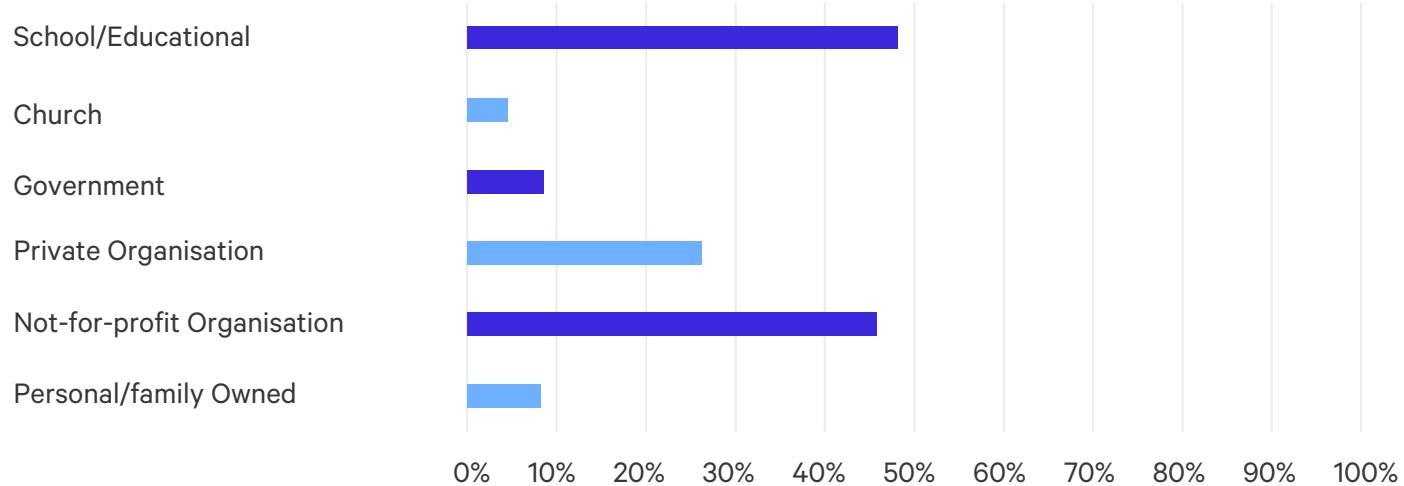
Respondents, for the majority, nominated that the programs they delivered were either recreational (29%) or educational (43%) in nature with some programs being for tourism (8%), holiday care (6%), special interest groups (8%) and therapeutic (5%) purposes. Respondents defined the organisation they worked for as school or educational (34%) and not-for-profit organisations (32%). The remainder said they work for personal or family owned (6%), private (18%), government (6%) and church (3%) organisations.

Graph 2 – Types of outdoor experience and provider

Type



Provider



The following table demonstrates the variety of roles that respondents hold.

Respondents reported working in a variety of roles. The majority (38%) were employed as Outdoor Educators followed by Facilitators (18%) and Program Managers or Department Managers (18%).

Table 1 – Outdoor Roles

	Mean	# of Respondents
Facilitator	18%	63
Senior Facilitator	5%	19
Outdoor Educator	38%	135
Supervisor or Trainer of Leaders	7%	25
Program Manager/Department Manager	18%	64
Clerical, Maintenance or Operational Support	2%	8
Director/ Site Manager	6%	20
Executive Manager, CEO or GM	2%	6
Industry Governance/Government	0%	1
Higher Education	3%	10
Total		351

Results

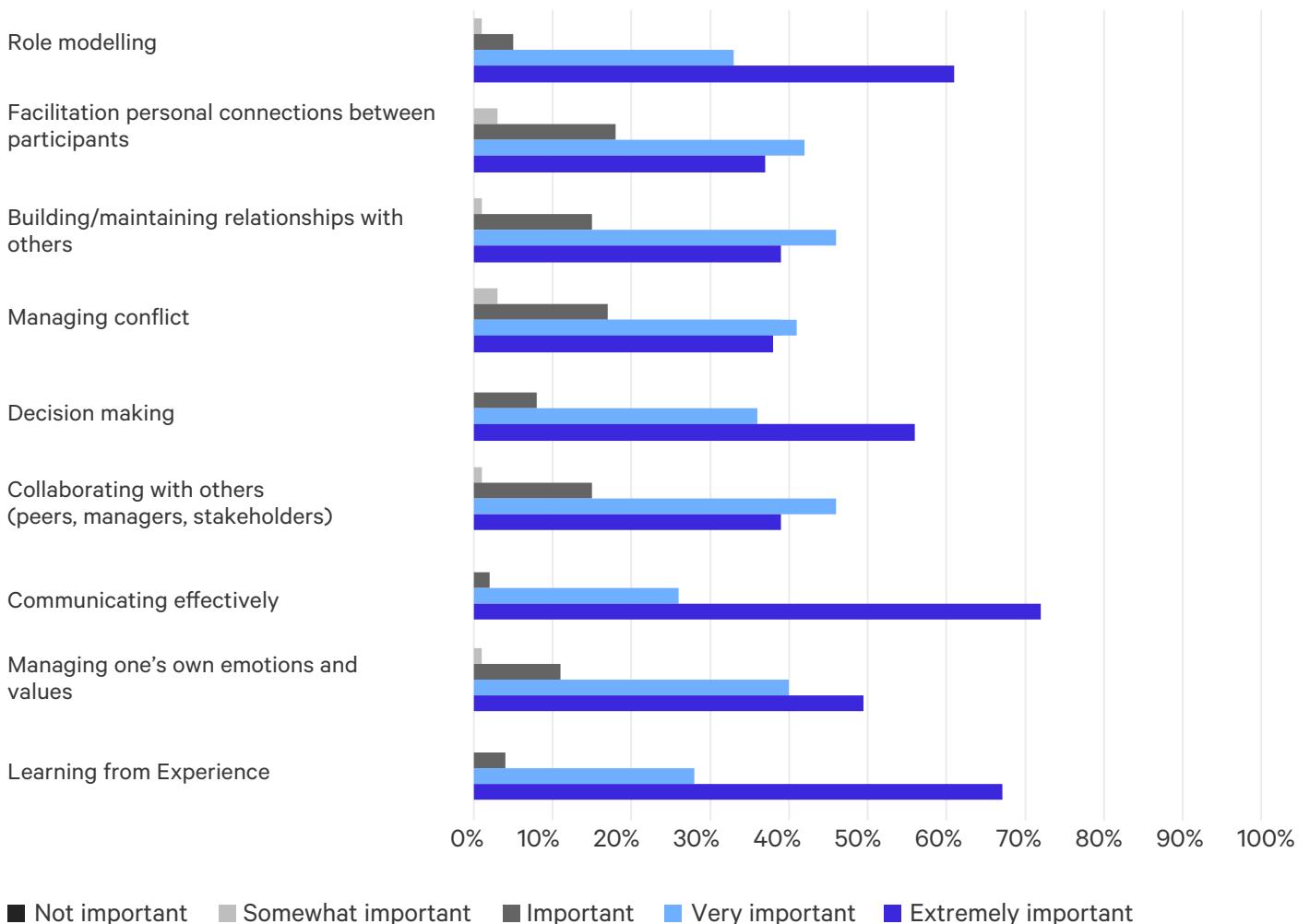
Respondents of the survey reported using **AA for 79% of an average day** of program delivery. This suggests that outdoor leaders draw on their AA for significant portion of their day-to-day work.

Respondents use AA for
79%
of an average day

Importance of Affective Abilities

The following graph indicates the perceived importance of AA for outdoor leaders:

Graph 3 – Perceived importance of Affective Abilities



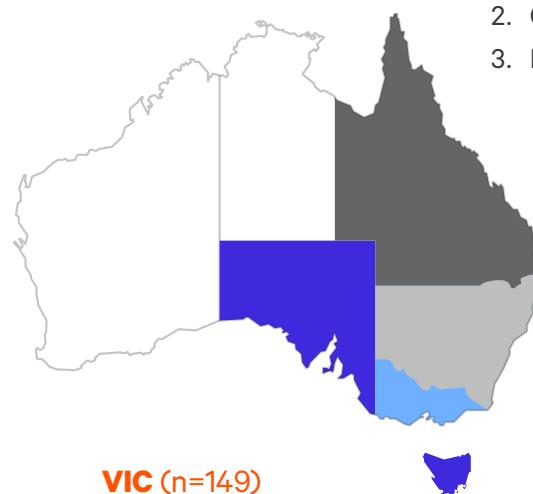
Overall responses indicated that Communication (4.71), Learning from experiences (4.62) and Role modelling (4.55) were seen as the three most important AA. When considered from a Leader and a Manager perspective, the only change to the top three was that managers included Decision making (4.52).

Similarly, when responses of importance were considered by state, all states included the four AA mentioned above with Queensland including Managing one's own Emotions and Values (4.58) in their top three. This can be seen in the image below.

There is consensus that the most important AA are Communication, Role Modelling, Learning from Experience, and Decision Making.

WA & NT (n=30)

1. Communication (4, 6)
2. Learn from Experience (4, 5)
3. Decision Making & Role Modelling (4, 4)



SA & TAS (n=45)

1. Communication (4, 7)
2. Learn from Experience (4, 6)
3. Decision Making (4, 5)

VIC (n=149)

1. Communication (4, 7)
2. Role Modelling (4, 6)
3. Learn from Experience (4, 6)

QLD (n=36)

1. Learn from Experience (4, 8)
2. Communication (4, 7)
3. Role Modelling & Managing Emotions (4, 5)

NSW & ACT (n=91)

1. Learn from Experience (4, 7)
2. Communication (4, 7)
3. Role Modelling & Managing Emotions (4, 5)

Communicating Effectively appeared to be the single most important AA reported in the survey. The importance of Communicating Effectively was reinforced by primary rankings in other survey questions including the AA respondents most admired in other facilitators, the AA most needed in critical situations and the AA that outdoor leaders should most receive training.

Managing one's own Emotions and Values, however, was highlighted as much more significant when circumstance proved to be challenging or interpersonal incidents were in progress. A discussion of this item will be continued in the section on Intensity of AA Use.

Qualitative responses, such as those included below, illustrate how respondents view the value of comprehensive AA as well as those individual AA that stand-out as most important to effective leadership and program delivery.

“

I could tick “all” as soft skills like these are way more important for an outdoor leader than any hard skills. Hard skills on activities are simply tools that we use to evoke an experience but, I feel beyond those skills, we teach the underlying life skills such as communicating effectively with others and managing your own emotions in all situations. This is why a focus on facilitation is so important in training.

”

“

I believe that all of these are critical for an outdoor leader at any level. Whether we are dealing with groups in the field or meeting with school staff to discuss program needs, at some point we are going to have to utilise one or more of these skills to effectively manage our responses.

”

Frequency in Affective Abilities Use

Respondents reported the frequency of encountering everyday behaviours that required the use of AA in the following graph.

Graph 4 - Frequency of behaviours which require AA

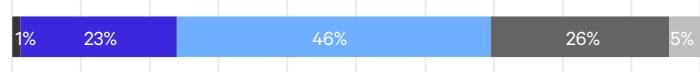
A participant is anxious, fearful, or overwhelmed



A participant is lonely, homesick, or left out



A participant refuses to take part, try an activity or complete an activity



A participant over-estimates their abilities



Participants disagree, have conflict or have an argument/fight



Participants don't work well together



Environmental factors significantly alter program



Your peers disagree with you



Your peers don't follow your or others' directions



Your peers don't perform their work satisfactorily



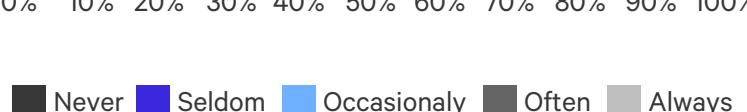
Stakeholders' expectations are unreasonable



You have to ignore or manage your own wants/needs to deliver a program



You call on the help of others



Items 1-6 are experiences that concern participant behaviours and, on average, reflect a large part of the demand and use of AA for outdoor leaders. Respondents reported experiencing challenging participant behaviours Occasionally (44%), Often (32%) and Always (5%). Inversely, peer relations (as reported through items 8-10) had a positive effect on role demand with the majority of perceptions of negative peer behaviours reported as Seldom (60%) and Never (9%). It appears that stakeholder expectations are managed well, for the most part, as evidenced with the majority of respondents in the Never to Occasionally range in response to expectations being unreasonable; Never (7%), Seldom (48%) and Occasionally (33%).

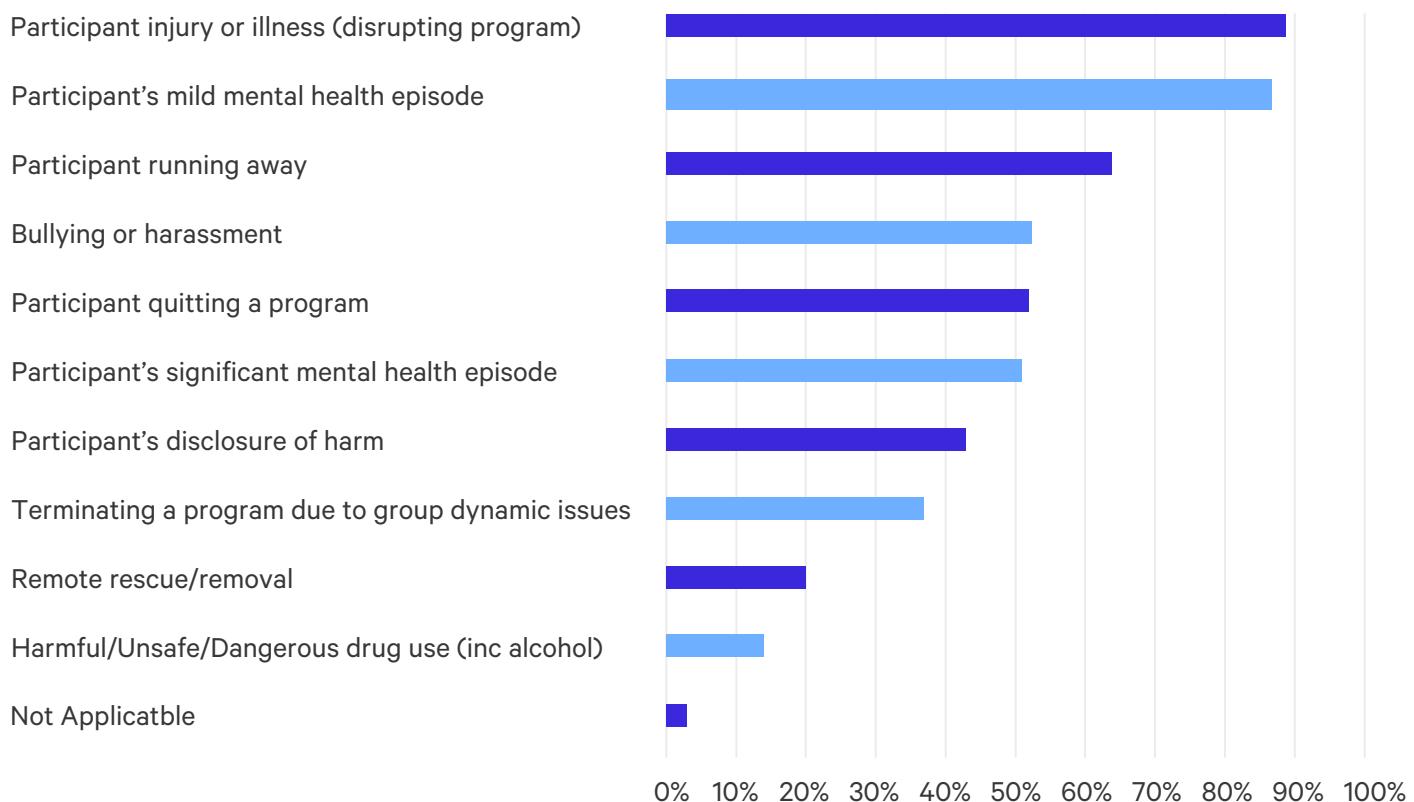
Item 12 considers the management of personal needs and emotions. The majority of respondents reported

low levels of having to manage or suppress their own needs in the performance of their roles. These figures indicate that the majority of respondents felt they only Occasionally (39%) or Seldomly (25%) needed to prioritise the needs of participants before their own. This would suggest that employees have found a good role fit and/or work structures, expectations and culture are supportive of balanced and/or healthy expectations for staff performance. However, it is worth noting, a third of respondents reported needing to manage or subsume their own needs Often (26%) and Always (4%). This suggests that some respondents are not in roles that are a good fit for them, personally, or performance expectations are not reflective or supportive of the AA demand placed on employees.

Intensity of Affective Abilities Use

The role of contact-level leaders requires frequent management of emotionally demanding incidents. Respondents have encountered a significant number of challenging situations in the course of their careers. The following demonstrates the rates of encounter.

Graph 5 – Personal encounters with critical/intensive incidents



89% of respondents have addressed injury and illness that disrupt their program delivery. Experiences of mild (87%) and significant (51%) mental health episodes were common. 64% of respondents reported experiencing or addressing incidents of bullying and/or harassment. 37% of respondents reported receiving and/or addressing disclosure of harm. 43% reported doing a remote rescue or removal. A number of these incidents (e.g., bullying, disclosure of harm, drug use) are common alongside mental health conditions. This suggests that outdoor leaders are often exposed to a number of psychological and social challenges within the same incident, group or program.

Qualitative statements, like the one given below, indicate just how complex and integral the use of AA are for outdoor leaders.

“

For me the most important thing is to remain present and mindful and respond to challenging interpersonal situations, with sensitivity, as they arise. This can be challenging as we are often working under conditions that could be described as intense/intensive or challenging: removed from friends, family and our usual support networks, working long hours with little time alone to process and reconnect with self, little leisure time, doing a mix of physical and ‘emotional’ work that can be draining. The challenge as I see it is to remain calm and connected under these conditions, and if I succeed in this, I’m usually able to respond effectively to most situations.

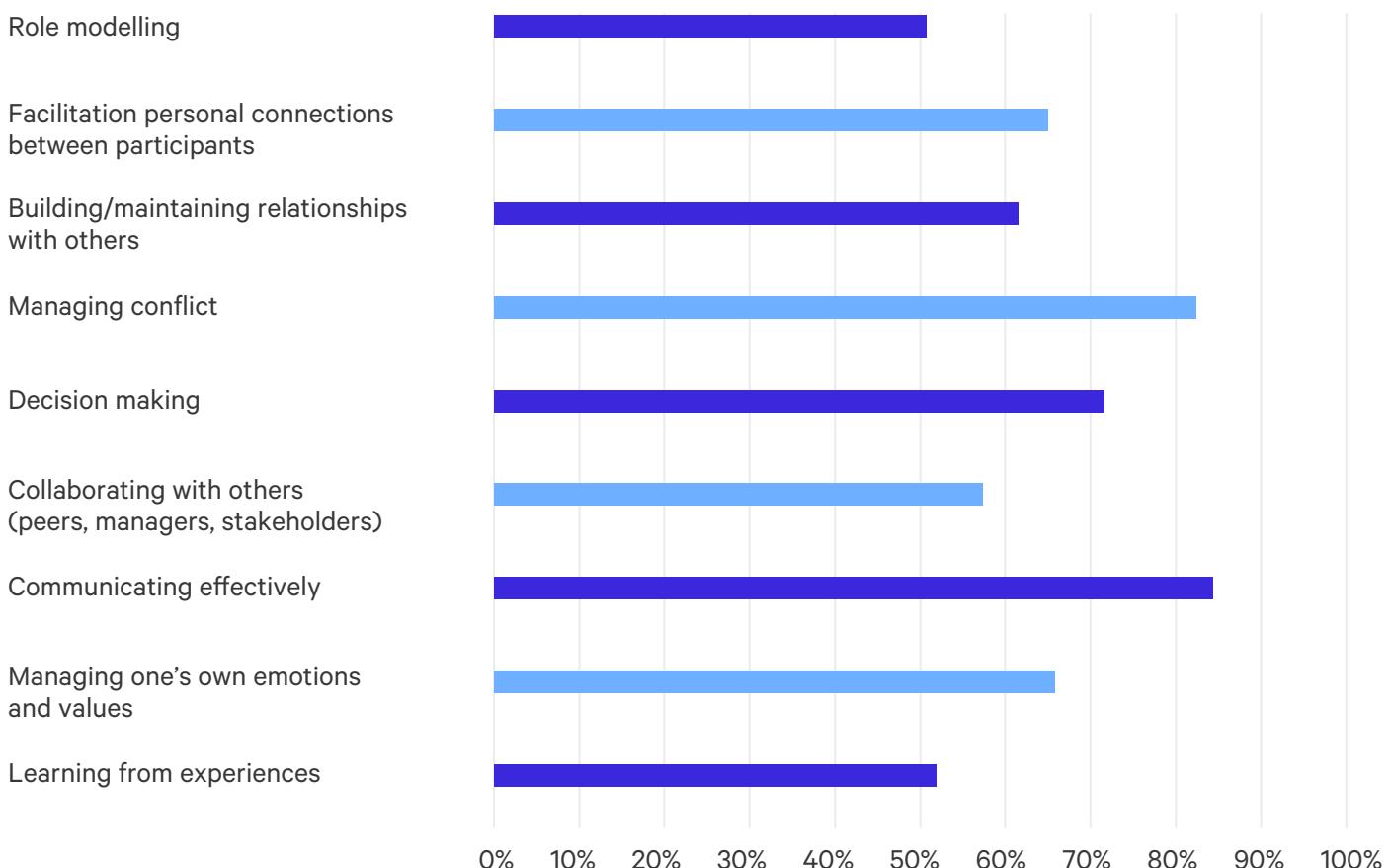
”

Outdoor leaders' capabilities to draw on, apply and embody AA in order to deliver meaningful outdoor experiences are imperative. AA are needed to meet both the frequency and intensity of outdoor leader roles. As the respondent above suggests, the challenges of outdoor leadership can be all encompassing and, consequently, approaches to staff support and wellbeing are necessary.

Affective Abilities Training Needs

Survey respondents strongly supported the need for AA development and training. The following graph shows which AA needed the most development or would benefit from targeted training.

Graph 6 - AA that outdoor leaders should receive training



Survey responses suggest that new and veteran leaders should be trained in Communicating Effectively, Conflict Management and Decision Making. Conflict Management is an unexpected inclusion to the three most important AA to develop since it ranked 8th (out of 9) on the importance of AA question. This appears to be incongruent with earlier responses. The data on questions of intense/unusual behaviours or incidents suggests that Conflict Management plays more of a role in these situations however, not enough to suggest that it should be listed in the top three for training. This anomaly is worth exploring further to provide better comprehension as to why conflict management features so strongly in the view of respondents for leader training.

Qualitative responses, below, support the need for training and development of AA as well as illustrate the current lack of opportunities for outdoor leaders.

“

There is so much focus (and sometimes funding) on hard skills in the workplace and maintaining their currency while I find investment in developing staff's affective abilities is more often left up to the individual. If we are to better realise the potential of the industry, and its possible benefits, I believe greater emphasis and financial investment is needed. This is also critical in minimising the potentially (serious) harmful effects of poor affective abilities employed by under trained/developed facilitators.

”

“

I think there is a trend in under-training outdoor leaders in affective abilities, particularly in regard to dealing with conflict or difficult behaviours. I also think self-management and burn-out management is not discussed or dealt with enough within the industry.

”

“

It is so important for the safety of professionals and participants, that outdoor leaders receive training in affective abilities. We used to say that these abilities couldn't really be taught; that is a fallacy. Learning how to debrief a situation, activity or journey will use all of the listed abilities and enhance the learning/impact of the outdoor experience for the participant.

”

Overall, qualitative responses support the need for more, intentional and explicit opportunities for leaders to develop AA.

Conclusions

Survey respondents report using their AA for 79% of their day. This is a significant amount of time where, in conjunction with other skill sets and knowledges, outdoor leaders are engaged in and draw on their capacity for complex inter and intra personal perception, processing, facilitation and response. The data suggests that the occurrence and demand of AA is both frequent and intense. This is evidenced in the frequency responses of “Often” and “Always” to participant, organisational, environmental and personal behaviours that require AA to manage. Rates of incidents encountered through a career also highlight the emotional demand and intensity of situations that outdoor leaders face. These can include mental health episodes or incidents, rescue or removal from programs, disclosures of harm, harmful substance abuse or escalated inter-group conflict deemed unresolvable and that terminates program. These findings suggest that outdoor leaders need to be equipped to encounter a diverse range of interactions as well as those considered unusual and emotionally demanding. Yet explicit training or development of AA appear to be limited in tertiary education opportunities in Australia (Baker & O’Brien, 2019).

Survey data suggests that effective communication is deemed as the single most important AA needed to be successful and effective as an outdoor leader. This held true across state, employment role, the kind of behaviour or incident being addressed and perceived training needs of outdoor leaders. This finding suggests that most difficult or challenging behaviours and situations can be navigated through effective communication prior to conflict or escalated circumstances. Effective communication acts as a positive and proactive approach to interpersonal facilitation whereas, for examples, conflict management may be seen more as a responsive or reactive ability. Effective communication requires that emotional and social intelligence, such as perception and judgement, are necessary precursors.

For example, knowing when to interject and what to say is very important for communication to be effective. This is not to suggest that all conflict should be avoided but that effective communication is a complex and multi-faceted ability in itself.

Role modelling, learning from experience and decision making are also among the top most important AA. Role modelling requires that leaders demonstrate desired behaviours at all times that they are acting in their role. Learning from experiences suggests the ability to reflect and accommodate learning into current and future practice. Decision making connects concepts of knowledge (such as conceptual practices in the model offered earlier) and judgement. When respondents were asked which AA that new outdoor leaders should receive training in, conflict management featured as the second most important. This appeared to be incongruent with responses to a number of survey questions. Conflict management was listed as the fourth most used or needed ability when in extreme or intense situations only. In all other questions, it was ranked relatively low (last or second last place of 9 AA). It appears however, in light of the intensity of critical incidents, some kind of training in crisis management appears necessary.

The findings on critical incidents encountered by staff suggests that further education and AA development specific for psycho-social incidents should be highlighted (see UPLOADS Annual Report 2018-2019). Given the ranking of mild (87%) and significant (51%) mental health episodes that respondents have experienced over their careers, paired with research on rising levels of these incidents, it would be valuable for future staff development to consider the need for employees training and knowledge around mental health first aid and responder care.

Recommendations

Changing the mindset that Affective Abilities can be taught.

There are still people in the outdoor sector who believe that people skills cannot be taught. For example, “We used to say that these abilities couldn’t really be taught, that is a fallacy”. We know that AA are learnt skills and those, often deemed good at it, have had much more exposure and experience that have helped to develop them. Outdoor leaders should have opportunities to develop AA through tertiary education and on-site training. These opportunities should make AA explicit and take the time to both practice and assess new leaders’ abilities in order to give feedback on how they perform and how to continue developing. This should include learning on how to reflect on feedback and incorporate learning into practice.

The most important AA are; Communication, Role modelling, Learning from experience, and Decision making.

A focus on continued developmental opportunities for effective communication should be prioritised given the findings of this study. Face-to-face communication should be practiced regularly but additional modes and systems of communication should also be reviewed. Creative communication methods may include blog or community chat groups, regular staff debriefs or discussions and collaborative knowledge management systems.

Support organization/managers with understanding how to recruit, train, develop culture and evaluate performance of AA within staff.

Managers in the outdoor sector need to have good understandings of how to recruit, train, develop organizational culture and evaluate staff performance in regards to AA. This involves recognizing what AA are valuable to sustaining and supporting the contextually specific work (client populations need and expectations, staff abilities and talents, organizational values) being delivered. Far too many companies leave employment strategies and management to generic HR processes that are overlaid onto the unique work of outdoor leaders. Employment practices should consider the unique AA skills of outdoor program delivery if they intend to be ethical and sustainable.

Outdoor leaders need to be equipped to encounter a diverse range of interactions that are considered emotionally intense.

Education on mental health and how to respond to incidents, with a particular focus on the emotional effects on and care for the responder, should be pursued. This may be in combination with mental health first aid or more tailored to individual staff populations. According to the data from this survey, staff have extensive experience and, thus, expertise. This suggests that staff may be the best resource for understanding both the issues that staff need to be prepared for as well as recovery needs. Working with employee knowledge bases to develop protocols or guidelines for response and responder care would be beneficial to individual staff members and organisation's human capital.

Strategies for keeping great leaders leading

Manager

- Develop Affective Abilities and role model the Affective Abilities you expect from your staff
- Recruit, train, reward and retain staff based on AA criteria
- Consider program planning to match skills and not overextend capacities
- Evaluate & modify policy to support the emotional demands of front-line roles
- Foster regular mentoring to staff for healthy debriefing and intentional AA development

Leader

- Take responsibility for self-care of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing
- Develop AA to ease stress of emotional demand and develop buffer
- Create and maintain healthy boundaries
- Seek mentorships and meet regularly
- Develop rounded aspects of identity and maintain strong relationships with people outside of work

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