

# The National Affective Abilities Survey

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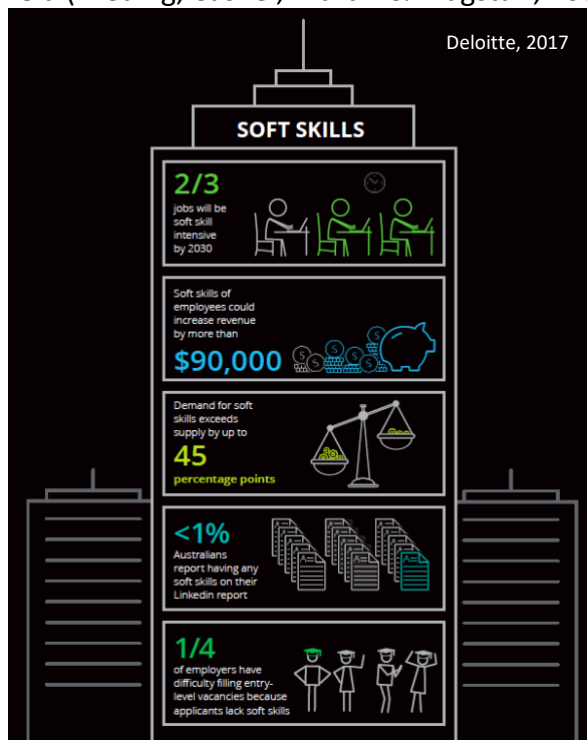
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## Introduction

Outdoor leaders' capabilities to draw on, apply and embody Affective Abilities are at the heart of meaningful outdoor experiences. Affective Abilities are defined as the interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities required to influence the development of positive relationships (Baker & O'Brien, 2019). 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. This report will summarise the results from a national survey (n=393) about the Affective Abilities that Australian outdoor leaders see as necessary and most useful. This report concludes by discussing the value of the emotion work conducted by outdoor leaders and how managers might engage and support outdoor leaders better.

## Rationale

The need for increased and sophisticated people skills is not only identified in the outdoor field (Breunig, Cashel, Martin & Wagstaff, 2006; Hayashi & Ewert, 2006; Shooter, Sibthorp &



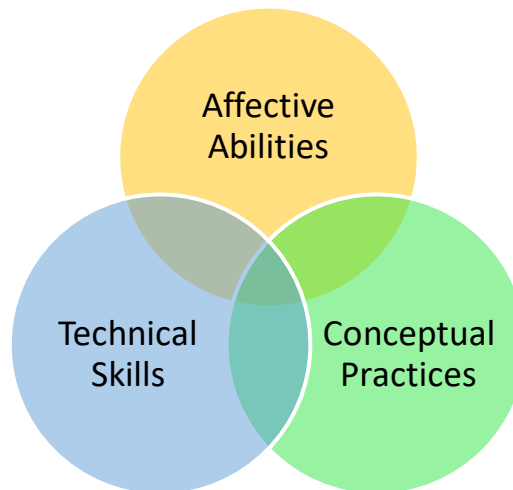
Paisley, 2009) but in broader industries. Increasingly employers are emphasising the need for graduates to be equipped with people skills that will enable them to be effective (Mitchel et al., 2010; Robles, 2012). A recent report by Deloitte (2017) suggests that two-thirds of all jobs will be people-skill 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).

Outdoor sectors, specifically in Australia, recognise challenges in recruiting, training, supporting and retaining staff. One of the greatest challenges voiced is that of recruiting and retaining staff with high levels of people skills (aka Affective Abilities). While still under investigation, preliminary evidence suggests that staffing issues are significantly influenced by the emotional demands of contact-level roles. Leader and/or facilitator roles rely on the ability to effectively connection with and relation to many stakeholders in the delivery of outdoor experience. This survey suggests 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 challenges to retaining valuable staff and/or their on-going performance (see Baker 2020).

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.

## Overview of Affective Abilities

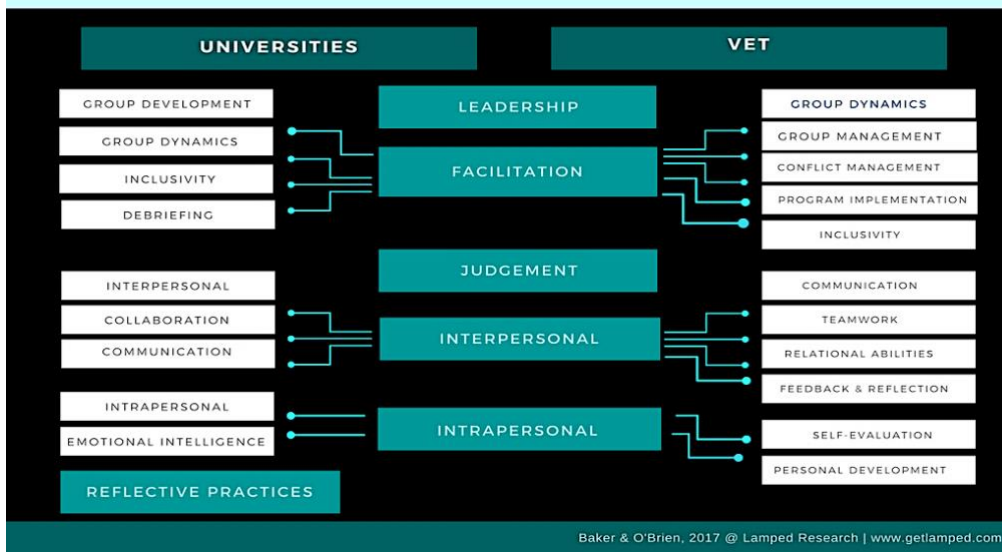
Baker and O'Brien (2019) suggest that outdoor leaders draw on three fluid, important and different knowledges when performing as outdoor leaders; technical skills, conceptual practices and affective abilities.



- **Technical Skills** are the tangible or manual skills (often demonstrated through qualification) 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** is 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, communications or collaboration) (Baker & O'Brien, 2019).

Baker and O'Brien (2019) found five thematically grouped 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



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 survey (n=351) which collected quantitative and qualitative data about the skills and abilities that outdoor leaders perceive are necessary and report as using 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;

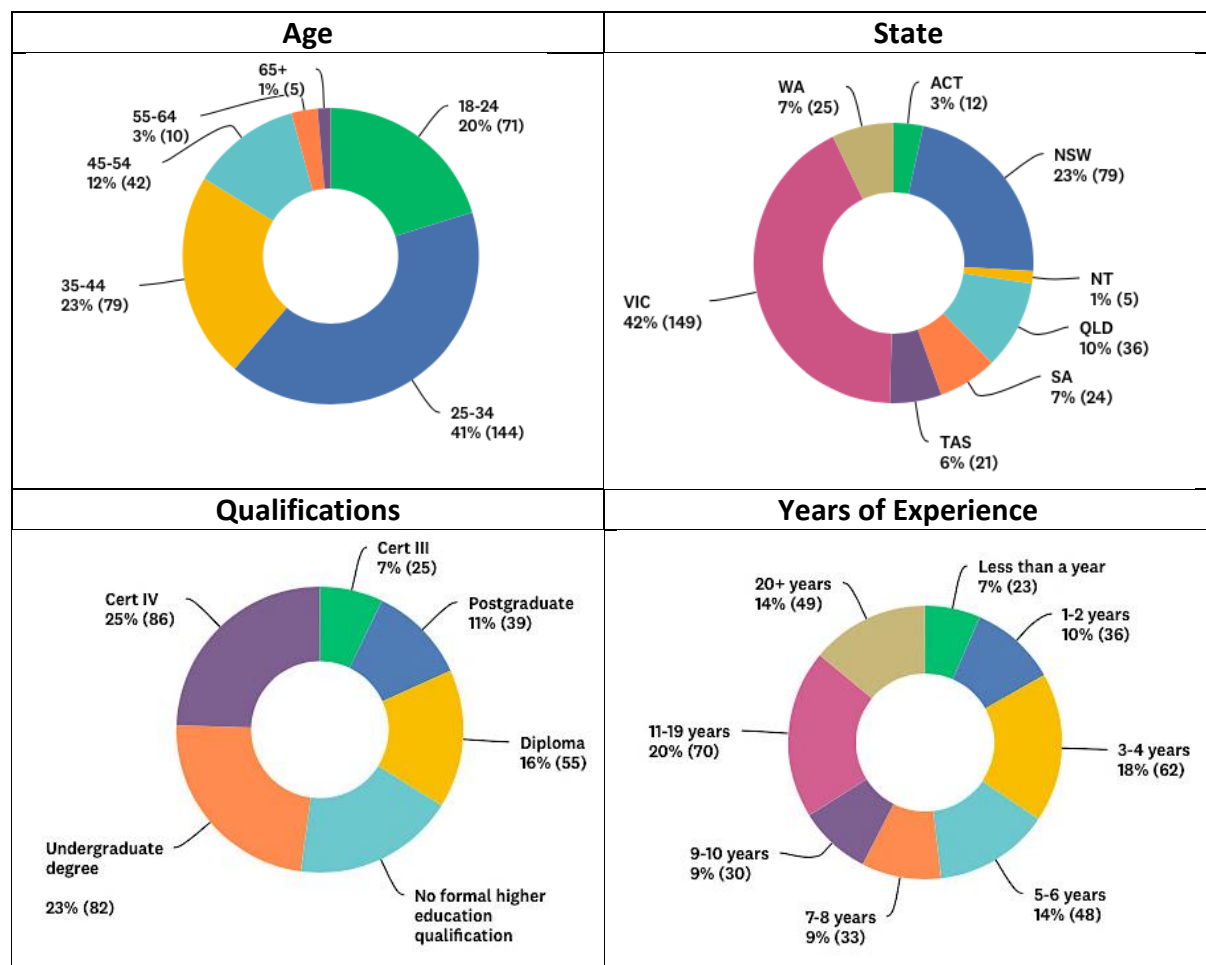
- Role modelling
- Facilitation personal connections between participants
- Building/maintaining relationships with others
- Managing conflict
- Decision making
- Collaborating with others (peers, managers, stakeholders)
- Communicating effectively
- Managing one’s own emotions and values
- Learning 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 manually for emerging themes.

### *Survey Participant Characteristics*

Participants represented an equal split in gender (M = 51%, F= 49%) and good representation in most categories including state/region, levels of education, qualifications, years of experience and roles fulfilled in outdoor sectors. The following graphs illustrate participant characteristics.

**Graph 1 – Survey participant characteristics**



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

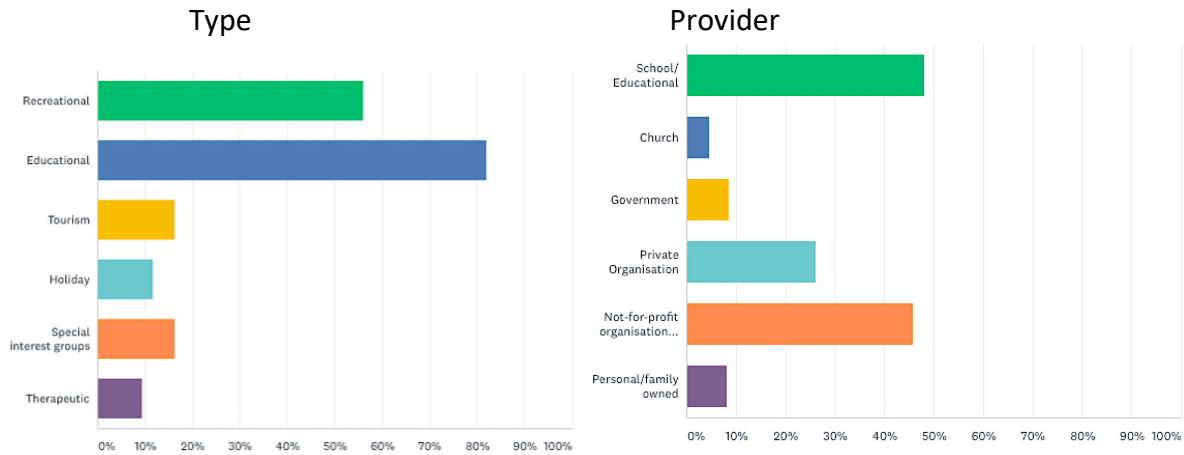
Respondents, overwhelmingly, were employed in Victoria (42%). This reflects the high numbers of outdoor experience providers and levels of active governing bodies located in Victoria. Respondents from New South Wales (23%) and Queensland (10%) also provide substantial quantity to undergo more advanced statistical analysis in future reports. 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. Australian Capital Territory (3%) and Northern Territory (1%) has low numbers of responses. The state groups for analysis in this report are WA and NT, ACT with NSW, SA and Tasmania.

There is good representation across all the categories for levels of education and years of experience. The only area where responses are low are 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 worthy of note that 18% reported receiving no staff training.

The following two graphs illustrate the type or “style” of outdoor experience provided and the kind of entity that respondents worked for

Graph 2 – Types of outdoor experience and provider



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 personally or family owned (6%), private (18%), government (6%) and church (3%) organisations.

The following table demonstrates the variety of roles that respondents hold

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               |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                                 |      | <b>351</b>       |

Overall, survey responses represent a diverse range of participant characteristics. There are a number of characteristics that are worthy of further exploration in relation to AA; levels of

qualification, education, years of experience, state of employment and employment roles. Some of these will be considered in this preliminary report with much more detailed analysis in a later report.

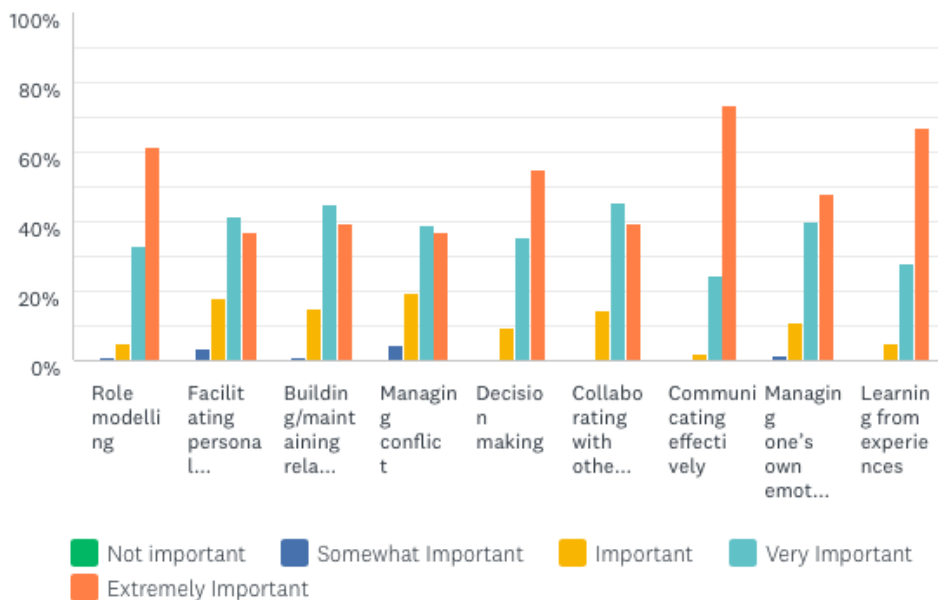
## Preliminary Results

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.

### *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.

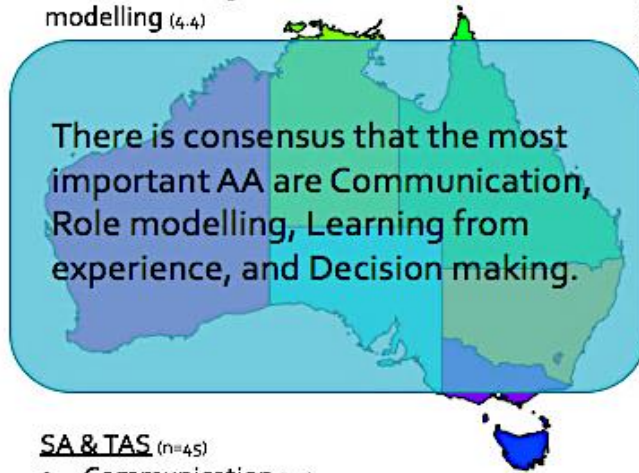


WA & NT (n=30)

1. Communication (4.6)
2. Learn from Experience (4.5)
3. Decision making & Role modelling (4.4)

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 (4.5)

SA & TAS (n=45)

1. Communication (4.7)
2. Learn from Experience (4.6)
3. Decision making (4.5)

Victoria (n=149)

1. Communication (4.7)
2. Role modelling (4.6)
3. Learn from Experience (4.6)

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 picked up in 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.

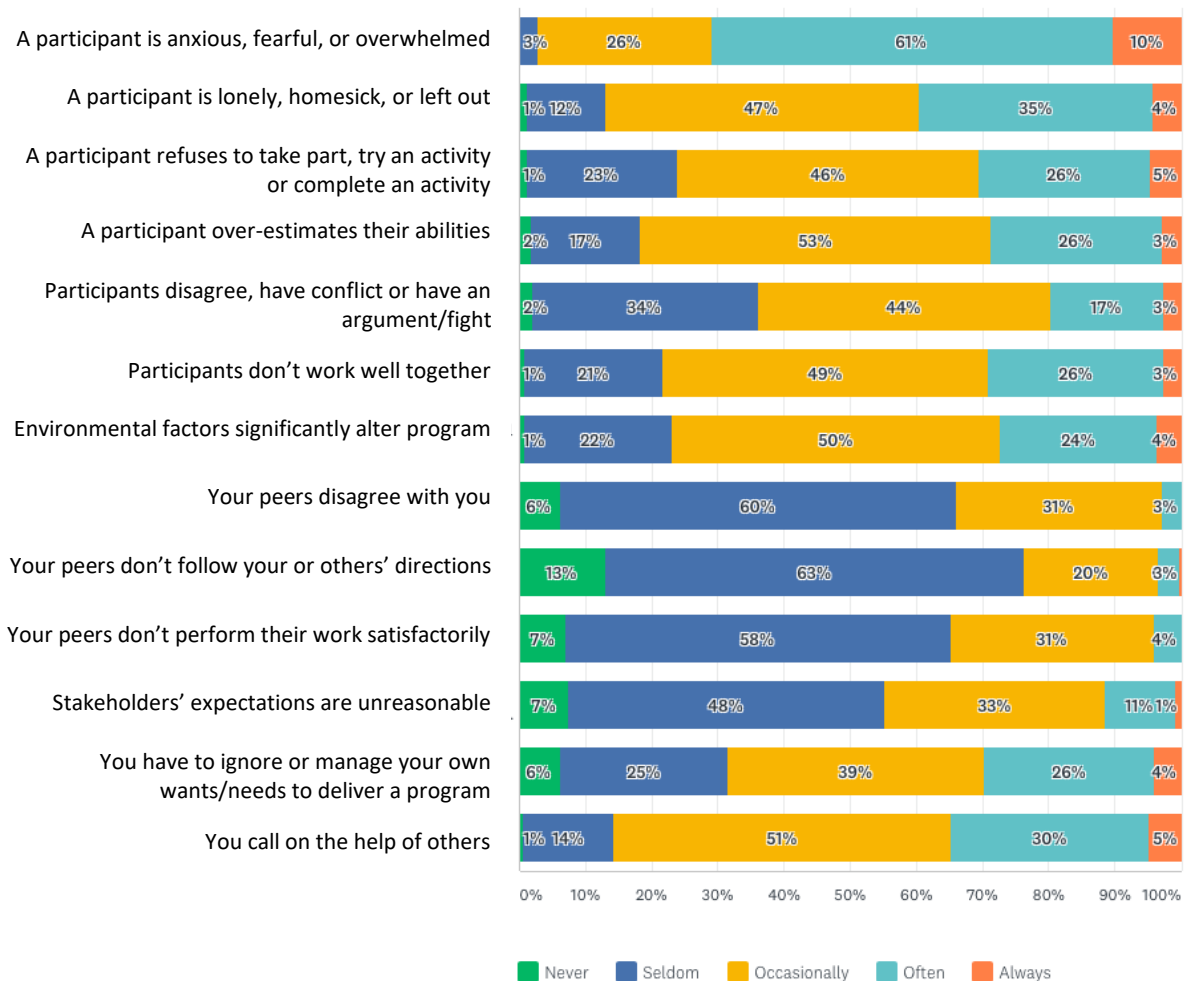
I could tick "all" as soft skills like these are way more important for an outdoor leader than any hard skills. Hard skills on activities are simply tools that we use to evoke an experience but, I feel beyond those skills, we teach the underlying life skills such as communicating effectively with others and managing your own emotions in all situations. This is why a focus on facilitation is so important in training (Q21.350).

I BELIEVE THAT ALL OF THESE ARE CRUCIAL 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 ETC, AT SOME POINT WE ARE GOING TO HAVE TO UTILISE ONE OR MORE OF THESE SKILLS TO EFFECTIVELY MANAGE OUR RESPONSES (Q21.105).

### 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**



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

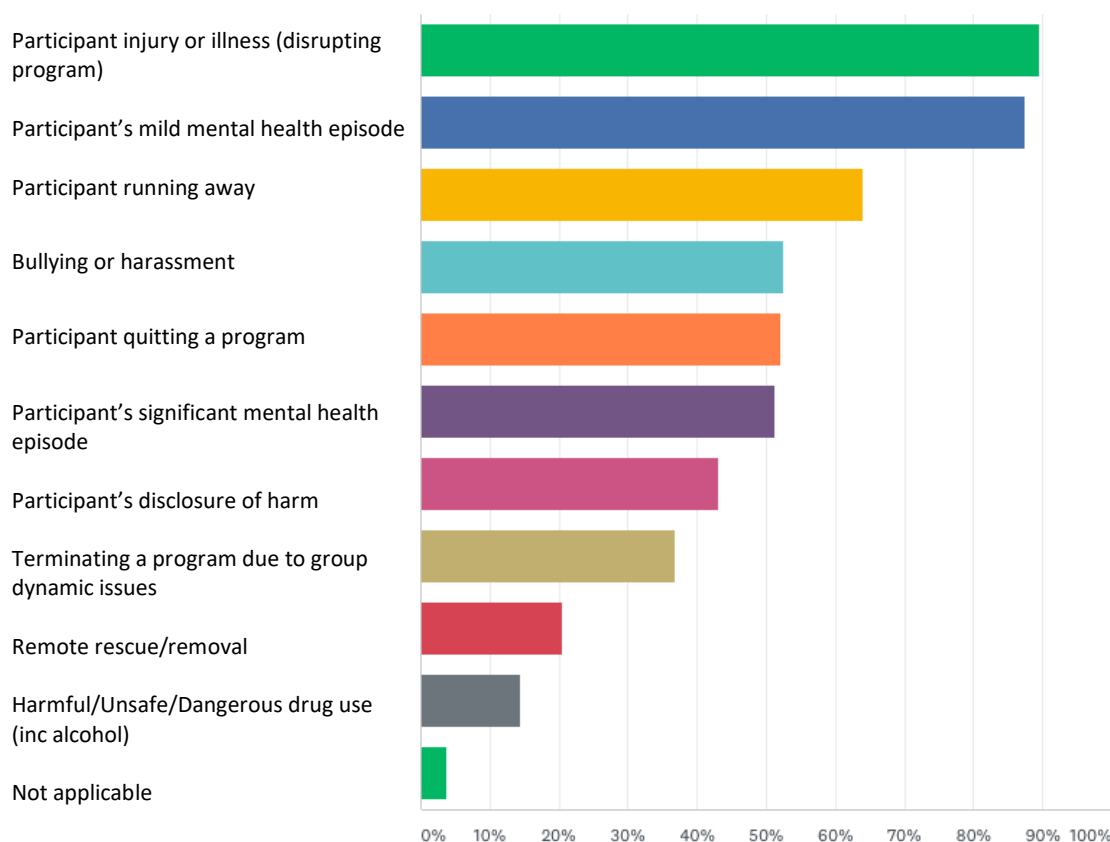
(60%) and Never (9%). It appears that stakeholder expectations are managed well, for the most part, as evidenced with the majority of respondents in the Never to Occasionally range in response to expectations being unreasonable; Never (7%), Seldom (48%) and Occasionally (33%).

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*

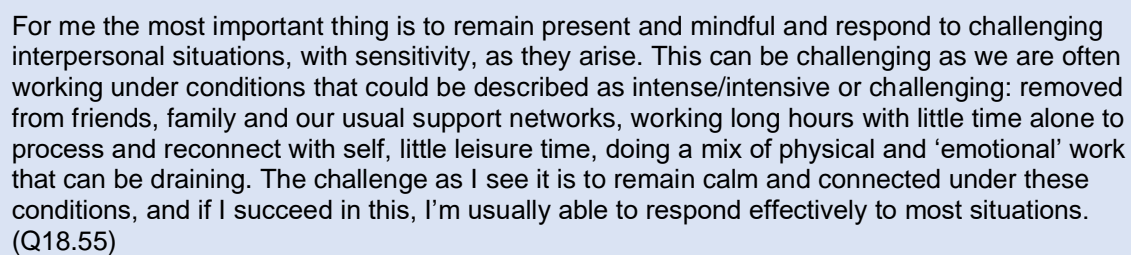
The role of contact-level leaders requires frequent management of emotionally demanding incidents. Respondents have encountered a significant number of challenging situations in the course of their careers. The following demonstrates the rates of encounter.

**Graph 4 – 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 are becoming increasingly 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% report doing a remote rescue or removal. A number of these incidents (e.g., bullying, disclosure of harm, drug use) are considered co-morbidities of mental health concerns therefore, respondents are exposed to a significant number of challenging psycho-social situations.

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



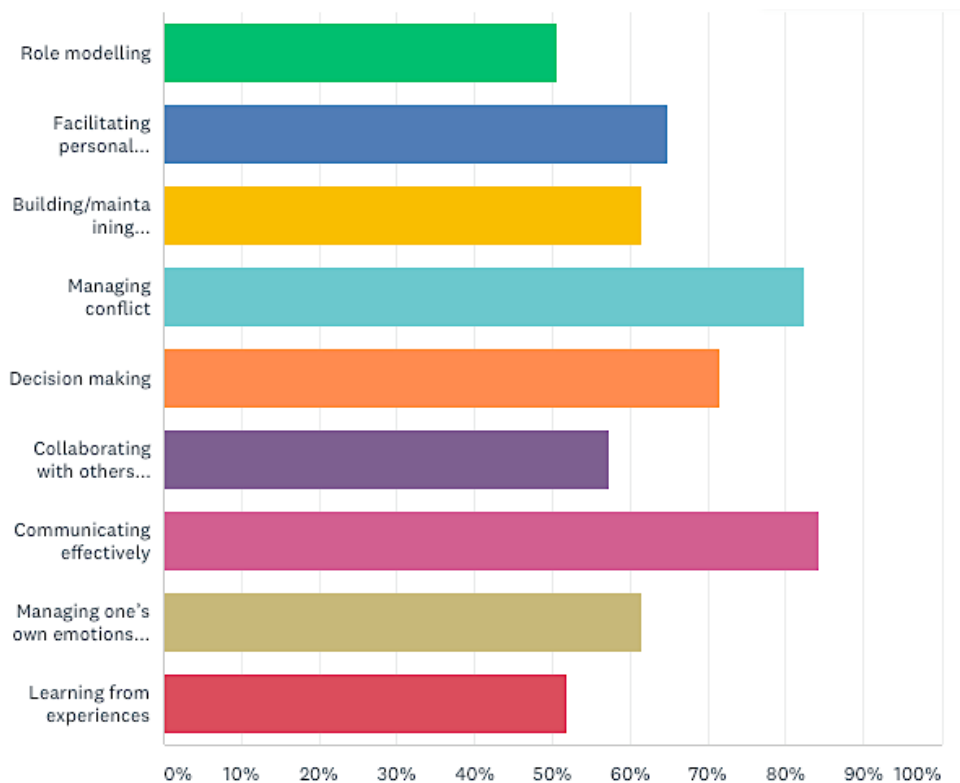
For me the most important thing is to remain present and mindful and respond to challenging interpersonal situations, with sensitivity, as they arise. This can be challenging as we are often working under conditions that could be described as intense/intensive or challenging: removed from friends, family 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. (Q18.55)

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. The challenges of leading well can, as the respondent above suggest, be encompassing of the whole person and, thus, holistic approaches to staff support and wellbeing are also necessary.

### *Affective Abilities Training Needs*

Survey respondents addressed the need for AA development and training. The following graph suggest which AA were seen as needing the most development or provision of training opportunities.

### **Graph 5 -AA that outdoor leaders should receive training**



The 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 top three most important AA to develop since it ranked at 8<sup>th</sup> (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. These qualitative responses also highlight some areas of need for AA development.

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 (Q21.1)

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 (Q21.132).

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 (Q21.268).

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

## Conclusions

Outdoor facilitators 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, that outdoor leaders are engaged in and draw on their capacity for complex inter and intra personal perception, facilitation and processing. 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 or 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 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 or 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. I would argue that effective communication also requires that emotional and social intelligence, such as perception and judgement, are necessary precursors to effective communication. For example, knowing when to interject and what to say when you do 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 in a facilitator role. Learning from experiences suggests the ability to reflect and accommodate learning into 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 incongruent to be listed in the training question however, in light of the intensity of incidents that outdoor leaders report encountering, 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. Given the ranking of mild (88%) and significant (52%) mental health episodes that respondents have experienced, 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

There are still people in the outdoor sector who believe that people skills cannot be taught.

Changing the mindset that people skills can be taught.

For example, “We used to say that these abilities couldn’t really be taught, that is a fallacy.” (Q21.33). We know that AA are learnt skills and those, often deemed good at it, have had much more exposure and experiences that have helped them develop. Outdoor leaders should have opportunities to develop AA through tertiary education and training. These opportunities should make AA explicit and take the

time to both practice and assess student’s abilities in order to give incoming leaders

feedback on how they perform. This should include learning on how to reflect on feedback and thoughtfully incorporate learning into practice.

A focus on continued developmental opportunities for effective communication should be prioritised given the findings of this study. Face-to-face communication should be learned and practiced regularly but additional modes and systems of communication

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

should also be reviewed. Creative communication methods may include blog or community chat groups, regular staff debriefs or discussions and collaborative knowledge management systems.

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

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

involves recognizing what AA are most valuable to sustaining and supporting the contextually specific work (client populations need and expectations, staff abilities and talents, organizational values) being delivered. Then it requires applying this knowledge to all aspects of staffing. Far too many companies leave employment strategy and management to generic HR processes that are overlaid onto the unique work of

outdoor leaders. Employment practices should consider the unique AA needs and skills of outdoor program delivery if they intend to be ethical and sustainable.

Education on mental health and how to respond to incidents, with a particular focus on the emotional effects 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

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

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 very beneficial to individual staff and the organisation.



## Strategies for keeping great leaders leading

### Manager

- Acknowledge and value emotion work
- Recruit, train, reward and retain staff based on AA criteria
- Consider program planning to match skills and not over-extend capacities
- Evaluate & modify policy
- Consider how staff remuneration reflect perceptions of value (& work with other signifiers of value )

### 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
- Foster mentorships/ 'supervision'
- Develop rounded aspects of identity
- Recreate & play

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