



# Looking back on the evolution of an industry

## Reflections on Outdoor Management Development

The objective of this article is to examine how Outdoor Management Development (OMD) has evolved over the last forty years or so, with the aim of identifying good practice and creating debate in regard to a way forward.

To do this, a panel of industry 'experts' (sometimes known as 'old fogies') met to discuss why they first went into the world of Outdoor Management Development (OMD) and the changes they have seen over the last forty years or so.

### The panel

Our four main panel members, John Richards, Bob Larcher, Simon Maddison and Mike King, all started their OMD careers in the mid-eighties to early nineties.

### Getting into discussion

#### What was OMD like 40 years ago?

Full of interested and interesting people who felt they didn't fit in mainstream education, including people from the military (Bob worked with an ex Grenadier Guard), the arts, ex-teachers (John, for example) and social workers. Overall, a very varied population, all motivated by wanting to help people to learn and grow.

Interestingly all the panel seemed to feel that the programmes they worked on were surprisingly sophisticated. Yes, there was a lot of going down caves, walking up hills, canoeing along rivers and building bridges and

### What is Outdoor Management Development (OMD)?

In a nutshell OMD encompasses experiential outdoor-based programmes, events, courses, etc. for those from the world of work.

The key elements of OMD are a series of exercises or initiatives which, undertaken outdoors by groups of participants, require risk-taking, problem-solving and teamwork for successful completion. Interspersed with these exercises are review or debriefing sessions in which participants analyse their experiences and share their learning with fellow participants.

The value of OMD (1) is in its ability to develop team cohesion and team effectiveness, improve interpersonal communications, co-operation and trust contribute to organisational development and change, etc.

## AUTHORS

**John Richards:** John creates learning environments that encourage behaviour change. He has worked internationally, developing bespoke workshops that facilitate the behaviours needed for multicultural teams to realise their full potential.



**Simon Maddison:** Simon is a coach and facilitator working with teams and individuals who work in all sorts of organisations. His beliefs about experiential learning and developing the 'whole person' (not just the employee) stem from his early career in OMD. Based in Bristol, he works internationally with a fantastic range of colleagues.



**Mike King:** Mike is an independent leadership development facilitator and coach. Mike has been an IOL member since its foundation and, whilst often working inside, his heart remains outdoors.



**Bob Larcher (APIOL):** Based in Toulouse in France, Bob considers himself to be an experientially-based leadership development practitioner. He works with a wide range of international companies both in the UK and France and across all organisation levels. Bob now works mainly indoors and occasionally outside.



Photos: All from the authors.

rafts, but there were also social events, clay pigeon shooting, visits to cultural venues, charity events and drama: all used to provide leadership and teamwork opportunities as a catalyst to stimulate in-depth reviews and enable real-time reflection and challenge.

In the early days, the projects were very physically demanding, and the external perception was quite macho, so despite efforts to play down the military heritage, it was quite easy to spot.

There was also a lot of 'indoor' work trying to make sense of all the outdoor stuff and what it meant in terms of management, leadership and teamwork. This was not only important but also essential in helping each participant to identify they could transfer their learning back into their world of work.

A recurring element during the discussion was the time available, as programmes were often residential and a week was considered short. There was time to move from one activity to another and to blend outdoor activities with outdoor experiences; there was time in the course to change the planned activity and adapt to what was felt to be the needs of the group.

Mike remembers the 'standard' Outward Bound course being 3 weeks long and involving 3 expeditions linked by other centre-based activities.

There was time for long conversations about the meaning of life and the effect of each person's behaviour on those around them, and the impact this has on getting the 'work' done. Time was important to allow the emergence of aspects such as camaraderie, morale and group cohesion between the participants and build trust with the trainers; the wet and the cold seemed to enhance this process. In the early days there was little thought around why it was good, everyone just knew that it was.

As John said, "In terms of behaviour change, I remember my first 5-day residential course had more impact than two whole years of classroom teaching." The immediacy of the experience and the pertinence of the feedback, given and received, opened everyone's eyes to what was really going on between the participants and created a real cohesiveness between the group.

It's probably true to say that health and safety, particularly around mountain water sports, was not well thought through. Bob vividly remembers using his throw line to pull someone out of the bottom of 'Loonies Leap' and thinking, "wow, that was close"; while Simon mentioned, "the joy of getting back to the van on the edge of hypothermia". Risk was clearly considered, but not in the way it is today. There was no 'risk register' and very little, if any, written recording of 'near misses'.



Simon also remembers being laughed at for suggesting it might be a good idea to wear a helmet and buoyancy aid and being told "no, they'll get damaged". Having said that, accidents (even minor ones) were really very rare in the panel's experience.

Although national outdoor qualifications existed, most operators only had one or two 'qualified' people who in turn provided in-house training to their staff. None of the panel had recognised instructor qualifications when they started their professional careers, although all had been previously involved in some kind of supervisory role with people (mainly young people) in an outdoor environment.

There was very little use of management or leadership theory in the early eighties, so debriefs were essentially based around the interpersonal dynamics the participants had experienced during the different activities and there was little effort to compare with frameworks or models.

“After classroom teaching for two years, I wanted a role helping young people develop that could offer more challenge and a broader experience. I felt constrained in the classroom, which required an approach and skills that were not really 'me'.” John

Bob vividly remembers being charged with exploring the theory of leadership and discovering the likes of John Adair's "Action Centred Leadership Model" (2), Tannenbaum and Schmidt's "Continuum of leadership behaviour" (3) and Hersey and Blanchard's "Situational Leadership" (4). These, along with Tuckman's "Stages of group development" (5) became the bread and butter of the debriefing of leadership and teambuilding events, especially in helping participants to identify how they could transfer their learning back to the workplace.

The early nineties saw a lot of elaborate projects built on commercial scenarios and run under extreme time pressure. 'Failing' projects were commonplace as groups learned to work together, identifying learning points to take forward to the next task.

## What is it like working in OMD now?

In terms of the evolutions over the last 30 years or so, the panel are unanimous on the major change: time! Organisations today are very reluctant to give time to participants' personal journeys of insight and discovery; the 5 to 6-day (or longer) programmes of the eighties and early nineties are now typically two days – and often not even residential.

It is clear that on an individual level behaviour change takes time and is more successful in a focussed environment with the support of skilled practitioners helping people to move through the five major change stages: Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action and Maintenance (6).

Interestingly, as Simon said, “although there is less time today, there is more pressure to show results”. Organisations today want (quite rightly) to see quantifiable behavioural change in the people they put on programmes. Those participating will quite likely have completed a 360° appraisal, discussed the results with their manager and HR, and drawn up some kind of learning contract identifying the behaviours they wish to develop. The positive impact of the time bound nature of programmes today has without doubt driven improvements in how experiences are generated, with more outside or even inside exercises and the use of video etc. This has also led to better programme set up, planning and focus to ensure that the outcomes desired by the client organisation are achieved.

On the negative side this can lead to the ‘rodent maze’ feeling with participants being pushed through a series of activities with the reviews being based around pre-set questions that often miss much of what really went on during the event and thus leading to less personal learning and hence less behavioural change.

Although the panel considered themselves to be thoroughly professional all those years ago, increased professionalism has brought many benefits to the field with, particularly, a greater understanding of the environmental impact of the activities undertaken, as well as the physiological and psychological affect of activities and the reviews on the participants. As Simon said, “we now know we were doing the right thing – and I bet some of the mad stuff we did would still go down well”.

**So, where are we today?** There are clearly providers delivering outdoor-based events to corporate clients; the outdoors as a teambuilding environment is still relatively popular, with events such as white-water rafting and mountain-based treasure hunts clearly providing opportunities for cooperation and leadership.

The command task-type exercises still exist, building the raft or the bridge to get across the river, getting the team through the Spiders Web and extracting the ‘Toxic Waste’ and taking it to a safe area, being a few examples. There is also still a bit of going down caves or mines, canoeing down rivers and bivouacking overnight, all overseen by facilitators with nationally, recognised safety qualifications.

The bite sized approach, popular today, has clear advantages in terms of releasing staff (it may in fact allow even more staff to participate over a given time period) and can be effective when there is sufficient work-based support to ensure behavioural change and transfer.

The recognition of the importance of emotional intelligence and its implications for leadership and teamwork, together with the impact of taking time (slowing down) and the outdoor environment on wellbeing and mental health, could be an opportunity for a return to longer more “open-ended events”.

To sum up, the Outdoors was a venue for experience-based learning and reflection, with learning being driven by what the learner wanted it to be and the role of the trainer/facilitator being to adapt to emerging issues. It is now more an organisation-driven laboratory with learning being what the client organisation wants it to be and the role of the trainer becoming a ‘guarantee’ in respecting the programme.

## Having looked back, what does the future hold for OMD?

So, is OMD dying, or already dead?

The White Paper, ‘Future Trends in Leadership Development’ (7) published by the Center for Creative Leadership in 2014, highlighted four trends for the future of leadership development: more focus on vertical or self-development; transfer of greater developmental ownership to the individual; greater focus on collective rather than individual leadership; and much greater focus on innovation in leadership development methods. OMD, with its capacity to develop team cohesion, improve interpersonal communications and develop individual potential by overcoming personal barriers, clearly appears to have a role to play.

An evolving OMD seems to follow less of a ‘stand-alone’ approach (as it often was in the eighties and nineties) and more of a blended approach to developing people, incorporating experiential and residential modules, coaching, personal profiling, 360° feedback, co-development, action learning cohorts and learning partners. Overall it provides potentially powerful approach to ensuring learning transfer and sustained behavioural change.

Another trend which augurs well for OMD is the move away from ‘information giving’ (sometimes called ‘death by PowerPoint’) during training programmes towards using the time available for face-to-face interactive experiential exercises allowing participants to test and develop their behavioural agility. ■



If you're interested in behaviour change pop over to page 27 to read 'Don't drown in change – part two'



## References

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- (2) <http://adair-international.com/assets/free-action-centred-leadership-materials-2017-1-.pdf>
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- (7) Nick Petrie, Future Trends in Leadership Development, CCL (2014). <http://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/futureTrends.pdf>