



by  
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## The View From ...

# Obsession (...or...why do we shy away from reflection?)

It's that time of year again...adverts everywhere for new toys, clothes, gear, the latest must haves....funny how this always starts earlier each year – as though retailers feel the need to get the jump on their rivals just in case someone spots the gap in the market (it's not as though this come round every year is it!)...Anyhow – I got to thinking about this obsessive need to fill our lives with "stuff", the latest and best (according to the marketing chaps) of everything, and I started wondering about where this comes from and how it applies to us in the outdoor industry. We all know someone who is "techno-freak", or "gadget man" or "I've just got the latest...." Now I'm not knocking them – sometimes they really do have the best stuff that works better than something we've all been using for years. But if you stop and think – how often is it that they have stuff because it has become an obsession, something that masks the need for deeper, more fulfilling experiences? I mean – just how many fleeces or Goretex (there are other brands out there!) jackets does one person really need? And what is it they are really trying to prove and to whom?

This is something I've been aware of and thinking about for several years now and it applies to more than kit. For me this has been brought to the fore by re-visiting the various books that were written in the aftermath of the 1996 Everest storm (possibly some unconscious realisation that it is ten years since). I started teaching a course on leadership and group dynamics to outdoor students at about the same time as these books were appearing and used them as the basis for many discussions that inevitably became in-depth and explored a number of contentious issues. One in particular (by Beck Weathers) really highlighted obsession and hiding and perhaps the darker side of what we do. To remind you – Beck is a pathologist who suffers from depression which he found could be kept at bay by climbing, an activity which rapidly became an obsession. He had an absolute need to prove his ability and set out to "do" the 7 summits (the quest for which was halted at 5 after Everest). His fascination was at the expense of his family and sometimes the patience and understanding of friends as well. It took "an epiphany" on Everest where he very nearly died to help him realise that sometimes the bigger picture needs taking care of.

It got me thinking – how often do we encourage a level of obsessive behaviour that could actually do more damage than good? This could be in staff, or in ourselves. The drive to be the best often requires an equal determination from family and friends to help keep their loved one anchored or at least to enable them to be so driven by support in the basics of daily living. But how often do they appreciate the back up they need and also the level of sacrifice this sometimes entails? It seems to me that it usually takes something BIG to bring the driven one back down to earth and open their eyes – at that stage one simply hopes that they can open their eyes and have the opportunity to repair the sometimes badly damaged relationships.

I wrote in an earlier article about the work-life balance and I guess that this is an extension of that. Having drive and determination, discipline and dedication to be the best are hugely admirable qualities. But how often do we think – the best at what? Or even, what do I mean by “the best”? “What determines why we act in certain ways, or even, why we abstain from choosing?” (Gammelgaard, 1997). Reflective practice is something that we are increasingly encouraging and long may that last. Because in order to be the best, we should be asking ourselves what it is we are trying to do and more importantly, why. What need is being fulfilled by doing this and what are we prepared to sacrifice to achieve it? Paul Pritchard’s “The Totem Pole” speaks eloquently of these questions and uncovers some heartbreaking soul searching.

Perhaps we need to be thinking about appraisal and supervision sessions, how they are structured, and what we really need to get from them. After all, if most people answered honestly, they would say that appraisals don’t really mean anything to them. Not surprising really when you think that most appraisers don’t ever have any training in how to conduct effective appraisals. Perhaps we have as much a role to play in encouraging reflective practice through effective questioning of staff (and friends) as each individual does each time they fall off a rock face. Think about asking “What do you need?” rather than the usual “What do you want?” In changing that one word,

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the question changes the way issues are looked at, becoming more introspective and forcing the listener to think on a more reflective plain. (You may not get an immediate answer, and perhaps what you do eventually hear will not be the whole answer, but the thinking process will be taking place!). It can be a painful and all too emotional question, and one that can need courage to ask. But that shouldn’t stop us asking. The aim is not (necessarily) to get an answer, but to encourage the reflection. And surely that is the key to understanding and ultimately, to growth. ■

#### ..... **Author’s Notes**

Heather is a training and development manager for Fairbridge, a national charity working with inner city 13-25-year-olds most at risk. She has worked as a lecturer in outdoor education at both HE and FE levels and also as a practitioner. Her articles focus on how academic models can be used every day by practitioners and also on observations of what is happening within the industry.

#### **References:**

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**Photos:** by the Low Bank Ground Team