

**Throw a Party: The Hostess Concept of Leadership**  
(1992) By Denise Mitten, Executive Director of Woodswomen

**Note (2021):** Denise Mitten was a founder of Woodswomen (1977—1999). The Adventures in Good Company (1999—present) approach to guiding has its roots in the outdoor leadership model developed by Denise at Woodswomen. Although this article discusses working with “special populations” in the outdoors, the key concepts about the role of the guide apply to AGC’s “population” of adult women participating in small-group adventure vacations.

**Autobiographical information:** For the past 20 years Denise Mitten has worked in adventure, outdoor, and environmental education. She has had opportunities to work with women, youth, inner city African American youth, men, women offenders, homeless people, women survivors of sexual abuse, and nuns in emotional recovery. She has extensive experience working with heterogeneous groups that include all these types of people as well. Ms. Mitten brings a comparative perspective regarding the value and uses of various leadership and motivation styles with many different groups. Ms. Mitten is one of the most widely experienced adventure guides in the business. She has led climbs on Mt. McKinley and in the Himalayas; SCUBA dived in the Caribbean and the Galapagos Islands; taught skiing in Colorado; taught and raced whitewater canoeing; guided raft and kayak trips down the Colorado, Green and Rio Grande rivers; taught rock climbing in California, Washington, Colorado and the Midwest; led bike trips in Europe and New Zealand. As Executive Director of Woodswomen, Ms. Mitten combines her breadth of guiding experience with a scientific (MFS at Yale University) emphasis and administrative background. Ms. Mitten developed and refined Woodswomen's acclaimed leadership program both through Woodswomen programs and as a faculty member at Metro State University. This leadership style focuses on both ethical and inclusive leadership. Ms. Mitten is a member of the American Mountain Guides Association and the Association of Experiential Education.

**Abstract:** Everyone has fun at a successful party. They think about it for weeks, remember conversations and look forward to coming back to your house. At Woodswomen we know that having fun is the key to motivation for special populations. That is why we teach the hostess concept of guiding. I use the analogy that a good leader resembles a good hostess. First the leader sets a stage where people can feel safe and comfortable. The leader helps set a tone of enjoyment and light heartedness as well as inclusivity. Then the leader encourages people to relax and have fun. When people are having fun, they are more likely to learn new behaviors that the leader models and feel good about taking risks. This results in enhanced self-esteem and an increase in self-confidence which leads to a "can do" attitude. This attitude feeds into the experience being both successful and fun. Using the party concept, it will follow that people will have successful and perhaps life changing adventures. People take their accomplishments with them in increased self-esteem and pride, often realizing that this trip need not be an isolated event in their lives.

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having fun is the key to motivation for special populations. That is why we teach the hostess concept of guiding. I use the analogy that a good leader resembles a good hostess. She checks in with participants and encourages them but avoids telling them what to do. Miss Manners says that a good hostess circulates freely among guests and is accessible to all. Leaders also let the participants be responsible for their own actions, just as the guests are responsible for having a good time and contributing to the entertainment rather than just being entertained. In the same spirit, trip leaders seek to encourage participants to accomplish their own goals. The goal of the hostess concept of guiding is for the leader to help create a trip atmosphere that encourages people to develop or express self-esteem. In order for a person to develop self-esteem as an infant, youth, or adult, the person needs to be in a nurturing and structured environment (Clarke 1979). The trip atmosphere must feel safe and comfortable. Then people can be child-like and have fun which helps them be open and receptive to learning.

The hostess concept of guiding is effective with all populations because most people learn and relate well when they are comfortable and having fun. It is especially effective and in fact necessary with special populations because people joining outdoor trips from special populations tend to do so in an attempt to develop self-esteem. The hostess concept of guiding provides the necessary atmosphere for this development.

### **The leader**

The leader is the key to a successful party. In putting together a trip, the first ingredient is a leader who feels comfortable hostessing or "throwing a party" in the area of the trip. This leader needs to be well-trained and well-briefed in the art of throwing parties. The leader needs to know how to have fun and how to encourage others to have fun and feel comfortable at the party location, as well as possess a host of other outdoor leader requirements. Leaders are responsible for helping people take safe, manageable steps towards gaining new skills and attempting new challenges or risky endeavors. As a leader, one balances keeping the trip safe while giving the participants the freedom and opportunity to make and carry out plans. Joy Hardin did groundbreaking research on participants' expectations and outcomes on outdoor courses. She found that because participants look to the leader for direction and protection, the role of the leader is a powerful one. In Hardin's doctoral dissertation, *"Outdoor/Wilderness Approaches to Psychological Education for Women: A Descriptive Study,"* she talks about the goals of outdoor leaders and their impact on the participants. Her research supports the idea that a leader's goals and assumptions influence the experiences of the course participants:

- Her behavior has known effects on participant outcomes;
- Her expectations have known effects on participant achievement;
- The match or lack of match with participant expectations strongly influences participant learnings.

Following from Hardin's conclusions it is clear that as a leader, one has many opportunities to influence the trip. Subtle or not-so-subtle comments help set the tone of the trip. For example, at the beginning of a trip similar to the beginning of a party, participants often feel nervous,

awkward, anxious, excited, and/or expectant. If the leader is excited, eager to embark on the journey, and at the same time calm and confident the participants will probably pick up on this and be assured that the leader can do her part in making the trip safe and successful. As the party starts the leader can help facilitate introductions and expectations and help people meet other people who she knows may have common interests and experiences. The leader needs to be available to answer a myriad of questions, sometimes over and over again. And of course, the leader needs to be versed in the answers. This is analogous to knowing where the bathrooms are, where the dishes are, where the extra roll of toilet paper is, and where the fresh ice is. The leader's attitude helps set the attitude of the party. For example, if she is available to answer questions and is nurturing while providing structure, the participants will tend to feel comfortable and also be supportive of each other.

At the beginning of the trip, the leader needs to offer a great deal of structure. People new to the wilderness cannot accept nurturing or develop trust until they know where they are going to sleep. When people arrive at a party, they need to be greeted, told what is expected of them, and where to go to get in on the action. To most people it is important that a trip be organized. Especially in the beginning, people want details about safety, meals, and how general trip logistics are to be organized and taken care of. The greater the perceived risk or challenge, the more structure people say they want. Novices especially desire structure. It increases their trust in the leader and enables them to be more comfortable trying new activities.

A wilderness trip involves a great deal of task focus especially in the beginning: packing gear, traveling to a destination, setting up initial campsites. Many of the early connections between trip participants are made at this task level. When people can channel their nervous energy into tasks, tension is eased, fears subside, and some people find it easier to talk as they work together. Having adequate structure at the beginning of a trip facilitates people starting to form relationships by giving them access to the group and each other. The leader will need to be directive and dispense information that participants need to be safe.

### **Providing a sense of belonging**

A leader helps create a positive atmosphere for relationships to develop by creating a trip setting that feels emotionally, spiritually, and physically safe. In a supportive and nurturing trip environment, participants will often respond by feeling good and having fun which leads to:

- taking the initiative to try new activities and skills,
- reaching out to others,
- cooperating as individuals to accomplish group tasks and goals, and
- allowing themselves to recognize and fulfill their wants and goals.

A leader can encourage and discourage norms. Some norms are conducive to healthy relationships: It's O.K. to ask for help; everyone is welcome; or individuals can speak up when tired or hungry. Leaders can promote norms that help people feel safe. For example, people

may learn to watch out for each other or be sure that everyone gets served the first helping of a meal before people have seconds. These norms also help people feel included. Other norms tend to alienate people: sarcastic teasing; ethnic, racial or homophobic jokes; or pushing well beyond one's limits. Leaders need to be sensitive to how they use humor. Many of us have our favorite groups about which to joke. For example, some of us may joke about lawyers, some of us may joke about doctors, and others about ethnic groups. Any joke that the leader shares or that is shared by a guest that the leader finds amusing, has the potential to be interpreted by other participants as a warning that they may or may not be included. Even though no one in the group may be a member of the group joked about, by modeling that people *are* the butt of the jokes, the leader creates an unsafe atmosphere.

Feeling accepted and feeling a sense of belonging are important ingredients to being present and therefore to having fun. When participants do not feel safe, often levels of performance go down and the safety of the trip can be compromised. Therefore, the leader setting a tone for open communication and rapport, which helps develop support systems and group cohesiveness is important for building the fun, party model.

Being accepted for who they are for many people means feeling trusted and respected and having their differences acknowledged and affirmed. It also means feeling safe to state feelings. It takes time to develop trust and respect, which are necessary for healthy relationships. Because in outdoor situations people tend, as soon as the experience begins, to establish connections with each other, relationships can be based on dependency rather than on trust and respect. If relationships are based on dependency, for example, if a participant establishes a relationship to ensure that she will have food, shelter, and protection and that she will be liked and not be left behind, this may be at the expense of her emotional or spiritual safety. A participant may feel that she has to not talk about certain things about herself or not show any weakness or perhaps strength in order to be accepted. She may join in ridicule or joking about others in order to be accepted. If she compromises her integrity in order to be accepted, then by definition she can't feel emotionally and spiritually safe.

In my experience, I have found it important to pay attention to how these connections are made. What influences people to connect, and the kind of connections made, influence the trip atmosphere. Healthy connections can add to group cohesiveness, enable people to feel good about themselves, and give them opportunities to grow. Unhealthy connections can divide a group, create unsafe conditions, or cause people to compete for food, shelter, and protection. One of the primary things that unites a group immediately in a wilderness setting is the survival aspect. Some groups seem initially to view this as uniting against a common difficulty (for instance high winds while canoeing, constant rain, or a mountain pass). During the course of the trip, I encourage leaders to try to redefine this as working as harmoniously as possible with the wilderness and not spending energy fighting it.

Setting a trip pace that includes time for leisurely chatting provides the time and space for healthy relationships to form. Many people come on a wilderness trip in a time of personal transition, and often people are expected to make major personal decisions or changes on a

trip. People need relaxed time by themselves and with others to reflect and to process these decisions and changes. People tend to form trusting relationships by sharing personal information so there needs to be relaxed days with time for talking. This may also include special day trips for those who wish to continue a more active pace and choose to connect around an activity. Additionally, connecting around leisure time activities is important in establishing long-term relationships. A trip schedule of always-on-the-move will impede the formation of trusting relationships. A pace that constantly pushes people to their limits can cause resentment. Relationships may be built around these resentments rather than positive aspects of the trip.

Planning a pace that includes time to share and relax is different from offering a trip with no structure. People want to accomplish goals, see new territory, and try new skills. All these expectations are compatible with a trip structure that also accommodates a flexible trip pace.

As the trip progresses, the leader is often less directive about tasks. In accordance with the trip goal, she begins teaching more technical skills to the group, to sub-groups, and to individuals. The leader continues to be friendly with participants, checking in personally with each in order to stay current with them.

### **Know the population**

The leader may need to emphasize various features of this model depending on the special population involved. The leader needs to be familiar with behaviors and attitudes of special populations she works with. This will help her more accurately interpret the meaning of their behaviors. For example, people of different class backgrounds may have different ways of expressing anger and joy. When working with a population with food issues leaders need to know that the participants may need to believe that there is plenty of food and that food will not be used as a reward or punishment.

When working with a special population leaders need to be aware of particular situations that present challenges and special risk to members of that population. For example, when working with survivors of sexual abuse, it is important to realize that buzzing insects, pelting rain and lightning, can bring up very strong feelings of discomfort and of being invaded. A responsive and aware hostess can help participants through some stressful moments. It is important for members of special populations that come from abusive backgrounds to learn to experience patient and understanding leaders. Often for these populations, violence, harsh words and explosive behavior have been used as motivators. By the leaders modeling patience and understanding even when going through power struggles with participants they help these participants learn respect, patience, and understanding. The participants then can use these ingredients with their children and people they work with rather than falling back on learned behaviors of using abuse, violence, and explosive verbal behavior.

### **Even parties have a goal**

While fun is the key ingredient for motivation and for a successful trip it is not the focus of the trip. The goal established by the program staff or the leader needs to be kept in mind throughout. It is important to have and state a clear trip goal at the beginning of the trip. For example the goal of a dinner party may be to have hors d'oeuvres, a main dish, and desert. If the hostess focuses on having fun and people are having a great time eating hors d'oeuvres and chatting, and she forgets to serve dinner then the dinner party will not be a success. Likewise, if the goal of a trip is to bike from Arthurs Pass to Queenstown and the participants are having so much fun at Fox Glacier that the leader forgets to keep biking, the trip goal will not be met, and the success of the trip is compromised. Another trip goal could be to canoe safely for seven days learning the basic canoe and camping skills. In addition to the common goal, individuals have the opportunity to set and accomplish personal goals such as learning to fish or make a pineapple upside down cake. This also gives the group positive projects around which to have fun.

### **The opportunities of working with homogeneous groups**

"Special population" is often used in our field as a term to refer to groups with a homogeneous element. I specifically refer to these groups as having *homogeneous elements*, rather than being *homogeneous groups* because it is too easy to forget the amount of variety and diversity among the participants in special population groups.

There are special opportunities for participants in groups that have homogeneous elements. Most participants in special population groups say that emotional sharing is easier and that "It feels good to be with people that have enough in common that we don't have to explain everything." This is of great value especially when there is lots of new potentially stressful information to deal with. Knowing that within the group people have some base line of similarity can contribute greatly to the feeling of emotional safety.

People often see the homogeneous elements as a weakness. For example, "I am hindered having to go through life as a woman" or "I am hindered having to go through life as a physically challenged person." However, after successfully facing challenges together as part of a homogeneous group participants can see the weakness as a strength or can get rid of self-imposed limitations.

In all-women experiences, many women discover how enjoyable and powerful it feels to be part of an all-women group. As a result, their attitudes towards women and towards themselves change. In an emotionally safe atmosphere born of group support, participants gain confidence, competence, and strength as well as new options. They discover they can accomplish and enjoy unfamiliar activities and tasks and also think in wholly new ways. Women discover their own power or expand their self-images. Women often go past self- and society-imposed ideas of what is possible, both as individuals and as women. This results in higher self-esteem and more self-reliance, enabling women to return home more actively involved as responsible community members, family members, or relationship partners.

## **How to keep the party from dragging**

Leaders are instrumental in keeping the group process in motion. This includes encouraging women to be open about their fears, by leaders being accessible and human, rather than perfect, never scared, tired, or hungry. If I am especially bothered by the bugs one day or if I am especially tired, I make a point of saying it. A leader's attitude about herself and her own self-esteem are important when she facilitates group process. Since we help people set goals, it behooves us to be clear with ourselves about what our goals are. Appropriate personal boundaries help one's guiding be non-intrusive. Appropriate leader boundaries help the participants focus on their trip, their goals, and their relationships with each other. It can be easy for the leader to slip into being the center of attention. Since we know what to do, and often are more relaxed than the participants, we can easily be the most vocal or the most humorous. If a group revolves around the leader, relationships among members are inhibited. The leader can also be the center of attention by being absent. People can bond unhealthily around their fear of being alone or resentment of the leader's absence.

## **Summary**

Having fun is a key to a successful outdoor experience. The leader creates the stage for this in addition to ensuring that all decisions and endeavors are in her best judgment, safe. In order for people to have fun they need to feel like they belong and feel safe. When people feel like they belong they are more likely to feel confident and have a "can do" attitude. Attitude feeds into the experience being both successful and fun. Using the party concept, it will follow that people will have successful and perhaps life changing adventures.

The leader sets the platform so people have the opportunity to feel emotionally, spiritually, and physically safe. The leader helps set a tone of enjoyment and light heartedness as well as inclusivity. In a supportive environment, people more easily choose to challenge themselves and take risks. People take their accomplishments with them in increased self-esteem and pride, often realizing that this trip need not be an isolated event in their lives. In summary, fun is a key motivator for people to be involved, learn, and accept challenges.