

## **Administrative aspects of Top Rope Site Management**

The Professional Climbing Instructors Association Base Managed Climbing Instructor Course (BMCI) seeks to transmit professional expectations in specific areas of focus relevant to operating or being a staff member of programs that conduct top rope based climbing activities. The course focuses on the technical aspects however there are expectations in other areas of operation as well. The administrative aspect of a program is an area that we cover only briefly during the course. It is our hope that this handout supplements that coverage.

This essay aims to transmit an outline of current professional administrative practices of a quality top rope climbing program and provide resources for further study. It is intended for those new to the field – if you're out there running a program you probably know more than you wish you did about program administration!

When evaluating a program's administrative practices the question being asked is "does the program appropriately do what it says it does?" This is a somewhat vague and general question. Part of the definition of "appropriate" is "suitable" and that is how the industry tends to define it in this context.

Parts of the larger administrative puzzle are:

- Does the program have legal access in its program areas?
- Are business and operating plan adequate?
- Are technical procedures in synch with industry minimums?
- Program impacts – LNT, etc
- Is an appropriate standard of care given to program participants?
- Is there an appropriate risk management structure in place?
- Is a quality assurance program in place? (for clients, staff, insurance and permit administrators?)
- Program philosophy, goals, and objectives – are they in synch?
- Staffing: qualifications, documentation, policies
- Transportation

*"Programs and practitioners are all judged, ultimately, by a jury of peers, whether it is through word-of-mouth, accreditation, or, in the worst case, litigation."* Michael Gass, Ph.D.

### **Access land designation and permission to operate**

There are essentially three categories of land designation in the US: Publicly owned federal land, other publicly owned (state, county, city) and private. These can be further subdivided: Federal Land is managed by a variety of agencies including the National Park Service, Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management. The designation is less important than the fact that permission to use the land, whatever its designation, is a professional expectation of those who desire to provide any sort of service on those lands - regardless of presence or absence of profit motive. Church groups, other non profits and college outdoor programs are generally not exempt from

this requirement. State and Federal land managers have a formal permitting process, private land varies from simply asking a land owner to a more formal permit process.

### **The permit process**

In the case of private land there may or may not be a permit process and much of the following won't apply. For city, county, state and Federal land the first step is to determine which agency manages the land and who is the specific person who is in charge of managing commercial or "special" use access there, and what is their title. Different agencies have different names for the position: on a National Forest it is probably the Recreation Officer; on a National Park it may be the Special Uses Officer or "person in charge of Special Uses. Generally you can ask for the person in charge of issuing commercial use permits.

If at all possible arrange a face to face meeting, introduce yourself and start establishing a rapport. Keep in mind that this person probably handles many requests for a wide variety of commercial use access and that they are probably part of an overworked, understaffed, and under-budgeted department. They are facing increasing demands for all types of access. You are probably grouped in the same category as a film company desiring to produce a commercial on public land. Anything you can do to help the administrator with their job will be appreciated and will help make the permitting process as painless as possible for all concerned. Some questions you might ask them so that when you finally turn in an application it is complete:

- Do they have commercial access for you proposed type of use available or are there restrictions?
- What are their insurance requirements?
- You will be providing an operating plan, what details are they most interested in? Trip outlines? Proposed sites to be used? Do they have a sample outline that best suits their needs?
- Are there issues or special concerns regarding your proposed use that you may not be aware of?

- Allow at least six months and preferably much more lead time for the process.
- Be prepared to take "no" for an answer and have an alternative in mind.

### **Special situations:**

We live in a time of increasing pressures on public land coupled with decreasing budgets and staffing on those lands. In some places this has led to a state of affairs where the land manager simply cannot handle requests for additional use regardless of type, duration, or our perception that it has no impact. This is simply a fact of life and until the budget situation improves at the national level it is doubtful that this will change.

Wilderness is another "complication" for the would-be commercial user. Wilderness designation is, in a sense, our culture's highest zoning law, at least in the sense that it is the most restrictive of what can be done on land so designated. Wilderness lands are managed for a variety of purposes and human recreation is just one of these. In many places Wilderness designation is not a serious deterrent to commercial use; other places are much more restrictive or even ban commercial use completely. Some complications of Wilderness designation may include party size limits, season of use limits, surcharges, and a professional obligation to have a group that is much more savvy in its Leave No Trace practices. Those operating commercially in Wilderness have a special responsibility to understand the implications of Wilderness designation and to be

able to explain the concept and value of Wilderness to their clientele. For more information on Wilderness see: <http://www.wilderness.net/>.

## **Insurance**

Needless to say, possessing appropriate insurance is both a professional obligation as well as a requirement of any land manager I know of. Minimum requirements vary from land manager to land manager and currently range from several hundred thousand dollars to millions per occurrence. As I write this there are two companies in the entire country that are willing to write insurance policies for “mountain climbing”. This is a cyclical market but since I’ve been involved in outdoor instruction it has always been a tight market. Schools and camps seem to have more insurance options than companies who specialize in “mountain climbing”.

## ***Business and Operating plan***

Both the prospective insurance company and the land management agency will ask for an operating plan. Think of this as a document that succinctly but completely describes what it is you propose to do, how you propose to do it, and why you are qualified to do it. These qualifications should include technical as well as financial capabilities. A complete operating plan could also have an employee manual included.

## ***Technical Procedures***

Minimum technical competencies should be defined and how staff accomplish these spelled out. The AMGA accreditation guidelines are a good example of technical competency expectations by discipline.

## ***Program impacts and Leave No Trace***

Part of the operating plan should be a Leave No Trace plan. This should include mention of how sites are selected for use, environmental concerns to be addressed at program sites, mention of appropriate/intended group sizes, how your impact on other groups will be managed, staff/participant LNT briefing samples, vegetation/soil compaction/animal/bird etc. issues, anchor and cliff maintenance and impact of it. An evolving trend is for site leaders to have taken at least the two day LNT trainer course; many programs now have a certified LNT “master”, a graduate of a six day training course on staff. An overall plan could be made for the program as a whole with a site specific LNT plan which uses the 7 LNT principles as a matrix.

## ***Standard of care***

Does the program provide an acceptable standard of care to its clientele?

This is a laundry list including (but not limited to): Clients are accurately informed of the risks involved from first contact with your program, through the sign up process and at each new activity during the program. Marketing materials accurately portray the risks involved and the goals of the program. An acceptable level of physical and emotional safety is provided while the participants are in your care. Client goals and program goals are in synch – the program is providing what the clients expect, and to provide a positive experience is at a minimum one of the program goals. Clients are as comfortable as is reasonable to expect (A comfortable client is more capable of learning and having a positive experience ((and tipping!))). Adequate pre planning is occurring at both the program and instructor levels. “To fail to plan is to plan to fail.” Staff climbing skills are adequately superior to client skills. Course content is accurate, up to

date, and relevant. Condition of program and instructor equipment, clothing, and attitude is appropriate and professional. Staff has appropriate teaching/presenting skills; good “people” skills. Adjunct trainings are required/provided (medical training, ongoing education, conferences, etc).

*Special staff training must be provided when the client groups include populations with special needs (eg: blind, deaf, youth at risk, etc).*

## **Risk Management**

Risk Management (RM) is a very broad topic! It is present at every level of a program, from the top administrator to the individual instructor and participant. The essence of risk management is to prevent fatal accidents, serious injuries and illness, and loss or damage of property. Parts of risk management include Avoidance (training, planning) and Response (emergency plan, training, contingency equipment, follow-up). Though they can't be perfectly divided into these categories I tend to divide RM into the administrative aspect, the individual instructor aspect, and the participant; each has a role. At a program level a RM plan should be in place for the entire operation, with specifics for each program and area of operation. This would include emergency plans as well what is expected of staff as far as training levels go. At the staff level training, experience and judgment are important parts of RM. The individual participant plays an important role in many ways. The risks inherent in outdoor activities cannot be entirely removed without compromising the activities themselves. None of our activities can be made “safe” and participants must take responsibility for their own actions even while on one of our programs.

Medical and technical prerequisites from clients are an important part of RM; a program must have written policies for both and a system that screens prospective clients prior to a trip.

Finally, a program should have a system in place to learn from its “incidents”, which are generally defined as “an event where there was opportunity for significant injury, death, or property damage but none occurred”, and its accidents. We might call these incidents “a close call” or a “near miss”. The next step up from an incident in severity is an accident. Programs need to document both and have in place a system for learning from them.

## **Quality assurance**

A feedback system needs to be in place where program participants have an opportunity to comment on their experience and for the program to improve. It's important to know what the program is doing right and even more so to know where there's room for improvement. Without feedback the program is in a vacuum and may not improve or may improve much more slowly than it otherwise would. The feedback process may range from instructor and management interviews with participants, formal trip evaluation forms, and many other methods.

## **Program philosophy**

A program should have a defined objective and/or philosophy and this should be accurately portrayed in marketing materials as well as in program delivery.

## **Staffing**

Distinct staff levels are set and requirements and limitations of each are clear. Limitations would include terrain restrictions eg: assistant instructors are not allowed to lead climb (note that the

BMCI and TMCi Courses assumes no leading is required to obtain anchors. Lead climbing is outside the context of this course). Staff files are kept up to date. A system is in place to discover and inform staff of their professional development needs. Staff policies are clear, written, and followed.

### ***Transportation***

If the program transports participants it must have written policies that are in accordance with government and insurance provider regulations.

## **Sample Operating Plan Outline**

**Program mission, objectives and philosophy**

**Summary of operations**

**Program information**

Trip outlines with itineraries and maps

**Risk Management**

Risk management plan

Pre, during, and post trip procedures

Emergency medical and evacuation procedures

Emergency response kits

**Environmental Impact Leave No Trace plan**

**Staff policies**

Staff requirements and qualifications

Employee handbook w/ policies and procedures

Pay Scales, training budget

Personnel: Current Employee and guide roster

**Technical Operation Procedures:**

**Summary of Financial aspects**

Business Plan

Financial data

See also:

**PCIA.US**

Accreditation guidelines and other resources.

***Association for Experiential Education (AEE)***

<http://www.aee2.org/skin1/pages/US/accreditation.htm>

<http://www.aee2.org>

***Administrative Practices of Accredited Adventure Programs,***

AEE, Michael Gass, Ph.D. (editor), 1998

***American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA)  
accreditation guidelines***

AMGA.com

Also, there are some other handouts which cover Risk Management in the PCIA participant manual