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Addressing Burnout in Outdoor Education

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Addressing Burnout in Outdoor Education

Abstract

The role of instructors in the field of outdoor education is crucial, and those who aspire to spend their life teaching and helping others experience growth are incredibly drawn to this line of work. According to Two Factor Theory, this industry is rich in growth factors, hence the strong allure, but severely lacks in hygiene factors, causing a high rate of burnout in the industry. For the betterment of both the instructor experience and the industry itself, an emphasis must be placed on providing more of those hygiene factors in order to retain experienced and enthusiastic outdoor educators.

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Comments

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The role of instructors in the field of outdoor education is crucial, and those who aspire to spend their life teaching and helping others experience growth are incredibly drawn to this line of work. According to Two Factor Theory, this industry is rich in growth factors, hence the strong allure, but severely lacks in hygiene factors, causing a high rate of burnout in the industry. For the betterment of both the instructor experience and the industry itself, an emphasis must be placed on providing more of those hygiene factors in order to retain experienced and enthusiastic outdoor educators.

Addressing Burnout in Outdoor Education

Outdoor education is an industry dedicated to using nature as a medium through which students get the opportunity to gain skills, experience different perspectives, and strengthen values. While these objectives can be accomplished in other contexts, the outdoor environment allows people to have distance from everyday life and focus more on themselves and the people around them, forces more thoughtfulness and intentionality in decision-making as required by unpredictable outdoor conditions and hazards, and encourages relationships and trust to be built between other members of an outdoor trip. This makes the outdoors an ideal classroom for experiential learning and effective translations of skills back to society at the conclusion of the trip.

But as most people do not have the skills, knowledge, or experience required to be comfortable enough in the wilderness to engage with each other and get the take-aways they want, outdoor instructors and guides are one of the most critical pieces in the outdoor education industry. They essentially serve two roles: to ensure the safety and comfort of their students and to guide their learning process so that students can get the most out of an experience. This second role is important, as an instructor's ability to facilitate conversation and growth is what differentiates an experience in outdoor education from a casual weekend hike with friends, defining the entire purpose of the industry.

Background

Seeing as instructors are a pivotal aspect of the industry, one would expect that there is enough infrastructure to support their untraditional work. This is not the case. There are many inherent aspects of 'the instructor life' that can lead to dissatisfaction and strain. When leading a trip, instructors are required to be 'on' for 24 hours a day, without the relief of weekends or the 5

o'clock bell. They may work course that last for a month at a time and accumulate over 20 weeks in the field each year. Although this separation from society can also be a draw, it still makes it difficult to maintain relationships with family and friends (Barronian & Spaulding, 2017). These inherent drawbacks are exacerbated by low pay, especially when compared to the qualifications and experience required, and low job security (Heller, 2017).

The two largest and most well-recognized and respected organization in the outdoor education industry are the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and Outward Bound. Their instructors are top notch but can only expect to make as little as \$1,000 to \$3,000 for running a month-long course (“National Outdoor Leadership School Reviews,” n.d.; “Outward Bound Reviews,” n.d.). This number is slightly off-set because, during that month, the instructor can theoretically have no living expenses as food is obviously provided and there is no need for rent, gasoline, groceries, etc. This off-the-grid kind of lifestyle is common for instructors that are younger, but as they get older and settle down it becomes more impractical and having a home to return to after leaving the field might be something that takes a higher priority (as opposed to just bumming at the local climbing site or living out of a van) (Outdoor Research, 2014; Field, Lauzon, & Meldrum, 2015).

To make matters worse, there is low security surrounding this pay. Especially when an instructor is first starting off, they might only get contracted to work one course per year (Barronian & Spaulding, 2017). This leaves the instructor with eleven months a year to find some other way to support themselves until their experience allows them to start working a greater number of courses. Some instructors for NOLS or Outward Bound will work for other, more local outdoor education organizations, where pay and security don't necessarily improve.

This uncertainty is so common in the industry that it is seen as an essential part of the lifestyle, inseparable from the experience of being an outdoor educator.

I ironically sit here writing this paper in between taking breaks to research avalanche training courses that I can take this summer to make myself a better candidate to be hired as a NOLS instructor after graduation. I can attest that hidden amongst the drawbacks are motivations to work in this industry that no other job in the world can attempt to replicate, and I am backed up by the numerous applicants that are turned away after vying for a relatively small number of jobs. The issue surrounding the industry's workforce is not attracting new workers but retaining experienced ones. The cost and time required to train new instructors is high, and instructors may take years to fully develop into someone who is qualified enough to be a head instructor and start to share their knowledge to their younger counterparts. The motives that draw people to this industry are strong but, over time, are overcome by the difficulties of maintaining the 'instructor lifestyle'.

Outdoor Education Motivation in the Theoretical Context

Understanding this duality of factors affecting one's attraction to work in the industry is the first step in improving it. It may seem that measuring satisfaction is just a matter of subtracting the negatives from the positives and getting one net result. But the outdoor industry is a perfect exemplification of the simultaneous presence of positives and negatives without a necessary combined measurement. The separate effects of these pros and cons can result in a great deal of stress within an individual. In this instance, an instructor desires to work in the industry because it is the only thing that can satisfy their needs and objectives, but the result is an unsustainable personal and financial burden.

The theory that best explains this phenomenon is Herzberg's Two Factor Theory. This theory explores the simultaneous effects of hygiene and growth factors. Hygiene factors are basic conditions that need to be met, including a basic base of pay, personal comfort and safety, etc. When these factors are unmet, the individual will experience dissatisfaction. Growth factors are things that actually motivate a worker, and include things like professional development and recognition, expertise and competence in a skill set, and accomplishment. Without growth factors, the individual will not necessarily be dissatisfied, but will have no sense of meaning or purpose (Herzberg, Snyderman, & Mausner, 1959).

A job in the outdoor industry will score high on these growth factors, with the added effects of providing growth factors that appeal greatly to a select group of employees that can't be found in other industries. Yet it also falls short on hygiene factors. The duality of satisfaction and dissatisfaction is what leads to the burnout exemplified by outdoor educators (Bakker, Schaufeli, Demerouti, Janssen, Hulst, & Brouwer, 2000).

One theory that partly addresses the relevant issues, specifically on the issue of pay, is Equity Theory. Equity Theory states that when an individual sees a counterpart receiving the same or higher amount of gains with less or the same amount of effort being put in, the individual will become demotivated. This *could* apply to an instructor putting a relentless amount of effort into their job while in the field, comparing themselves to an individual who gets paid dramatically more and gets to punch the clock at 5:00 PM every day and go enjoy time with friends and family. In this model, the instructor would be inclined to decrease the amount of effort they put into their work so that the ratio of inputs to outputs is the same between them and their comparison, necessitating a departure from the outdoor education industry.

However, the flaw in the application of Equity Theory to this industry is that outdoor educators don't have a suitable comparison group. Nine-to-five jobs are so distinct from that of an instructor that comparisons just aren't realistic; inputs and outputs must be measured in ways that are too different to contrast. Operationalization of a salesperson's inputs might be in monthly sales totals, but that of an instructor might be the quality of relationships built with students or the absence of risk management failures during a month-long trip. Unfortunately, this theory isn't very helpful in exploring this particular issue.

Another seemingly applicable theory is Taylor's Scientific Management. This theory states that money motivates workers, and higher performance should accompany higher pay. This is seemingly appropriate, as outdoor educators are not paid much. However, this is less inclusive of the other reasons for burnout in the outdoor education industry, such as job insecurity. In addition, this theory implies that you could pay instructors *drastically* more and expect a linear increase in performance when, in reality, the job of an instructor is too cognitive and cerebral for that effect to come into play.

Proposed Solutions

Addressing the lack of hygiene factors for outdoor educators isn't a simple fix, but there are several simple measures that can be taken to decrease burnout. The most glaring issue is money. While instructors won't be overpaid anytime soon, efforts should be taken to make salaries livable and allow instructors to have basic amenities when they are not working in the field. The NOLS Instructor Association, as an example, is already an advocate for instructors to the NOLS leadership (Cotton, Vollrath, Froggatt, Lengnick-Hall, & Jennings, 1988). Addressing pay and benefits are their primary area of focus, and they have made some progress in this area.

In addition to increasing direct compensation, they also find ways to support instructors via trainings, travel reimbursements, and professional outdoor gear deals (NIA, n.d.).

Since drastically increasing pay is probably not organizationally viable, the industry must also find ways to give instructors more reliable pay, i.e. more job security. Hiring fewer new instructors might allow existing instructors to work more courses per year and be more confident in their employment. This decreases the need for them to continuously find outside work and allows their time off to actually be restful and prepare them for their next course. This would also benefit the organization, as each instructor would get field experience at a faster rate, decreasing the amount of time it takes for an instructor to fully develop.

Another benefit that could help instructors gain hygiene factors is lodging while not working. This idea has actually already begun. In Lander, WY, adjacent to NOLS headquarters is the Noble Hotel, a hostel-like facility for NOLS instructors to stay in-between courses. While very basic, it provides a place to sleep, showers, and other amenities that many instructors might opt out of otherwise to save money. The hotel is famous within NOLS and has earned a stellar reputation. However, NOLS operates trips all over the world, and one hotel in Wyoming is not suitable to support staff in all of these locations. The industry should follow and improve on this model as a way to provide the basic necessities to its employees, especially if the raising of salaries is not immediately realistic.

To evaluate the effectiveness of these solutions, the industry should take a look at its retention of employees, especially that of older, more experienced employees. Though trends may take some amount of time to develop, the goal would be to decrease the number of instructors leaving the industry. For those employees that are leaving the industry despite the addition of these hygiene factors, it is also important to determine *why* they are leaving. There

will inevitably be those who wish to change industry because they no longer enjoy the outdoors, no longer enjoy the teaching and facilitation aspect of being an instructor, or no longer feel they can meet the physical demands of the job. These reasons are not explained by a lack of hygiene factors, and therefore require different solutions to reduce the number of departures from the industry. Reasons for leaving that should decrease with the implementations proposed revolve around the sustainability of the lifestyle and generally have nothing to do with the job itself.

Because the outdoor industry is so unique and offers so many draws for those interested, it can be hard to escape the allure. The old adage of not actually working if you love what you do could not be better exemplified. Perhaps this is why there are so many people so willing to try and make the lifestyle work, only for some of them to find it is unsustainable. Increasing the hygiene factors to complement the high growth factors is crucial for the retention of good instructors, and measures to address the issue would benefit not only those instructors, but the industry as a whole.

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