

# A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW ON USING THE OUTDOORS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: SPECIAL FOCUS ON LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES OUTCOMES

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## Abstract

### Background

Through literature review on leadership we learn that there is no best way to develop leaders that is applicable to all organizational settings. Nevertheless, some recent trends appeared in the field of training such as 360-degree feedback from supervisors, peers and subordinates, off-site training programs and temporary rotational work assignments (London, 2002). Compared to other training approaches, learning through activities such as those offered by outdoor-adventure experiences allows for the introduction of more complex situations, where through experimentation participants learn new managerial skills and transfer these skills into their organizations (Mayer, 2003). The three most common types of this training are wilderness experience, the high-ropes course and low-ropes course (McEvoy, 1997). Hewitt Associates (2005) examined the leadership models of the top 20 companies and found that there is a significant correlation between a company's average return on sales and defined leadership competencies.

### Objectives

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to examine the outdoor-adventure training interventions context, and (b) to study the observed outcomes/effects on leadership development.

### Methods

For the purpose of this study 8 electronic databases were used, including published and 3 unpublished (thesis & dissertations), quantitative and qualitative studies that examine leadership development through outdoor training method. Qualitative assessments and data analysis were

undertaken, taking into account inclusion and exclusion criteria which were defined for that purpose. Only studies relied specifically on leadership development using the outdoors as a training intervention were included, with participants over 18 years old and also studies which presented statistical results on the observed outcomes. Also, the original language was English, published between 2000 and 2011 (April). Lastly, for data analysis the quality assessment and validity tool adapted from Cumming et al. (2008) was used.

### Results

A total of 27 studies met the inclusion criteria. According to Cumming's research quality and validity assessment the quality of the included studies was generally high. Results revealed that the majority 63% of the interventions (n=17) used low and high ropes courses, 22% (n=6) used adventure activities such as trekking expeditions and rock climbing and only 19% (n=5) studies used mixed methods of outdoor activities and classroom training, with a time average of 2-days. The most applied sector was education including students (44%) and academic staff (18%) as participants, following the business sector (33%) and mixed populations (5%). Referring to student sample the majority was consisted of MBA program participants, with admission requirement of minimum 3 years of work experience. The total number of participants was 2.946 with a mean age of 28.7 years old, of whom 67.5% were male and 32.5% female. According to the main outcomes observed the most common, being mentioned by 16 studies, was the competence of teamwork-team performance, task leadership (n=13), problem solving (n=9) communication (n=8), self-awareness- confidence (n=7) and trust development and social support (n=7). Also, these competencies showed to have the highest impact by measuring the significance of the interventional change or by comparing the control and study group differences. Except from that previous main competences, additionally outcomes seemed to have lower impact such as being empowered, planning-time management and achievement development (n=5), as also as well as the utilization of resources and creativity (n=1).

### Conclusion/Application to practice

Considering that human resource is the core value for each organization, this review explored the context of a new training method applied both in education and in business sector, using the outdoors as a mean for professional development. The most often used type of intervention was found to be the rope courses (high and low level) which is considered to be one of the most representing types of activities being used by outdoor management development. The main areas of development were identified as the increase of teamwork, task leadership, problem solving and communication skills. By recognising and developing such leadership competencies there is evidence that an organization can succeed a competitiveness advantage over competitors. Some contextual factors underpinning the increasing need for organizations to respond to growing complexity characterized by increasing levels of competition, stakeholder demands, globalization, legal and regulatory changes. There is an important need more than ever for any organization to adapt to the continuously changing business world, where professional development is considered as a valuable key factor of growth and survival. Finally, with regard to the limitation of the present review, the majority of the study population was consisted of

university students, leading to the necessity for further research oriented in the field of business sector.

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