



Self-Guided Group Organization - Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to offer a template to self-guided groups with respect to pre-trip and on-trip planning. The goal is not to diminish the experience we are all seeking when heading into the mountains, rather it is to have a check and balance system to prepare us as a group (pre-trip) and offer some protocol (during trip) with respect to group organization and function. Much of what is recommended below is considered best practice for guided groups and is in place to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience.

These pages contain a few tips and tricks that will help you to have a safer and more fun group trip to a new backcountry lodge. Going backcountry skiing is a time to have fun and to enjoy the mountains with others. But there are real risks out there, and people sometimes get hurt or killed. Take these pages as a guide to avoid some of the problems that have led to serious accidents in the past. This is not about forecasting avalanches. It is about how you can set yourself and your friends up for a great week.

Pre-Trip

Take a bit of time before the trip to think about it and plan it with your friends.

- Clarify the trip goals and objectives (what the trip is, what it isn't).
- What do we expect of the other people? What do they expect of the trip? I.e. does everyone participate in all chores on a rotational basis, does everyone need to have a minimum AST level of avalanche training etc.
- Equipment list with required (must have) items and optional items.
- The type and quality of first aid kit and rescue contents.
- You need to have some information about everyone in the group: Contact info, emergency contact info, experience level and related experiences.

The trip leader or facilitator should have communication with all participants in advance of the trip to gather the necessary participant information, so all of this is in place before you leave. This would include the emergency contact protocols of the facility the group is using i.e. scheduled calls with the base, emergency contact procedures etc.)

Once the group arrives at the staging community or town, meet everyone, and talk about the trip. This can be in the evening but take it seriously.

- Review the gear list to ensure everyone has the proper equipment, and in good working order.
- It allows members of the group who do not know each other to meet beforehand.
- Allows the leader to review, with the group, the current avalanche bulletin for the area.
- Allows for a review of trip goals and expectations.



- Allows for a double check of food quantity and volume (for self-catered groups).
- Check the regional avalanche bulletin and weather forecast and discuss conditions with the group.

Day 1 at the Backcountry Place

The first day at any backcountry facility is an opportunity for the group to get to know each other in the mountains. It is often tempting to drop one's gear in the lodge and charge out to the slopes to 'get on with the ski holiday'. Although this may achieve individual goals, the group suffers. The following are recommendations for the arrival day at the lodge:

- Check the place out:
- Facility layout and operational procedures (including emergency procedures).
- Communication and emergency communication equipment protocols and procedures.
- Are you able to get daily weather and conditions updates?
- The next 2 to 4 hours (depending on the group) should include a companion rescue (avalanche transceiver) practice. This is the chance to see who is practiced and who needs practice with their avalanche rescue techniques. Everyone should be involved in this with the more experienced participants working with the less experienced ones. **This is important as you are your first resource in ANY backcountry emergency. This should not be downplayed.**
- Start with a full function transceiver test:
- Everyone switches to receive, and you walk away with your transceiver on 'send' to determine the range at which everyone else can 'capture' a signal (i.e. they will raise their hand when they lose your signal).
- You move about 75 – 100 m away with your transceiver on 'search' and have each participant, one at a time, approach you with theirs on 'send' to determine the distance where you can capture their signal (they can then turn off and stand beside you).
- Any anomalies (they lose your signal very early, or you don't pick them up until they are very close) should be inspected and possibly replace the transceiver with a spare correctly functioning unit.
- Everyone should practice looking for a single transceiver as well as two transceivers. Initially these can be shallow burials (about 20 cm) to gain confidence with the 'real' or final practice involving a transceiver buried in a pack at least 1 m deep. This will include transceiver search and pinpointing, efficient probing techniques (i.e., probing in a spiral) and finally proper shoveling technique (i.e. conveyor belt technique).
- Don't forget to include an accident scenario where there may be 3 or more buried transceivers (bury in packs) with the entire group involved in the search and recovery. Important with the scenario is to debrief immediately after it is completed. Give each



person a chance to tell you: What they did well and: What they would do differently next time. You can then summarize the importance of teamwork and organization with respect to a rescue operation emphasizing again that the group is its first resource.

- If some people need more practice, you can recommend they continue practicing that day, or in the evening with you or another experienced participant.

Type and condition of transceiver, probe and shovel:

TRANSCIVER

Often the question comes up as to which is the 'best' transceiver out there. A sound answer would be 'the one you are practiced and are confident with'. The point being, buying new technology does not always buy success. It takes practice. Yes, the modern digital transceivers have improved to where one can move quickly to the pinpoint. In a mixed group where there are several different models and generations of transceivers, digitals can appear 'confused' if one does not recognize the signs and adjust accordingly. Digital transceivers are becoming more commonplace; however, there are still many competent users of the analogue technology.

Important is if you, as the trip leader, see very old transceivers they should be replaced before you head out in the field as there may be issues with frequency drift. In other words, it may be challenging for them to find you, or you them. Typically, any transceiver that is about 5 yrs. old should be tested by the manufacturer to ensure it is functioning properly.

PROBES

A recommendation is for everyone to have a probe that is 3 m in length. These should all be deployed during the practice session. On occasion, the cable used to connect the probe links has frayed to the point where it has failed and when one tosses the probe to flake out the links, they scatter. A sinking feeling in an emergency for sure!

SHOVEL

There are many good shovels available. Be aware of any metal fatigue or cracking at the neck of the shovel blade. This is typically because of prying with the shovel rather than cutting blocks and scooping. Plastic shovel blades may be less effective in avalanche debris than metal blades. Typically, 'D' handles offer the most versatility for the shoveler. All should be assembled during the practice session to ensure they are in proper working order (i.e. there are no defective pop pins etc.).

First travel, ski day

This may be on the first day after the transceiver orientation and practice. It is a very good idea that on this first day, the entire group travel together to terrain that is appropriate for the group. At most, the group would go to Challenging Terrain (vs. Complex) but this is also with the understanding that the chosen terrain is NOT committing. It is important to recognize this first afternoon is to get a feel for the group member's abilities both in travelling and in skiing. This is also a chance to get a sense of the snowpack and conditions before attempting more committing terrain. In summary:



- Travel as a group on the first day in non-threatening terrain
- Evaluate the abilities of group members
- Evaluate the snow conditions
- Review the regional avalanche bulletin and weather forecast information with everyone to raise awareness of current conditions and to help frame your decision making.
- Use the CAA Avaluator 2 card to guide your decision-making in avalanche terrain on any avalanche slopes which pose a question

Daily Skiing Routine

All of the group may not want to travel together all of the time each day. The following are a few recommendations in the event the group wishes to split up:

- Morning transceivers check for all group members.
- Each group will have an appropriate first aid and rescue kit.
- Minimum group size should be 4. This allows for 'reasonable' rescue resources.
- Determine if the proposed trip is appropriate for the group members involved.
- Whenever possible obtain the regional avalanche bulletin and weather forecast via satellite phone, cell phone, internet, radio network or other means.
- Determine if the proposed trip is appropriate given the current avalanche conditions.
- Each group will have communication abilities (i.e., radio) with the other group(s). If you are at a facility where radios can be charged, leave the radio(s) on for the day. If not, plan at least 3 scheduled calls throughout the day. Communication with other groups is critical in the event of an accident. Waiting until you are 'overdue' could be too late.
- Continue with group communication with respect to conditions and changing conditions. If the conditions change – it snows, it rains, it blows or it warms up – you need to talk about that and be prepared to change your plans.
- Use the CAA Avaluator 2 card to guide your decision-making in avalanche terrain on any avalanche slopes which pose a question. Watch for changes in the conditions in group member energy levels and group member confidence levels (is the terrain too aggressive for any of the group members?).
- Regardless of if you are travelling as a group, or in different groups, take and write down your observations of snow, stability, and weather. Share it with the other group members.
- You may find the conditions are not what you expected and should feel comfortable change your plans to something mellower or turn around. You may want to have a



plan `B` already in place and will want to communicate any change from the original plan to the other group(s) as soon as possible.

- Regular radio check-in(s), sharing of relevant of appropriate information and relaying of current and anticipated location.
- Radio check-in 1 hour before nightfall.

ASSUME THAT THE LOCAL DANGER IS ELEVATED WHEN THERE IS:

- is evidence of recent avalanche activity in the last 48 hours
- recent loading - i.e. 30cm or more new snow HN in the last 48 hours or recent wind
- recent rain or rise in temperature to near zero
- whumpfing or shooting cracks or hollow drum-like sounds
- evidence of a persistent weak layer or deep persistent weak layer
- sudden planar or sudden collapse compression test results in the first 25 taps
- most of block or whole block rutschblock results (in the RB 1 - 5 range)

Disclaimer: This document is intended to provide some basic guidelines to assist non-professional / self-guided groups in following accepted best practices. It is not intended to replace proper instruction, regular practice and sound decision-making in the field. All users are encouraged to consult the regional avalanche forecast and apply the Avaluator 2 card in trip planning and in decision making in the field.

This information is provided with no warranties or guarantees expressed or implied.

Participant Information Form



Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____ Year/month/day

Address: _____

City: _____ Province: _____ Postal Code: _____

Home Phone: _____ Work Phone: _____

Cell: _____ Fax: _____ Email: _____

Health Care# (Province & type): _____

US supplemental health coverage (required for out of country trips): Provide details in advance of trip.

Emergency Contact: _____

Relationship (i.e. father, wife etc.): _____

Address: _____ City: _____

Province: _____ Postal Code: _____

Home Phone: _____ Work Phone: _____

Fax: _____ Email: _____

List any special dietary requirements (i.e., vegetarian, food allergies, etc.)

List any medical conditions (i.e. allergies, contact lenses, prescription drugs, etc.)



TRIP PLAN

(Original to be left with a responsible person and copy to be kept with trip leader.)

Start Date: _____
Intended Return: _____
Purpose of Trip: _____
Starting Point: _____
Finishing Point: _____
Please notify: (Name and Phone #) _____
If we have not returned by: (Date and Time) _____

Transportation to and from Start point

Vehicle left behind: _____
Licence #: _____ Make / Model: _____
Colour: _____ Owner: _____
Dropped off at start point: _____
Name: _____ Phone #: _____
Picked up at end point by: _____
Name: _____ Phone #: _____
Date: _____ Time: _____

Trip

General Area: _____
Specific Area: _____
Route In: _____
Route Out: _____
Map Sheets: _____

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Note: Please include photocopy of map sheet with intended route plan and campsites drawn in.

Equipment

Tents: (colour) _____
Backpacks: (colour) _____
Food: (days per person) _____ Radio: (type & frequency) _____
Signalling device: _____
Personal locator beacon: (PLB #) _____
Cellular Phone: _____



PARTICIPANTS

Number of Participants: _____

Number of Leaders: _____

Person #1 Name: _____ Age: _____

Disabilities: _____

Emergency contact: (Name and Phone) _____

Person #2 Name: _____ Age: _____

Disabilities: _____

Emergency contact: (Name and Phone) _____

Person #3 Name: _____ Age: _____

Disabilities: _____

Emergency contact: (Name and Phone) _____

Person #4 Name: _____ Age: _____

Disabilities: _____

Emergency contact: (Name and Phone) _____

Person #5 Name: _____ Age: _____

Disabilities: _____

Emergency contact: (Name and Phone) _____

Person #6 Name: _____ Age: _____

Disabilities: _____

Emergency contact: (Name and Phone) _____

Person #7 Name: _____ Age: _____

Disabilities: _____

Emergency contact: (Name and Phone) _____

Person #8 Name: _____ Age: _____

Disabilities: _____

Emergency contact: (Name and Phone) _____

Person #9 Name: _____ Age: _____

Disabilities: _____

Emergency contact: (Name and Phone) _____