

Mountain School Tech Tips: Organizing a Group Avalanche Rescue

So, here we are in early winter, with an inherently unstable snowpack that could (literally) avalanche to ground at any time. Prevention, as the old saw goes, is definitely better than cure, but should or your party get caught in an avalanche this year, knowing how to quickly and effectively turn your group into a rescue team is another of those skills that backcountry travelers need to master.

Below is one method (courtesy of Howie Ridge at the December 2008 Winter Leaders workshop) that you can use to organize your travel group into a rescue team.

1. Select a leader.
2. The leader should then, quickly:
 - Determine last seen point.
 - Evaluate risk of further slides.
 - Establish and communicate to team members the safe location and route to reach safe location.
 - Appoint a spotter if sufficient manpower, otherwise leader is spotter.
 - Break the party into subgroups if sufficient manpower. One method is to break the party into groups of two or three. The person with the best search skills does the transceiver search, the other one or two people follow behind with probes and shovels.
 - Divide search area into segments and assign one group of two to three to each segment – if sufficient manpower.
 - Instruct probers to probe likely areas, uphill sides of trees, large piles of debris, etc.
3. All individuals switch beacons to receive, on lowest volume if not an assigned beacon searcher. With new avalanche beacons some transceivers will emit beeping sound that can not be shut off. If this is interfering with the ability of the assigned beacon searcher, the unit should be completely switched off.
4. Leader instruct the spotter (if not leader) to shout REALLY loudly if further avalanche activity is noted, and searchers are instructed to switch to transmit then run to safe zone following proscribed route.
5. Begin appropriate search techniques, beacons searchers with beacons, probers and shovelers looking for signs of abandoned equipment, boots, etc. and probing likely areas.
6. Once signal is pinpointed, probe using normal spiral method. When you get a strike, leave the probe insitu.
7. Begin digging using the V conveyor belt method (see December 2008 KMC newsletter).
8. When you reach the victim, follow ABC's of first aid.
9. Do not eat, spit, urinate or in any other way contaminate debris field in case rescue dogs need to be called in.