

Mountain School Tech Tips: Keeping it Together: Some Tips for Group Management

Investigations of recreational avalanche accidents have shown that group management – or lack thereof – is often a contributing cause in the occurrence of accidents. Group management is neither complicated nor complex, but it does require the cooperation of the entire group, and, ideally, is the responsibility of everyone in the group. The most important part of group management is communication. At the outset of your tour, get together and talk about the plan for the day, the potential problem areas (such as avalanche slopes) that you may encounter, and how you will collectively manage your group throughout the upcoming tour.

Some useful group management strategies include:

- Have a tail gunner - one member of your group who brings up the rear. Ideally, this should be someone with a reasonable level of experience, and you might consider equipping this person with an FRS radio, a repair kit and a first aid kit.
- Set frequent regroup locations. Most trips can easily be divided into legs that make some kind of rational sense, such as the first trail junction, the pass at the head of the valley, the end of the logging road, etc. Make sure everyone knows where the next regroup location is and that they need to stop there and wait for the entire group. Regroup locations should be frequent, say every 15 to 30 minutes of travel time. Regrouping once every four hours, isn't a group management strategy, it's a disaster plan. Choose safe locations away from avalanche slopes, terrain traps, and overhead hazards for regrouping.
- Make it a policy to keep the person immediately behind you in sight. If your immediate follower on the trail is lagging, slow your pace to keep them in sight. If everyone in the group periodically checks to make sure they can see the person behind them, it is impossible for the group to get separated.
- When skiing downhill through the trees, use the buddy system. Each person should have a buddy to ski with and is responsible for keeping their buddy in sight at all times. Don't forget to set a regroup location for getting the entire group back together at the end of the run. This might be the bottom of the run for short runs; for longer runs, try and find some obvious regroup location part way down. Perhaps there's an open area, a transition to logged forest, or a short flat spot or bench that can be used as a terrain marker for regrouping. If there are no obvious regroup locations on the way down, regroup every one to two hundred vertical metres or 10 to 20 turns.
- If the terrain and snowpack conditions warrant one at a time travel, make sure everyone in the group is in agreement on which slopes you will cross/ski one at a time, what the spacing between skiers should be, and where the group can regroup safely. Post a look-out to watch each person cross/descend the slope, so that you have a "last seen point" in case of avalanche. Most importantly, don't abandon the last person to ski down or across a slope. It's disturbing, to say the least, if you are the last person in your group to cross/descend a slope to get to the other side and find that

everyone else has left.

- If there are particular hazards on the route, for example, terrain traps, cliff bands, or thin, rocky areas, that skiers should avoid when descending, ascending or crossing a slope, make sure everyone knows where those areas are and what options exist to avoid them.

Whatever strategy(s) you choose, make sure everyone in the group has heard, understands and agrees with the plan.