

LESSONS FROM THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

Hiking in the wilderness provides key insights into how you can improve communication, productivity and leadership skills.

BY JOSEF MARTENS

THE FIRST TIME I WAS ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL, I KEPT spotting a man that made me a little uncomfortable. He looked pretty rough, with an ungroomed beard and messy hair, as he hiked on the other side of the stream I was following.

When we eventually met up on a bridge, I started to walk quickly by him. He might have sensed my aversion, because he stepped out of the way to let me pass. But our eyes locked, and there was something in his expression that startled me. I can only describe it as an enormous presence and feeling of peace.

We started talking. He told me about how his life took unexpected turns when he left military service. That's when he first hiked the Appalachian Trail. At the time, his total assets dwindled to \$20, but he managed to find work along the trail and earned \$1,200 in four months. Eventually, he got everything he ever wanted. Now, many years later, he was on the trail again.

What came through in the conversation was his ability to be fully present in each current moment of his life. He was able to listen – to really listen. And this gave a lot of power to his being and to his words.





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This first experience hiking the Appalachian Trail inspired me to explore it section by section. It's shaped many of my weekends over the last three years. And it led to a series of revelations about how the lessons one learns, experiencing all that wild beauty, can also be applied to our work lives – helping us to enhance our careers and leadership skills.

PARTNERING & PRESENCE

My encounter with that rugged man holds a couple of ingredients for innovation: being able to partner with others and being fully present.

Pay attention to those you tend to avoid. Then, find at least one person to give another chance and see where it takes you. When you collaborate, are you truly pursuing joint goals – or are you just willing to be part of a team as long as your goals are met?

WINNING OTHERS OVER

ON THE TRAIL, people that I encounter tend to fall in two categories: the ones going for a hike and the ones who are on the hike.

Those going for a hike bring their “regular thoughts,” with all their worries, concerns and limitations. As they move along, their conversations mimic what you would hear at the office, coffee shop or sports club. They are still in their ordinary world.

Those who are on the hike, however, have attained a deep sense of peace and presence. They are fully in the moment and no longer in their office or caught up in other distractions. Many of them are so-called through hikers, who hike the entire Appalachian Trail in one season.

They are in an extraordinary world that isn't shaped by the outside contexts or circumstances – in fact, the world has become their creation.

Here's what I noticed about these groups: the second group is much quieter. Its members are better listeners, calmer and don't make the conversation about them. They are able to be fully present with other people.

In comparison, people in the first group may ask questions, yet frequently they are imparting advice or what they think they know.

Folks from the second group ask real questions. They don't need to show their expertise. They ask out of curiosity and because they want to learn something about you or about what you've experienced.

They don't judge your answer or give you the sense that it was the wrong answer. Their questions are borne out of genuine interest in the other person – without any agenda. The focus is on the other person and not on them.

The result: it's much easier to listen to them, be with them and follow them. Meeting them is a pleasure and a gift. Like Khalil Gibran writes in his poem *On Children*: “You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.”

Even though it may take the full hike to fully achieve their state of mind, there are many behaviors and ways of interacting that we can copy from them.

In business settings, many professionals tend to rely on their expertise as their strong suit. More than once, I have observed discussions about who is right or who knows more. The reality is that, very often, this is not the key factor in leading our teams, advancing in our organization or building our businesses.

That's the reason why, when I selected a CPA to handle my returns, I didn't make my choice based on an assessment of the candidates' knowledge of tax regulations. Instead, my focus was on who I could work with the best.

Is it possible to get into the mindset of being on the hike without hiking 2,200 miles? Yes, I've seen it in some people. It requires a full focus on the other person and a mindset that goes beyond win-win to a state where winning no longer matters. Getting there is one of the greatest gifts we can give to our coworkers, friends and family. Be someone who is on the hike.

When you feel the strong urge to speak, defend unpleasant feedback or think that the world hinges on your next words, tell the little voice in your head, “Thank you for sharing – let's first listen a little more.”

TAKING A RISK, OR NOT

When I started planning for the hikes, I wondered what might go wrong. How do I prevent or manage those situations? I read books about troubleshooting and also took a three-day intensive class on wilderness first aid. Many topics regarding injuries, accidents and medical problems were covered.

To my surprise, snake bites weren't discussed at all. I talked to the instructor team about it, and they told me that almost all snake bites occur in the same scenario: “Young man goes on a hike with a young woman. They encounter a snake. Young man wants to show off and take a close-up photo of the snake. Young man ends up in hospital getting treated for snake bite.”

If you don't fall into this scenario, according to the instructors, a snake bite is not a likely problem. Snakes usually slither away. I hadn't had a proper understanding of what was risky and what wasn't. This is so often the case: our intuitive assessment of risk doesn't match the (statistics of) reality.

My sense of risk-taking developed further as I continued to hike and conversed with other people along the trail.

Talking with fellow hikers, you begin to share and hear very personal stuff. I revealed things about myself that I normally wouldn't discuss, and some of the people I encountered related very private stories.

This builds relationships. We often assume that we only start getting personal when the relationship is strong. What I learned is that it's the other way around: the relationship gets strong because we share personal stuff.

This is often overlooked, especially by folks in an expert-driven field. Financial service professionals, for instance, are not known for their risk-taking prowess but rather for their skills in risk avoidance and risk mitigation.

My lesson learned from hiking: get better at becoming more personal. This doesn't mean revealing the deep, dark secrets of our past. It simply means a willingness to step out of our usual habits, share something just a little uncomfortable and pay attention to how the other person reacts.

In most cases, we'll notice that the

other person reciprocates and that it develops the relationship. This is a risk well worth taking.

APPLYING CREATIVITY

When you hike long distances, it becomes clear very quickly that you need to be intentional and smart about what you carry with you.

Here's how it works: you read up about what you might need, do your research into the various options, try some items out on shorter hikes and select which ones you'll take. If you're not an ultra-lightweight packer, you add some personal items that are not on the list of "usual items." (For me, it's always some slices of bacon for the first breakfast.)

There's a really cool thing about backpacks: they limit how much you can take with you.

This makes packing a great way to practice creativity. Often, we think of an item as having just one use. But when we think a bit more, we can use the same item for multiple purposes.

A classic example when hiking is duct tape. It can be used as a first-aid material, to repair or patch something (broken tent pole or torn backpack), to make a fire (duct tape is highly flammable), close food bags, fix a cracked water bottle, create a rope, cover pan handles for heat protection, make loops to attach items to the backpack. The list goes on. It's also very light and easy to carry – instead of taking a regular roll of tape, you can wrap a few feet around a hiking or tent pole for easier carrying.

The takeaway here is to spend some time brainstorming and creating more options. At work, for instance, we often have one clear way to get something done, even though there are other alternatives.

In their book *Decisive*, Dan and Skip Heath discuss how our decision-making gets better when we have multiple options to choose from. Often, we don't create a list of options before we decide. We come up with one way of doing something – usually the obvious way and the "low-hanging fruit." Then we go with it.

Unfortunately, creativity in financial services doesn't have the best ring to it. For example, "creative accounting" is usually considered closer to being illegal than being an expression of a positive skillset.

But there are ways to exercise creativity in areas like organizing the business and workflow, managing teams, conducting meetings or finding new ways to engage clients and business partners.

IMPROV SKILLS

Here's another benefit of the backpack's constrained storage capacity: it shows the limitations of planning. The more time I spend on the trail and the more experiences I have, the more equipment I would like to carry with me. Yet, I can't because the pack is full.

Wanting to take more gear comes from my desire to control the situation and plan for everything. Here's what I learned: planning is great – being good at improvising is even better.

Don't get me wrong, plans are important, and I'm not suggesting that you stop making them. However, the ability to deal with a curveball on the spot is just as important. Maybe spend a little less time on planning and more time on practicing improvisation – being present in the moment and developing trust in yourself and your team's ability to deal with situations instantly.

In the business world, there is much more focus on planning



than improvising: there are plenty of people who hold the title of financial planner. Have you ever met a financial improviser?

How do you get better at improvising? Set up low-stakes situations where you don't know the outcome, where you don't have a fleshed-out plan, then handle them.

THE TRAIL GOES ON

I've been hiking the Appalachian Trail in sections. I don't have the time to do the hike in one stretch. (Although I wonder if I'm shying away from taking the risk and going all-in.) My journey is not complete yet.

There have been times when I thought I had arrived somewhere in my life, and I recognized this as a mindset of being stuck and fixed. My hiking experiences have shown me that I have not yet arrived – my journey is still in progress.

Maybe one day we will meet on our separate journeys. If we do, like the man I met on the trail a few years ago, I hope we will embrace the meeting, be fully present and be willing to enter each other's world.

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