



WHEN IS A LEADER NOT A LEADER?

Alun Richardson imagines a walk where all kinds of things go wrong and poses questions on what the correct course of action should have been for a leader. Pencils and paper at the ready...

"Hill walking, climbing and rambling are activities that can be dangerous and may result in personal injury or death. Participants should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions and involvement." –

Mountaineering Ireland participation statement

As Training Officer for Mountaineering Ireland, one of my roles is to talk to clubs and run workshops supporting leadership on club walks. I have found that fear of being sued is a common thread in discussions, and even though instances of successful litigation are extremely rare, this fear seems to affect the way clubs run.

Leadership within clubs is a subject that evokes many opinions and even some emotion. In this article, I want to challenge your perceptions of what a club leader is, leaders' responsibilities and even whether 'leader' is the correct word.

First, we will examine a club walk with a concentration of events that can, and have, happened all on one walk. Then I will pose some questions raised by the events, for you to think about.

Before the walk

■ Jane, 41 years of age, is a stalwart member of the 'Figment of My Imagination Walking Club' (FMIWC, a member club of Mountaineering Ireland). She has volunteered to organise a club walk of 5-6 hours in the Maumturks during August. She is an experienced walker and has done BOS Mountain Skills 1 & 2 but doesn't hold any national walking leadership awards. She organises the meeting place, advertises it in the newsletter and provides as much information as she can, but does not prepare a written risk assessment for the walk.

■ The weather forecast is for a fine start to the walk, but it may rain a little later. The wind is light SW all day.

■ Jane arrives at the meeting point



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where there are twenty walkers waiting to start the walk. Jane knows some of the walkers. Some of the group look well kitted out in branded gear, but others are not so well kitted out. One walker has a plastic bag for his gear, and another fit young man has trail shoes on, even though the club rules state that they must wear walking boots. Two are not club members but are interested in joining the club, and there is a 17-year-old son of one of the club members who dropped him off an hour ago; the son is a member of the club.

■ Jane informs everyone that she is leading the walk and asks someone to assist her. She informs the guy with the running shoes of the club rules, but he says he has forgotten his boots and is adamant he wants to do the walk. Jane shares the kit from the guy's plastic bag amongst some of the group and allows

him to come along. Jane decides that the 17-year-old can come along on the walk too and doesn't want to argue with the guy in the trek shoes, so he also comes along. The two newcomers join everyone and they set off.

The walk

■ The walk initially follows a well trodden track for an hour, passes a chapel and then turns left to head steeply uphill. The rest of the group are relaxed and most follow along, chatting to each other. Two of the team, however, are much faster and quickly head off in front. After an hour more, the faster two decide they want to go ahead and will find their own way back to their cars. Jane tries to stop them as they are the best navigators in the club, but they are adamant they want to leave the slower group and they go off on their own. Shortly after this,

All photographs by: ALUN RICHARDSON

one member gets a phone call that his mum is ill and sets off down on his own at a fast pace.

■ At one o'clock, the group stops for lunch and the rain starts. The fit young man with trekking shoes announces that he has also forgotten his waterproofs. Jane decides he should go down but he wants to carry on with an extra top and a black plastic bag as a waterproof jacket. Jane reluctantly agrees. They continue on the walk and the rain slows down a bit.

■ After another hour and a half's walking, one of the new members realises he has left his keys and wallet back at the lunch spot when he went to the loo. He is adamant he wants to go back for them, but the mist is coming down. Despite Jane's insisting that he should not go back unaccompanied, he turns and heads off. One of the group decides to go with him, but Jane knows that the person is not a great navigator. Jane continues the walk.

■ About one and a half hours from the end of the walk, someone in the group who is wearing old boots, with poor grip on the sole, slips and injures his ankle. He is pretty cross that he wasn't told the downward section was slippery. He can't put his weight on it but is happy to be helped down and doesn't want to call Mountain Rescue.

The responsibilities of organising the walk start to weigh heavily on Jane's shoulders. After all, she is an amateur walker herself who just wanted to go for a walk in the hills! The two who went back for the keys and wallet arrive back three hours after the group have all gone home! Jane has missed her dinner date that evening and is not happy. She doesn't want to lead another walk ■



The Training Officer's face when he realised the rain had turned his map to mush on his solo jaunt around the Glencoaghan Horseshoe recently. The 'blithely blunder' technique was perfected to get him down safely. It was a chastening experience.



Students on the recent GPS workshop in Connemara, a superb course run by Kevin O'Callaghan.

The questions

Jane is pretty unlucky for all these things to have happened in a single walk, but all these events have actually happened. The questions to consider are below, but remember, there are many correct answers.

- 1 Does being a member of a walking club increase Jane's responsibilities to the participants on the walk?
- 2 Are Jane's responsibilities to the people on the walk greater because she organised or led the walk?
- 3 Does Jane have to be the leader?
- 4 Does Jane or the group have to look after the less experienced members?
- 5 Was she right to let the two non-members come along?
- 6 Should she have allowed the guy with the plastic bag or the trek shoes to go on the walk?
- 7 Who is to blame should somebody slip or should Jane's navigation result in the group becoming lost?
- 8 Are twenty people too many to have in the group?
- 9 Should Jane have done a written risk assessment?
- 10 Should Jane have allowed the under-seventeen to come on the walk?
- 11 Was Jane or the group correct to let the two faster guys go off on their own?
- 12 Should Jane have sent someone down with the guy who was rushing off to see his sick mum?
- 13 Was Jane's course of action with the guy who had forgotten his waterproofs the correct one?
- 14 Should Jane have called the mountain rescue team to help the guy who hurt his ankle?
- 15 Could Jane, or the club, be sued by the guy who slipped?
- 16 Did Jane have to wait for the two guys who came down late?

The answers

To find the answers to these questions and one perspective, go to www.mountaineering.ie/trainingandsafety/viewdetails.asp?ID=36. We will also have these in the next *Irish Mountain Log* ■