THE VOLUNTEER'S DILEMMA: LEADERSHIP ON THE WATER

Why "friends paddling together" is not a legal defense.

BASED ON THE GLENCAR LESSONS

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GOOD INTENTIONS, TRAGIC OUTCOMES

- **The Incident:** In November 2019, a university club traveled to the Upper Caragh River (Ireland). The group was large, with mixed experience levels including total beginners.
- **The Conditions:** Heavy rainfall made the typical Grade 3-4 river high and fast. Overhanging trees and fast water created lethal hazards.
- **The Tragedy:** Despite plans to walk around hard sections, a paddler became trapped underwater and died.
- **The Verdict:** There were no paid instructors and no reckless malice. The critical failure was the decision to get on the water at all.

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THE MYTH OF THE ‘PEER GROUP’

The Trap: Believing that because no one is paid, everyone is equal.

The Reality: If experience levels differ, it is NOT a peer group.

Key Insight: You cannot hide behind the label ‘Peer-Led’ if novices are relying on your judgment for their safety.

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LEADERSHIP IS AN ACTION, NOT A TITLE

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EXPERIENCE CREATES RESPONSIBILITY

- **The Imbalance:** A group is only as strong as its weakest link.
- **The Law of the River:** Strong paddlers do not cancel out beginners.
- **The Rule:** The least experienced person sets the safe limits for the entire day.

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Why They Can’t "Choose"

The Concept: “Challenge by Choice” implies participants decide their own risk.

The Flaw: Beginners lack the reference points to judge risk or consequence. They don’t know what they don’t know.

The Duty: As a leader, you must sometimes remove options rather than offer them.

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CONDITIONS CHANGE CONSEQUENCES

- A Grade 3 river isn't always Grade 3.
- **Multipliers:** High water, cold weather, and limited daylight don't just add difficulty; they increase the consequence of an error.
- **The Truth:** Rescue skills are a last line of defense, not a justification for exposure.

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THE SAFEST MOVE IS THE HARDEST

The most critical safety decision happens in the car park, not the rapid.

Brave Leadership Means:

- Changing plans despite disappointment.
- Walking away when margins are thin.
- Choosing an easier venue.

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REDEFINING ‘GOOD’ LEADERSHIP

The safest clubs aren’t those with the strongest athletes.

- They are the clubs with the strongest decision-making culture.
- **Action:** Praise caution. Support leaders who cancel trips. Normalise saying ‘No’.

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THE VOLUNTEER LEADER'S CODE

Final Rule: If in doubt, choose the conservative option.

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