

WISE ONES – CONVERSATIONS WITH THE PROMINENT MENTORS OF THE U.S. AVALANCHE INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT: Mentorship is often referenced as a crucial part of knowledge exchange and professional development in the avalanche industry. Latosuo et al (2016) surveyed the members of the American Avalanche Association confirming the high value placed on mentorship within avalanche professionals in the US; most successful mentorship relationships were based on professional relevancy, personal connection, and were initiated by the mentor. Johnson et al (2016) looked at the identities and geographical homes for the mentors. While four hundred people were listed as mentors, the top mentors were referred to very frequently. These individuals have impacted a relatively large number of other professionals with their willingness and ability to share their professional expertise. This set of 11 interviews explored the how and the why of mentorship values being passed on between the generations of snow professionals in the US. The project also visualized “Network of Mentorship” following the lineage of mentors/mentees of this study.

.KEYWORDS: Mentorship, Avalanche professionals, Network

1. INTRODUCTION

Mentorship is referenced as a crucial part of knowledge exchange and professional development in the avalanche industry. In mentorship, mentor, a more experienced person, passes on the knowledge and expertise onto a newer or less experienced person, the mentee. Mentoring is often described as a long-term mutually beneficial relationship, different from teaching or coaching.

Latosuo et al (2016) surveyed the members of the American Avalanche Association confirming the high value placed on mentorship within avalanche professionals in the US. While four hundred people were listed as mentors, the top mentors were referred to very frequently. These individuals have impacted a relatively large number of other professionals with their willingness and ability to share their professional expertise. This set of 11 interviews explored the how and the why of mentorship values that are being passed on between the generations of snow professionals in the US.

2. METHODS

Based on the list of most frequently mentioned mentors within the US avalanche industry (Johnson et al 2016), we contacted eight current and retired avalanche professionals about participating in an interview. One individual declined. In addition, we interviewed four individuals that the mentors had identified as mentees. Interviewees clustered in geographical regions of Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and Alaska (Table 1). Interviews were conducted July 13 - 30, 2018, and recorded digitally. Audio recordings were transcribed into text files and analyzed for content by the authors. The methodology was approved by Alaska Pacific University Institutional Review Board for ethical research of human subjects. All the interviewees gave consent to use their actual names in the research report.

Structured interviews covered three main themes in ten questions. Interviewees were given the questions prior to the actual interview via email that included a pre-interview questionnaire. The first theme was the individual's history with mentorship, the second theme was the value of mentorship in professional development, and the final theme was the impact of mentorship on risk management and workplace safety. We also allowed for open conversation on spontaneous content about mentorship during the interviews.

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Mentors					Professional	Since	Mentees							
Art Judson	CO	Ron Perla	CO	Ed LaChapelle	CO	Knox Williams	CO	1970	Nick Logan	CO	Dale Atkins	CO	Scott Toepfer	CO
Binx Sandahl	UT	Ed LaChapelle	UT	Art Mears	AK	Dave Hamre	AK	1971	Henry Munter	AK	Mike Overcast	AK	Ted Steiner	MT
John Montagne	MT	Gene Urie	CA	Knox Williams	CO	Karl Birkeland	MT	1980	Ethan Greene	CO	Ron Simenhois	CO	Doug Chabot	MT
Sandy East	CO	Karl Birkeland	MT	Tom Kimbrough	UT	Ethan Greene	CO	1990	Ian Hoyer	CO	Scott Savage	ID		
Ian McCammon	ID	Jake Hutchinson	UT			Don Sharaf	ID	1993	AJ Linnell	ID	Matt Bohne	AK	Dan Corn	AK
Jon Ueland	MT	Ethan Greene	MT	Karl Birkeland	MT	Scott Savage	ID	1993	Nick Armitage	WY	Ethan Davis	ID	Chris Lundy	ID
Rod Newcomb	WY	Don Sharaf	ID	Janet Kellam	ID	Lynne Wolfe	ID	1997	Jaime Musnicki	ID	Scott Palmer	ID	Robbie Rechord	WY
Tom Kimbrough	UT					Drew Hardesty	UT	1999	Wendy Wagner	UT	Ian Havlick	UT		
Tom Leonard	MT	David Hamre	AK	Janet Kellam	ID	Henry Munter	AK	2004	Mike Welch	AK	Rich Peterson	AK		
David Lovejoy	AZ	Lynne Wolfe	ID	Jerry Roberts	CO	Chris Marshall	ID	2004	Andrew Kiefer	ID	Nils Meyer	ID		
Drew Hardesty	UT	Brett Kobernik	UT	Jake Hutchinson	UT	Wendy Wagner	AK	2008	Ian Havlick	UT				

Table 1: Interviewed avalanche professionals listed in order of their earliest mentorship experience. Left columns list the interviewees' mentors, right columns list the interviewees' mentees.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 *Varied definitions of mentorship*

Despite the generally recognized prevalence of mentorship in the avalanche industry, the definition for mentorship varied among the interviewees. During four of the interviews, we spent time discussing the boundaries between mentorship, coaching, teaching, training, guiding or being a role model. Lack of industry definition for mentorship muddles the views of being a mentor or a mentee. Similarly, majority of workplaces do not have formal mentorship programs, which leaves organically formed mentoring relationships the norm.

3.2 *Formation of mentorship relationship from 1970s to 2010s*

"He was one of my original interns. So yeah, it was kind of an interesting thing. I was asked by one of the professors up at the university [Montana State University] to give a talk to her mountain weather and climate course about avalanches and avalanche forecasting, and I did. And then this 18-year-old kid comes up and goes, "I want to do that. I want to be an avalanche forecaster." And I said, "Well, that's great, 'cause I just started this Avalanche Center, and I need some interns." (Karl Birkeland, National Avalanche Center Director, talking about Ethan Greene, Colorado Avalanche Information Center Director)

The 11 interviewees were a broad cross section of professionals covering many sectors of the industry: backcountry avalanche forecasters, railroad forecaster, ski patrollers, mechanized guides, backcountry guides, academics, avalanche educators and avalanche center direc-

tors. They all shared the nuances of how their mentor and mentee relationships were formed spanning a time frame from 1970s to the present.

In the 2016 survey conducted by Lato-suo et al, mentorship was most often initiated by mentor, while mentees were initiators in a 26% of all professionals surveyed. This was noted an important result, because of the often-used directive "Find a mentor". Through our interview process we delved deeper into this, asking each person about the initiation of their mentor/mentee relationships and whether or not becoming a mentor was a conscious decision. Answers varied across the interviewees. Amongst the interviewees the mentor being the initiator was the case for over half of the mentor/mentee relationships described. Organic or symbiotic formation was reported in several of the relationships. There were two mentor/mentee initiations that were unique. Dave Hamre hired one of his mentors, Art Mears and Don Sharaf's NOLS student Ian McCammon became his mentor.

Workplace structure and being a supervisor was referenced in half of the mentor/mentee interviews as the reason they stepped into mentor role. Many illustrated their experiences with stories of snow safety directors moving through terrain talking about snow to new inquisitive patrollers and snow rangers reaching out to young patrollers and or brand new forecasters to provide guidance and lead heli-guides recognizing potential in young fuelies or aspiring guides.

Many talked about not necessarily consciously choosing to be in the mentorship role but that were so appreciative of their own experiences that they realized the value of being a mentor to the next generation. Mentors spoke of recognizing the intellectual curiosity of the individuals that they were initiating a relationship with, consciously making time to answer questions, seeing passion in someone and deciding to invest in them, wanting to provide them oppor-

tunities, and trying help mentees connect with other people in the community.

You want to be like them if you're the mentee or you're like, "I see something of value in this person," if you're the mentor. You know and it starts as maybe a conversation after class or it starts with you going touring and you're like, "This person is asking really good questions. How can I prompt them to ask even better questions?" (Lynne Wolfe)

3.3 Value of mentorship in professional development

Art Judson was the person that I had met some months before I was hired in 1970, and he became my original mentor, and was quite good in teaching me - someone who didn't know an avalanche from a snowball - what the game was all about, what my role would be, and so got me started. (Knox Williams)

While the avalanche industry has changed dramatically in the last five decades, mentorship as a professional development tool has kept its high value. In the early stages of career, it helps professionals to gain knowledge and skills as well as confidence for making decisions. Majority of the interviewees gave vivid examples how the field time with their mentors had taught them valuable lessons on terrain management, risk mitigation techniques and avalanche mechanics.

Several interviewees shared the view that becoming an avalanche professional requires robust and multifaceted continued education, but there are no clear pathways for that. Mentorship can be a way to gain the necessary competencies. Wendy Wagner stated that without mentorship, she would not have become an avalanche professional despite her graduate degree in the appropriate field of study.

Becoming a professional lineman or an electrician or a plumber you're looking at a 4,000 hour apprenticeship. Throughout that you have formal classes, you have examinations, a lot of on the job training. Then you become a journeyman and with another 4,000 hours of apprenticeship you get to the master process. For better or worse, we're looking at a profession with 13 days of formal training. That's a different model and our profession may be more risky than plumbing. I'd say that mentorship is crucial where

formal training is quite short and finite. (Don Sharaf)

Four interviewees shared that their avalanche mentors also offered broader perspective for human nature and navigating life in general.

[Tom Kimbrough's] mentorship conveyed something about who we are in our communities and what role that we play in them. That our profession is not a game but to be taken very seriously insofar as that the line between joy and death are very closely interwoven within our profession. It was less about the mechanics of snow or less about messaging per se but more about the life and the sort of philosophy of forecasting. (Drew Hardesty)

In the advanced career stages, participating in mentorship helps the experienced professionals stay relevant and informed, even learning new hard skills, but in addition, many shared the motivation to help newer professionals to succeed in their jobs.

This is much a matter of ethics as anything for me. I recognize the fact that there was this person that invested in me, and spent their time to help me along, and I feel that's an obligation within our field, because it's really one of the few ways that you can. There's a lot more information avenues than there used to be, but it still doesn't substitute for working with somebody that has a lot of experience and learning from them. I have an obligation to contribute to others' success in the field. (Dave Hamre)

3.4 Development of professional networks

Yeah it gets harder when you run out of coaches. You want people to bounce ideas off of and when people are always coming to you for the answer then who do you go to? (Don Sharaf)

Key benefit of mentorship relationships is the establishment of direct communication lines between professionals. All the interviewed people appreciated the ability to have people "on speed dial" to go with questions and concerns or just to talk shop. Henry Munter gave an example on how much he values learning from Tom Leonard about legal side of avalanche business, "the dirty underbelly of what we do"; high quality expertise in legal matters is limited to those professionals who have real-life experience in it.

I still will use a lot of folks just as a sounding board because they can pro-

vide me really useful information about whether or not I'm really on the right track or not with different things. (Karl Birkeland)

In the early career phase, interviewees would seek out more experienced people to find answers to particular questions, but often these relationships develop into peer-to-peer support, where the person with questions and the person with answers would fluidly change in the conversation depending on content. Several of the interviewed professionals emphasized the openness for dialog “*whether it be seeing things similarly or having different opinions on things*” as Chris Marshall framed it. Mentorship clearly supports strong collegial collaboration and creates high-functioning professional networks.

Having those kind of career-long connections with other people and with the way that you can share information and just talking to people who live in different climates, snow climates and different operations and have these different perspectives, that's more valuable to me than people who are in the same place doing the same thing that I am. (Scott Savage)

The lot of the hard situations that we find ourselves in, we tend to do better --- if we have a group of people that is thinking about it and discussing it. (Ethan Greene)

We used the interview data to visualize the clustering of interactions between this group of avalanche professionals (Figure 1). Some of the mentorship relationships are anchored in certain geographical region, i.e. Knox Williams in Colorado, but some relationships extend beyond states and regions, i.e. Ethan Greene’s connections with Montana, Utah, Colorado and Idaho. It is worth noting that this project did not illustrate well the big legacy of the early US Forest Service Snow rangers and early snow researchers.

3.5 Impact on risk management and workplace safety

All interviewees agreed that their mentors had influence on their risk management practices, while several did state that they definitely have their own individual risk tolerance as a particular starting point. Chris Marshall discussed how all three of his mentors instilled in him a conservative outlook for the mountain travel; without having their influence, he would have fostered a different attitude as an upcoming ski guide. He shared a gem of a phrase from Lynne Wolfe:

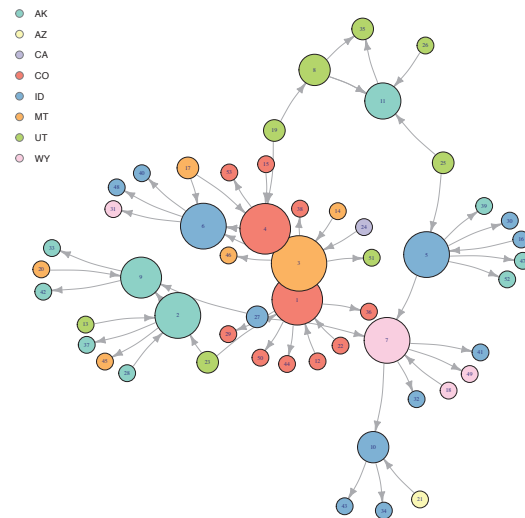


Figure 1: Visualization of the mentorship network described in the interviews. Colors represent geographical locations of professionals. Arrows illustrate the direction of the initial expertise exchange.

“Differentiate between what one wants to do and what one ought to do.”

While the simplest examples of mentor influence included experienced pros demonstrating a safe way to complete a control route at the ski area, the more nuanced cases described surprising close calls in the field. Ethan Greene’s mentors influenced his travel habits that have stuck with him for decades; Wendy Wagner had an early close call with her mentors that still impacts the way she approaches travel. Interviews repeated stories about exposure to practices and intentional conversations about events. Beyond sharing experiences, one of the important job of mentors is giving continued feedback on how to improve practices.

It's really important for people to get to be watched in their job and receive feedback, and, on the other side of that coin, for the people that go out into the field to come home and ask whether they did things right, or if there's a better way to do it. Just sort of sharpen the pencil on if we're actually doing a good job out there or not. (Henry Munter)

Several interviewees brought up the trust between mentor and mentee. David Hamre explained that being a snow safety director, you will

assign several teams out running routes and each one of those routes has to be done right. "So you have to have faith that those people do their job and not carry a bunch of uncertainty about it." Lynne Wolfe approached the trust from a different perspective. When there has been a mistake, we all feel vulnerable, but mentor can provide a safe place to process and learn from the events. Numerous mentors have role modeled the transparency of mistakes and humility.

A huge lesson learned from all my mentors is their forthcoming nature and their humility in being in the field and knowing that they don't know everything. (Wendy Wagner)

[on Jon Ueland] His overriding ideology was, "Okay, let's hang out our dirty laundry for everyone to see" He had that thick skin and was comfortable in his own shoes being able to talk about things like that in front of a group. (Scott Savage)

Many mentorship conversations continue to revolve around the concept of dealing with uncertainty, the pesky characteristic of avalanche field that can cloud even the most confident decisions. Don Sharaf's mentor, Ian McCammon, was among the influential people who transformed the avalanche discourse to include the idea of uncertainty. "Even if you understand where you went wrong previously, it doesn't mean that you're not going to make different mistakes in the future. And it's too complex a situation to be living on the edge of our risk envelope all the time."

4. CONCLUSION

This project documented and visualized an example of the interwoven network of avalanche professionals spanning from 1970 to 2018 across the Western United States. The eleven interviews with prominent avalanche professionals, who have engaged in mentorship as part of their professional development, has helped describe the how and why of mentorship within avalanche industry. The minimal professional training to become avalanche practitioner is balanced out by organic and informal conversations with novices, supervisors, and peers. Mentors help the newer professionals get up to speed with their roles and responsibilities, as has happened at least for five decades. Tapping into experience sharing over regions and generations improves professional's ability to complete their job with improved efficiency and better understandings. Mentees help sustain the curiosity and intellectual engagement in the seasoned

experts. In the end, mentorship facilitates collegial communication and builds high-functioning professional networks.

There aren't enough days in the winter or winters in your career to see it all yourself and figure it out. The volume of decisions we have to make, relative to the amount of feedback that we get, is just incredibly out of whack. I think that being able to get insight from other people that have been doing it for a long time and learn their own lessons is really critical. (Henry Munter)

I guess one of the things I'd say about mentorship is that if there are folks out there that want to be mentored, the best thing to do is to be persistent when they're approaching people they want to mentor them, 'cause everyone's really busy, and they might not respond right away. And also, probably be respectful of the fact that they're busy and sort of be prepared, too. (Karl Birkeland)

Everyone in our greater profession should consider, ask themselves, who have I mentored and who has mentored me, and to think who might I reach out to on both sides of the coin. I think it only further strengthens the fabric of our community, but also is a way of giving back along the arc of your career. (Drew Hardesty)

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