

The Wilderness Training Lab

Claudia, a successful 33-year-old corporate marketing executive, found herself in the mountains preparing to climb a rope ladder attached to a tree. When she reached the top of the ladder, she would fall off backward. It wouldn't be an accident. No, she wasn't suicidal or deranged. She was participating in an executive development program called Wilderness Training Lab.

Back at the corporate office she was known as an independent, smart, and tenacious businesswoman. She quickly moved up the corporate ladder from product research assistant to brand manager. Claudia had a reputation for micromanaging her subordinates and for being a loner. When asked about these issues, Claudia replied, "When I was in college, I had a lot of group projects. At first, I went along with group decisions and trusted others to do a good job. Even though I felt anxious about putting my grade in the hands of someone else, it seemed to be a good way to get along in the group. Those projects received mediocre grades, and I'm only satisfied with being the best. Then I started to take over the leadership of every group I was in. I developed the plan, decided who would do what, determined the timelines, and always took on the most difficult and complex parts myself, all the time making sure the others were doing what they were assigned. From then on, my group projects always got an 'A.' I carried those lessons with me into the workplace and I've had good success here, too. Maybe it rubs some people the wrong way, but it works for me. The only trouble I'm having is keeping up with all my projects. Some of the other brand managers want to work with me on joint projects, but I don't have time. Besides, they probably just want me to do their work for them or steal my ideas. The VP of marketing will be retiring soon and only one of the seven brand managers will get that job. What's in it for me if I collaborate with them? Let each of us sink or swim on our own merits."

A few months ago, the VP of marketing, Sandy Cines, discussed career plans with Claudia. Sandy had always praised and encouraged Claudia's work, but this time he was a little reserved. He suggested, in rather strong terms, that she attend an executive development "wilderness" program. Claudia hesitated because of her workload and upcoming deadlines. Sandy said, "Well, I'll leave the decision up to you. The director of training and I have looked at your strengths and what you'll need for the next level as an executive. Technically you're very strong, but more important at the next level is building good interpersonal relationships. The training director recommended this program for you, but, as I said, I'll leave the decision up to you." Claudia wondered what he thought was wrong with her interpersonal relationships. She had great relationships with customers and outside vendors, and in her personal life. Relationships with her subordinates and peers needed to be different. She needed to be firmer and less flexible with them, did she not? She did not think she had bad relationships with her subordinates or peers. They never complained to her. However, Claudia decided it was pretty clear that Sandy wanted her to attend the wilderness program.

She found a diverse group of men and women executives from all over North America when she arrived for the training. Many confided that their organizations had sent them to "learn how to be more effective in groups." Most of them indicated they were interested and eager but a little nervous about what was expected of them. They soon found out. They were divided into groups of 10 and taken out on the "course."

The first training exercise was climbing the "trust ladder." Doug, the program director, explained that the group members would have to rely on each other quite a bit during the coming week. To demonstrate that the group could be trusted, each person was to climb to the top of the ladder and fall backward into the group, which would catch the person in the proper manner. Doug showed them how. After everyone had completed the exercise, they discussed risk-taking, building and trusting one's support systems, being part of a support system, and communicating

one's needs. Then came more challenging exercises, such as building and using rope bridges to cross a stream, white-water rafting, and—the most physically challenging of all—scaling a four-meter wall. The front of the wall was sheer and smooth. A platform was on the other side, on which two people could stand at about waist level with the top of the wall and from which extended a ladder to the ground.

Everyone had to scale the wall, and no one could stand on the platform until he or she had scaled the wall. It was a timed event, and the groups were in competition with one another. The first thing a group had to do was develop a plan. Strong and tall people were needed to boost the others to a point where they could pull themselves over. Some stood on the platform and helped those who were not strong enough to pull themselves over. It was clear that the first people over also had to be strong. Another problem was the last person over. Everyone, except the last pair, would have “spotters” in case of a fall. Also, the last person could not be boosted to the top. Someone would have to act as a human rope, hanging down from the top so that the last person could climb up the person and over the wall. Therefore, the last person would have to be strong enough to boost the second-to-last person up, but light enough to climb over the human rope. To determine the order, the group members needed to share with one another their strengths and weaknesses. Claudia wanted to be the last person so that she could make sure everyone was doing what they were supposed to, and because, as the last person over the wall, she would represent the group's successful completion of this exercise. Two of the strongest men in the group confessed to having injuries that would hamper their performance. Claudia realized that her tennis elbow would be a great liability. When it came to her turn to discuss her strengths and weaknesses, she was honest about her injury and indicated that she would fit best somewhere in the middle where many people could help her.

When Claudia's turn to climb came, she called out to those on top what to expect—where she couldn't put much strain and how she would indicate that someone was pulling too hard. Then she was being pushed up with spotters all around her, and the next thing she knew she was over the wall.

Later, when the members discussed the event, Claudia asked what impact her limitations had caused in the group. Those who had been pullers replied, “None.” They said they knew what to do because she had told them about her problem ahead of time.

While packing to go home, Claudia thought about how much she had learned about herself and her relationship to other people, especially at work. She recognized that she generally failed to trust others to do their part and so she was not as effective as she would like to be. Her success came at a high price because of the extra workload she imposed on herself. In addition, she wondered, “What is the price my subordinates pay? How have my actions affected their attitudes and performance? Do I need to be so competitive with my peers? Is that really in the company's best interest? Is it in my best interest?” She knew she would have a lot to think about on the trip home.
