

VETTING HIKERS

Start With You, The Hike Leader

Vetting club members for your hike is the most important step towards having a great event. You want everyone included to be capable of completing the hike with some energy to spare in case there is an emergency. The best time will be had by the most people if the hikers are of similar ability, hike at a similar pace, and have similar expectations.

Initially, select hikes that are straightforward and low risk: no key exchanges, no shuttles, little or no scrambling, and perhaps even trails that have some cell service. Route selection can reduce the potential for things to go wrong. Limit your group to 10 people. Set yourself up to succeed.

Begin your vetting process by remembering past hikes that you have done on the route you have selected for the club hike: what are the hard parts, where do people struggle, how often and where do folks want to rest? Will there be a lunch break? Will overheating be an issue? Is this a hike that other hike leaders (potential assistants) are likely to sign-up for? Run through a virtual hike to have the top issues in mind before thinking about how you will customize your vetting for this hike.

If you will be vetting for a difficult hike, check the schedule for an upcoming, easier hike to suggest as an alternative to the hike you are offering for hikers you decline.

On To Vetting Hikers

Reading Between The Lines

No hike leader likes vetting unknown hikers because it is hard to get it right. As the hike leader, you know the difficulty of the hike you will be leading and you've likely seen hikers who have done well on it and those who have struggled. Struggling hikers often conceal much of their misery, not wanting to slow the group, disappoint the hike leader or confront their own failings. Probably at the end of any group hike, a few hikers are stoically hanging on by a thread. The challenge with vetting is identifying the people who will be completely overwhelmed on the hike.

Recently, I commended an often-lagging hiker for the good job she had done that day and she said "At least I made it." She was quite red and I suspected she was deeply exhausted. She pushed herself on that hike, as well as on others, to get stronger. But I made note, which helped me in respectfully declining her on a substantially more difficult hike 2 weeks later.

One of the questions we each ask ourselves at the end of every long hike is "How much do I have left?" These are what we think of as our reserves and this how we assess them. This woman the other day probably only had another half mile or mile left in her whereas we had another 10.

When vetting, aim to establish if the person will do the hike with relative ease or be exhausted. It's not good to be exhausted on the trail because there's nothing extra (mentally or physically) for dealing with an emergency and we are all at increased risk of stumbling when we are tired. Better to save working to the point of exhaustion for the gym.

That's the hike leader perspective but the hiker being vetted is interviewing for a position and therefore is putting their best self forward. Some are coyly deceptive: "I hiked Rim-2-Rim at the Grand Canyon" [but it was 20 years ago and I had heart surgery last month]. "I've been hiking a lot lately" [as in once a week for the last 3 weeks vs nothing all year]. Everyone's frame of reference is different and when vetting, strive to determine what their reference point is compared to yours.

If they've been hiking in Coachella Valley, it's easier to vet because you both know the same trails. Murray Hill or Maynard Mine are great starting points for vetting for harder hikes because they are steep and have good amounts of elevation gain for the miles done. You know how the hike you are sponsoring compares in difficulty to these hikes. Ask: "Have you hiked up Murray Hill recently? Who did you go with? When? How did it go? Was it easy for you? How many breaks did you take?" If your hike isn't that tough and they don't do Murray, then inquire about comparable hikes with the same questions, like to the first oasis on Art Smith.

If the hiker starts hedging, but still is pushing to be included, clarify that everyone stays together, that they can't just drop-out or turn around if it's too hard for them. Some new to the club presume that is an option. That comment by you may quickly change their mind or yours.

Past vs Current Fitness

Ask questions to determine which of their images of themselves they are remembering when they answer your questions:

How much hiking have you done in the last few weeks/few months?

How many miles do you usually hike at a time? In a week?

How much elevation gain is usually involved? [over 2,000' is a good benchmark for harder hikes around here]

Where does your usual pace fall: 'smell the roses', cardio event, or in between?

Breaks: are you a 5" break per hour hiker or more or less? Do you pause frequently on steep grades like Murray?

Medical Issues

Find out what is currently going on with their body.

Any recent injuries, illnesses, or treatments that might affect your performance?

Strategy

We don't ask all of these questions of every unknown hiker we vet. We listen to how they introduce themselves, if they do, and go from there. We sort of 'poke around' with questions to see if something pops out that they didn't think to share as a limitation. It's a bit of a cat and mouse game: each is telling/asking what they think is relevant.

Example of Post Vetting Conclusions for a Garstin to Murray Hill Hike

#1: Known: strong, fast, reliable, seasonal hiker who is almost back to top form; will slow on descents for fear of falling; chooses not to use poles; a hike leader

#2 Known: strong, fast, reliable; a hike leader

#3 Known: strong, fast, reliable, newer to club

#4 Unknown to us; "OK'd" by another leader; indicated she has been hiking recently

#5 Unknown: Colorado mountaineer indicated that he is in good shape with no medical issues

With guys like this, one has to wonder "So why are you bothering to hike with the Club if you do so much on your own?" For some of them, the answer is "My wife doesn't want me hiking alone", "I like to do some social hiking", "I want to learn the local trails." Time will tell if there is an unrevealed performance or medical issue.

#6 Barely known: signs up for hikes that are challenging for her; tends to be surprised that she struggles relative to the group; anticipating that she will be one of the slower hikers and frustrated by the fast pace

#7 Unknown: said has been hiking in the Valley for years, has done Murray Hill from several directions and many times

No one was turned away in the vetting process for this hike. Though an athletic event, this was a relatively low-stakes hike because it is a straightforward trail and 4 of the 9 people were hike leaders. One of the 4 leaders could easily turn-around and walk a poor-performing hiker back to the cars. On much more difficult hikes, half of the folks requesting to join the hike might be turned away. It's a judgment matter: a combination of the hike sponsor's perception of the hiker's ability, the difficulty of the hike, and circumstance.

In this instance, hiker #6 did fine but #7 could not keep up with the group going up or down. Early on, the sweep broke off from the group to escort her on an unplanned private hike at a very slow pace. "Fast pace" was not noted on the hike posting; if it had been, this hiker might have self-vetted and declined to join the hike.

Summary of the Vetting Process

..visualize the route and hike-specific issues

..vet unfamiliar hikers on the phone to assess their ability to stay with the group

..review your completed sign-up list, like in the example above, to refine your image of the event and to better anticipate potential issues and perhaps, remedies

..debrief with your sweep during and after the hike, comparing expected-to-actual outcomes for even better vetting next time

..make a permanent note of poor performing hikers, either for your use or to respond to an inquiry from another hike leader in the future