

PROSPECTIVE HIKE LEADERS: ANSWERS TO FAQs

Hike Leader Culture

One of the wonderful aspects of CVHC is the delegation of authority and decision-making to its hike leaders. As hike leader, you are in charge. You decide when and where to hike, who gets to come, and if you need to change or terminate a hike. You don't ask for permission, you decide. Sensibility, confidence, good judgment, and the ability to make decisions on the fly are some of the important qualifications for being a hike leader. There are Club rules, but you are ultimately the "decider".

But you aren't alone. You can literally call other Club leaders to inquire about questionable hikers. In your vetting process, you can ask a hiker, "Who have you hiked with?" and then contact that leader using the Member List to obtain their telephone number. You can also do the opposite and alert a leader to potential challenges with a particular hiker.

Other hike leaders are your support team. All are more than willing to come to your rescue. If you are in a bind or in a quandary on a hike, ask another leader in the group for help or advise. If needed, ask a hike leader in your group to walk a hiker back to the trailhead if there is a problem. If you had a difficult situation on a hike, discretely chat with other leaders afterwards for ideas for handling it more comfortably in the future.

Planning Your First Hike

Start by familiarizing yourself with the Hike Archive, which is accessible both from the Hike Leader Manager in the password-controlled part of the Club webpage and from the Home page, which is available to the public. Skim through the entire list of hikes because it's a bit of a guessing game at first as to how the hikes are organized. Often the distances and elevations are approximations and their difficulty designation doesn't always follow the stated criteria. In the beginning, select hikes to lead from these established ones.

Initially, limit yourself to out-and-back or loop hikes. Shuttle or key exchange hikes take more planning and likely give you less flexibility in an emergency. Wait until you are comfortable with leading hikes before adding another layer of complexity.

You are also welcome to create new hikes, like with the ¼ Tram hike to Rescue 1 that was created in late 2017. Before you do so, be certain that you aren't duplicating a hike entered under a different name. To establish the level of difficulty, look at the guidelines on the Hiking Schedule page and fine tune it based on your experience.

The guidance about posting hikes on the schedule is quite loose. Ask the club president about the days of the week that are preferred for Strenuous and above hikes vs Moderates, to be posted. That is guidance, not absolute. The only restriction is to not have 2 identical hikes that depart at the same time on the same day. It's allowed for 2 hikes to be quite similar on the same day though strive to differentiate your hikes from others: an "Extremely Difficult" hike from Palm Springs isn't competing with a "Moderate" in Mecca Hills.

The CVHC website is being rebuilt in early 2019. Until the new website is up and running, ask the Hike Leader Recruiter to post your hikes for you—it's not hard, just not intuitive for some.

There is no rule as to how many hikes you should sponsor per year. Some leaders have indicated that one per year was the minimum. Many leaders offer 1-3 hikes per month.

Consider sponsoring 2-3 hikes fairly soon after becoming a leader so you can gain the experience you need to be confident. The Club documents recommend inviting another hiker leader on your first club hike as leader, which is wise. Their presence takes the pressure off of you to remember all of the little details, particularly the greeting and instruction given at the trailhead. Invite other hike leaders to support you for as many hikes as you need to feel comfortable. Also ask them for feedback at the end of the hike regarding your pace and attentiveness to the group while on the trail.

When selecting hikes to lead, make sure you are hiking well within your ability. Be mindful of your 'reserves'. There is no rule about reserves, but consider leading hikes that generally only use about 50% of your proven capacity, which will add to your confidence and capacity should there be an emergency. Moderates are good choices for your first hikes because they are short and any difficult situation will come to an end sooner.

Before posting a hike, be very clear in your own mind as to who your 'target market' is for that particular day. The best time will be had by all if the hiking ability and expectations are similar among the participants. Do you want your hike to be a leisurely stroll or a fitness activity? Trail selection and comments in your hike posting are the first steps in shaping your event. The longer the hike, the more similar the ability of the hikers should be. If there are significant miss-matches of any kind, you may need to shorten your hike once underway.

Before the Hike

Don't take it personally if no one or only 1 person signs up for your hikes. That happens. Even long time, popular leaders sometimes won't have any sign-ups. The ½ Tram hike is a good example: there are many people who want to do the hike but most aren't able and the others don't sign-up. But even poorly attended hikes are worth having on the schedule because they keep people interested in the Club and give members more choices.

One of the online Club documents states that 3 hikers are the minimum for a hike, but the minimum number of hikers is at your discretion. Many leaders carry on with only 1 hiker: the member planned to hike that day; the leader planned to hike that day; so they go.

At least early in your hike leader career, strive to select a sweep for your hike before the meet-up. It is common practice to select a sweep at the trailhead but as a new leader, that could be problematic. It's not mentioned in the Club material, but ideally you want your sweep to know the trail well enough to take over leading or to backtrack if a hiker needs to be walked out or something happens to you.

Pre-selecting a sweep isn't so important if the trail is very straightforward, but if not, best to have someone who knows the way. And keep in mind, on essentially any hike that is Strenuous or harder, more than half of the group will likely be hike leaders and you'll have many sweeps to choose from. It's a courtesy to contact them in advance in case they had planned on hiking with an out-of-town guest or the like.

Even for familiar hikes, it's smart to hike it once at the beginning of the season before leading a group or get a current trail conditions report from someone else. Being confident and projecting confidence is a big part of success in any endeavor.

Consider publicizing a return time of "no earlier than" before the hike day to reduce the unexpected demands on you. That can be done by e-mail a few days before the hike. Restate the "no earlier than" time again at the trailhead. Surprisingly often, hikers will arrive at the

trailhead and announce, “I have an appointment at...” or worse, tell you that once the hike is underway. Make it clear that the estimated time is not a guaranteed time and is entirely dependent on how the day unfolds. Hikers can be amazingly clueless to the problems they create with their “Oh, by the way...” expectations of accommodation.

Safety

Vetting

Your #1 responsibility as a hike leader is the safety of all. The first step in making a hike safe is the difficult job of vetting hikers. It however seems to be impossible to ask enough questions when vetting, so listen carefully for tell-tale clues from the prospective hiker and let those clues guide your questioning.

The longer and the more difficult the hike, the more thorough you need to be in screening hikers. It is acceptable to tell a prospective hiker that they can't come on your epic hike unless they have hiked with you or another Club leader recently. For example, one week 3 'just joined the club' or 'will be joining' hikers contacted a leader about doing the ½ Tram hike. Since it is an extremely difficult hike and none had any history with the club, they were refused. They were advised to sign-up for another hike with the same leader, which none did. Had any of them recently completed a club hike, the ½ Tram leader could have contacted the prior leader to learn how they had performed. Confirming that a member was on one of your hikes is a good reason to keep a record of participants on your past hikes.

When vetting, you are authorized to refuse hiker requests based on prior bad behavior, in addition to lack of aptitude. At the trailhead, you are also authorized to refuse to allow a hiker to proceed on the hike for any reason you deem appropriate.

When posting a hike that is Strenuous or above, consider adding 'fast pace' to the entry unless it truly won't be. That comment will often 'self-vet' hikers and forewarn those with an inflexible view as to the proper pace. You can add a note to the posting for a specific hike that it will be a “moderate pace” and another time, you could designate the same hike as “fast pace.”

There is no Club definition of moderate and fast, but on a hike with good footing and minimal or modest gain, think in terms of 2.25 mph for a moderate pace and approaching 3 mph for a fast pace. Likewise, 2.25 mph on a climb is likely a fast pace. And be clear with the confusing language when discussing difficulty with a hiker: is 'moderate' referring to the difficulty, which is a combination of distance and gain, or the speed?

There are excellent recommendations about vetting that you can reference in the online Club Manual and a separate piece on vetting should you become a hike leader.

Food & Water

Tailor your hike leader routine to each hiking day. For example, on hot days, you might want to have bottled water and Gatorade on ice in your vehicle to give out at the end of the hike to make sure everyone is safe to drive home. On hot days, consider carrying extra bottled water and maybe Gatorade in your pack, even if the hike is short and especially if you don't know the hikers. Some hike leaders also carry salt in a zip bag for anyone who believes they might be getting sodium depleted.

If you bring snacks to share with a struggling hiker, don't bring peanuts or products with peanuts. You just never know who might have a nut allergy.

Emergency Numbers

The Club has a list of emergency phone numbers for the various jurisdictions in the area but when in doubt call, 911, especially if service is sketchy.

In case of an emergency, dial 911 even if you don't have cell service with your carrier. If another carrier is active in the region, their system will automatically take your 911 call regardless of your carrier.

Consider making note of cell service on your phone when hiking on trails for which you sponsor club hikes. It's hard to remember exact points for reception, but even establishing that several high, open points are 'never' or 'sometimes' workable helps.

Being Heard

Keep in mind that somewhere between a third and a half of people over age 65 have some degree of hearing loss. Strive to spot the hikers at the trailhead who seem to be having difficulty hearing and accommodate them as much as possible by speaking up, being closer to them when you speak to the group, and making eye contact when speaking. Wind, grit underfoot on the trail, and other conversations will make it harder for you to be heard when walking. When talking with a hiker behind you on the trail, aim to turn your head slightly towards them to more readily be heard.

Walkie-talkies are available for your use from the Club. The Club-owned pairs are usually held by the Hike Leader Recruiter in the peak of the winter season and the rest of the year, are held by a year-round resident of the Club, like JoEllen Leifer. Some members own sets that they will loan to you. There is a bit of a learning curve and charging time required, so plan ahead.

Monitoring Hikers

It's good 'continuing education' to make it a habit whenever you hike in a group to monitor hikers for excessive weariness. The more practice you get evaluating hikers on the fly, the more automatic it will be when you are leading a group. Periodically on the trail, take a long look at each hiker's face so you know when it changes from their baseline. Scan them for new limps or tilts in their posture.

Taking a break about 10 minutes into the hike, especially if going uphill, gives hikers a welcome opportunity to adjust their clothing or shoes to the actual conditions. It's also a good opportunity to make your first assessment as to how each is doing with the temperature, pace and grade.

Look for increasing redness, excessive sweating, tension in their face, and a pained look in their eyes as markers for being overwhelmed. If they are still smiling and chatting, they may be fine; if they've gone quiet, there may be a problem brewing. Dragging poles can be another marker for unmanageable fatigue.

Particularly if hikers are using water flasks and not drink tubes, stop periodically to allow them to drink. If they don't drink, consider reminding them to do so, perhaps by name, during your pauses.

Keep in mind that on trails with steep starts that some very capable hikers may require 10-30 minutes of warm-up time.

Resist the temptation to end a rest break when the last, lagging hiker rejoins the group. More than anyone, they need time to recover.

No Hiker Left Behind

Other online Club documents for hike leaders stress the importance of keeping track of your hikers on the trail and what to do if one goes missing—be sure to read that material. Clearly stating that you'll all stay together, that anyone dropping back for a bio break needs to check-in with the sweep, and having hikers who insist on leaving early sign out, are important.

A lovely stated convention for the hike leaders is to remain at the trailhead until all hikers have started their car upon return to the parking area. As the hike leader, you can ask them to start their engine if they want to linger in the lot and you don't.

Bolstering Your Confidence

A former Hike Leader Recruiter recommended that new hike leaders think of their event as "taking a few friends with you on your favorite hike". Keep the hike selection, maximum number of hikers, and sweep choice comfortable for you so you will be at your best.

Feel free to ask other hike leaders to join your first hikes for sweep, moral support, or feedback. If you don't know who to ask, contact the Hike Leader Recruiter and ask them to find a leader to support you.

Consider limiting your hikes to 10 people to keep it manageable in the beginning. Smaller groups are easier to lead; they make it easier to keep it fun and light-hearted; and they make you more approachable. You want folks to let you know if they are struggling or have a special need. People are less likely to speak up in a large group or if the hike feels regimented.

Legal Issues

If you are leading a hike that requires carpooling or shuttling, DO NOT assign riders to drivers in advance. Do find out beforehand who can drive to make sure you have sufficient seats and drivers available, then leave it at that. When at the meet-up, oversee only to the extent of shouting "Who is driving; how many can you take?" and let the drivers and riders work it out. Of course, make sure everyone has a ride. This distancing of oneself from the process decreases the Club's liability and yours, if there is an issue.

Likewise, rather than offering ibuprofen or similar products to an ailing hiker, shift the exchange so that the hiker asks you for it.

Remember to have all hikers sign the waiver/sign-up sheet (until the switch to the new club website) at the trailhead and to sign-out if they leave early.

The Next Step: Accessing Hike Leader Documents

If you would like to proceed with becoming a hike leader, the Hike Leader Recruiter will provide you with a username and password so you can read more about being a hike leader in the Club's documents. Once you have the login information you will:

Open the CVHC Home Page (cvhikingclub.net), click on 'Hike Leader Login' to the right

Enter your e-address & your password, click on Login

Note the 'Manage Hikes' options which you will use to post hikes

Note the 'Members' option where you confirm if members have paid; Desert

Trails Hiking Club members are accepted as CVHC members
Click on 'Hike Leader Forms': read all of the documents to more thoroughly
educate yourself about being a hike leader.

Annual Hike Leader Events

February TBA, 3-5 pm, Palm Desert Library, annual Hike Leader Training meeting, which is listed
on the Club Hiking Schedule.

December TBA, Hike Leaders Meeting at JoEllen's house to put hikes on the schedule. Bring
your calendar and consider arriving with the hikes you plan to lead and their dates for January
and February. If unable to attend, post your hikes on the schedule being mindful of duplications
of previously posted hikes.

Webpage Transition Note

During March of 2019, CVHC will transition to a newly designed webpage. Some procedures,
particularly the sign-up sheets, will change.

Smile and have fun!