Building Self-Efficacy Through Women-Centered Ropes Course Experiences

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SUMMARY. This paper describes our experiences as facilitators in adventure-based ropes course training. It summarizes experiences with different groups that raise rich and complex issues about the use of adventure-based learning for personal growth and professional development. These groups include women executives, women living in public housing who have formed a women's resource group, adolescent women in treatment, adolescents from culturally diverse backgrounds, graduate students, and women who have been sexually abused. These groups reflect the diversity of female participants who have engaged in ropes course training. Although participants are diverse, deep commonalities exist in the kinds of issues they are addressing in ropes course programs. Positive changes in women's abilities to take risks, practice assertive leadership, solve problems

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[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "Building Self-Efficacy Through Women-Centered Ropes Course Experiences." Hart, Linda, and Linda Silka. Co-published simultaneously in *Women & Therapy* (The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 15, No. 3/4, 1994, pp. 111-127; and: *Wilderness Therapy for Women: The Power of Adventure* (ed: Ellen Cole, Eve Erdman, and Esther D. Rothblum) The Haworth Press, Inc., 1994, pp. 111-127. Multiple copies of this article/chapter may be purchased from The Haworth Document Delivery Center [1-800-3-HAWORTH; 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST)].

effectively, and feel more competent in general, can result from participation in a ropes course experience. In this article, the reader will see how one fixed ropes course element can be used to create a variety of metaphors for diverse groups of participants.

Adventure-based training is increasingly being embraced as an effective strategy for enhancing personal growth, particularly in the areas of increasing one's sense of self-competence and risk-taking (Snow, 1992). Among the more promising forms of adventure-based experiential learning is ropes course training in which participants engage in facilitated group problem-solving tasks that take place on low and high ropes courses (Rohnke, 1989). Metaphorical experiences are created by the facilitator to engage groups and individuals in examining their ways of dealing with risks and challenges, thereby encouraging personal growth of the participants (Bacon, 1983; Gass, 1991; Gass, Goldman, & Priest 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Snow, 1992). In this article we will share our metaphorical treatment of the ropes course to increase self-efficacy in women.

Despite the general promise of ropes course facilitation for women, dilemmas are emerging as this adventure-based training is adapted from a largely middle class male model. Physical challenges have often been regarded as distinctively male (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992; Fuhrmann, 1986). In established ropes course programs, many facilitators continue to be males who receive little training in supporting the growth of women and these facilitators may use the ropes course experience to perpetuate gender-based stereotypes in physical settings. Unmodified, adventure-based training can become an exercise in proving one's physical prowess rather than an opportunity for growth.

How then can adventure-based training best be used to enhance women's lives and build on their competencies? Can physical challenges become an effective way to promote personal growth in women? Can the ropes course experience be tailored to meet the developmental needs of women? Will women be more prone to take appropriate risks after participating in ropes course training? Will women have greater confidence in their competence as problem solvers? Based on various training experiences with women from a

broad array of backgrounds, we have developed a model of ropes course training that emphasizes self-efficacy (see model in Figure 1).

Our model emphasizes using the ropes course as a ''learning laboratory.'' Change is promoted through carefully crafted initiatives that promote new, more self-efficacious behaviors. Central to this model is the importance of: (a) applying feminist metaphors (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hammer, 1990; Hooks, 1984; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991), as opposed to the war and sports metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) typically used in ropes training (and society as a whole); (b) using ropes course experiences to empower women-centered skills including communication and community-building skills (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991); (c) presenting physical challenges for empowering women; (d) engaging participants in a new arena so that they cannot simply depend on old coping mechanisms but instead are brought out of the ''comfort zones'' so that issues can be addressed; (e) tailoring the facilitation process to participants' personal goals and recognizing the cultural challenges that women face (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992; Melia, 1986); and (f) using a systems perspective in which the facilitator acts as a catalyst that ''disturbs'' the system and in so doing provides opportunities for growth.

This model can be used to facilitate a process by which women can learn to take risks without losing other strengths in the process. The goals of adventure-based experiences for women are to help them enjoy a high level of self-respect, take appropriate emotional risks, turn crises into opportunities for growth, resolve interpersonal conflicts in a manner that preserves personal integrity, clearly understand their personal and professional potential, ask for what they need, and recognize life's accomplishments. The challenge is for women to come through this metamorphosis as more competent risk-takers with higher levels of self-respect, while preserving positive qualities such as communication skills and community-building skills. In ropes course training, these particular goals are approached from an analogical distance (Bacon, 1983). When women are comfortable with their new behaviors, those behaviors can be applied to ''real-life'' situations. As an individual woman progresses through these goals, she becomes a more self-efficacious individual in that she produces desired personal and professional outcomes.

The basic components of the model in action are illustrated in the following discussion as it explores actual scenarios that develop on the ropes course. The prepared physical course sets the stage for the metaphorical experience. A typical ''low ropes'' element is the ''Mohawk Walk''[1] (Rohnke, 1989) in which wires are tightly strung one foot above the ground between four or more large trees to form a sequential path. When the group arrives at the course, the facilitator might begin the metaphorical experience by communicating a framework to the group–perhaps a group of age-diverse women from various occupational and educational backgrounds–in which the ropes course element represents an upcoming or recurring common challenge in each woman's life. The group has several decisions to make at this point. They must decide what challenges they share, how many ''setbacks'' or steps off the wire the task will require, and what time pressures they will impose upon themselves. Frequently, the trees become milestones while the stretches of wire represent specific difficulties within the larger metachallenge. Thus, the task is a game, but a game that is tailored to replicate important and often problematic features of each woman's life. While scrambling around trees and overcoming various obstacles, women work together to meet the challenges presented by the ''game.'' In the process, poor communication and lack of teamwork can come to the surface.

Afterwards, team members use the raw materials from the metaphorical experience to reflect on the strategies they used to solve the initiative and to consider how those strategies carry over to their day-to-day lives. For example, women have approached the ''Mohawk Walk'' by believing they will need much more time and many more touchdowns than they actually use. On the other hand, they may devote so much time to planning in an effort to create a ''risk-free'' environment that the task remains unfinished. The facilitator's role is then to draw out the meaning of these experiences and inspire the participants to initiate changes in their own personal action plans.

This initiative can also be used to explore gender issues. In our own work, a group of predominantly male fifth graders was participating on the ropes course as a form of leadership training (as they entered the top grade offered by their grade school). The males were

enthusiastic as the group began their experience on the high ropes course whereas the girls were quite reluctant to participate. At this point, the group was presented with the low ropes course element, the ''Mohawk Walk,'' and a framework was designed to emphasize the importance of women as leaders. We introduced the initiative as follows:

> Imagine that all of you are traveling by wagon train through the midwestern prairie in the middle of the 1800s. Just as you are about to cross the Rocky Mountains all of your oxen die (of a communicable disease). Determined to reach an outpost (on the other side of the Rockies) you proceed on foot through a mountain pass. You then encounter a group of native Americans who explain that crossing the land directly ahead of you would upset their ancestors as it is an ancient burial ground. They believe that the spirit world would be disrupted by the steps of strangers. There is good news, however. The native Americans are willing to build a system of tree-to-tree cables across the burial ground for you to traverse. The native Americans now consent to the crossing as long as the white men and women's feet touch the burial ground no more than five times and that the crossing take no more than 40 minutes. The Native Americans include one additional stipulation. It is the belief of this tribe that women are especially close to the earth and thus more favored by the spirit world. Thus, they insist that two women lead the group through the burial ground.

The boys and the girls in the class reacted strongly to the framing story. Two of the previously reluctant girls were now very eager to assume this challenge. The boys who had consistently fought for group leadership, on the other hand, were outraged at being excluded from leadership. They claimed that the group would never succeed with girls as leaders. In fact, two boys so purposefully attempted to sabotage the activity that they were asked to timeout for a portion of the exercise. After the timeout they were able to successfully re-enter the exercise. The style of leadership displayed by the girls was very different from that shown by the boys. The male leadership style in this group had consisted of one boy putting his solution forward and telling the rest of the group what needed to

be done. Another boy might then challenge the leadership with a new idea. In contrast, the girls asked the group as a whole for their ideas and developed together a plan which was a hybrid of several ideas. One of them decided to be at the front of the line while the other female leader remained at the end of the line. The task was completed very successfully with a great deal of communication and involvement from all group members.

An extended debrief explored the leadership issues that emerged: What style of leadership did the girls use? If you were used to leading, how did it feel to become a ''follower'' and fellow group member? If you were usually in a follower role, how did it feel to become a leader? Two of the boys who had consistently assumed strong leadership roles remained angry at only girls being allowed to be leaders and continued to view the situation as unfair. Other boys and many of the girls spoke in support of the girls' leadership; these youth stated that they felt more central to the decision-making process than they had in previous initiatives. The girls who led the group were clearly affected by the opportunity to display and practice their leadership skills. The impact extended beyond the students; their teacher saw a potential in at least those two girls that she had previously not seen.

In using this framework the facilitator took a risk. What if the girls had failed? Would the group automatically assume that female leadership couldn't work? Suppose none of the girls was willing to take the lead role? Although the risks were considerable, the facilitator felt that in this group (like so many others) the view of males as leaders was so entrenched (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992; Melia, 1986) that it was worth the risk to ''disturb'' the system. It seemed better to expose the gender issues than keep them hidden. Even though negative reactions might emerge, the skilled facilitator would address them during the debrief which is another of the complex benefits of the action-reflection approach (Friere, 1973) we use when delivering ropes course programs.

The youth example indicates how the ''Mohawk Walk'' element can be used to explore leadership issues. The same element can facilitate exploration of cooperation and mastery. The latter can be seen in a training with incoming graduate students in a program in Community and Social Psychology. Central to this program is com-

munity building. All but 2 of the 15 graduate students were female and many were mid-career professionals returning to school after many years. Many described graduate school as seeming quite daunting. The ''Mohawk Walk'' was used with the students as a metaphor for the upcoming year with the trees representing milestones and the cable representing challenges. As with graduate school, the task at first seemed overwhelming, with individuals questioning the possibility of reaching their goals. As they worked together to create support, all were able to get through ''the year.'' In completing the ropes course program, participants found they could advise and observe one another but in many ways still had to find a method that worked best for them as individuals. Here the academic environment metaphor was direct: During the debrief, students in the graduate program discussed the benefits of strong community support, but also became aware of the need for each student to find her own way through the challenges of graduate school.

Ropes course training is not simply about group functioning; it is also about how individuals confront challenges and deal with risk and change. The work on the high course elements emphasizes risk taking and developing confidence in one's abilities while using the community for support. Once again, the facilitator helps participants develop a framework for exploring the high ropes elements in ways that apply to the individual's work and family life.

High ropes course elements can be used successfully with survivors of sexual abuse, for example. Sexual abuse often leaves survivors unable to trust others and having a heightened need for control. This lack of trust in relationships, together with a need for control, can create problems for abuse survivors in their daily interactions (Bass & Davis, 1988). The high ropes course event called the ''Pamper Pole'' (Rohnke, 1989) provides an opportunity for survivors to confront both issues. The ''Pamper Pole'' is a telephone pole that rises 25 feet in the air. Widely spaced metal footholds provide a means for climbing to the top of the pole. Once the climber has made the difficult climb to the top, a trapeze is strategically placed ten feet away to entice the participant to jump. This physical challenge encourages participants to look at how they handle issues of trust and control. In one case, an abuse survivor spent over an hour

on this event climbing part way up the pole, falling off, attempting the climb again, and again falling off. Each time she reached a higher position on the pole, and she was finally able to reach the top of the pole and leap off. Her progression during this hour was videotaped for use in therapy sessions. Watching the videotape, she was able to see the lack of trust she had in herself, in the belayer (the person controlling the climber's safety rope), and in the system. As the event progressed, she was able to observe the growth in her level of trust. She described the leap as signifying a willingness to give up some control, knowing she would safely emerge from the experience. The several falls off the pole signified for her that one can continue ''to climb'' after experiencing a setback.

The ''Dangle Duo'' (Rohnke, 1989) is yet another high ropes event with rich metaphorical applications. The physical apparatus is a series of elevated logs placed approximately 5 to 6 feet apart and rising 45 feet into the air. Two participants climb the event together. Success is virtually impossible if either of the two women attempts this event alone. Participants will succeed, however, if they work together and communicate effectively by reaching out for one another at the right moment, and taking risks for one another. The ''Dangle Duo'' can supply useful metaphors for a therapist and client, couples, friends, mothers and daughters, and other twosomes desiring relational work.

Finally, the high ropes course event, the ''Multivine'' (Rohnke, 1989), provides a particularly strong metaphor for women with respect to risk-taking. The ''Multivine'' consists of a high cable strung between two trees 30 to 100 feet apart. Above the cable is a series of ''vines'' or ropes which the participant can use for support as she proceeds across the cable. Of course, the ''vines'' are not quite long enough to provide a sense of security before the next vine is reached. In order to progress from ''vine'' to ''vine,'' the participant must let go of the rope behind her and reach for the rope in front of her. The analogies to life outside the ropes course emerge: the necessity of sometimes letting go of the past in order to reach for the future, the sense of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the tasks ahead, and yet the possibility of summoning up the confidence to proceed and be assertive while reaching for accomplishment.

Although the ropes course experience is intended to enhance women's sense of achievement, cultural conditioning sometimes undermines acknowledgement of the women's competencies shown in the experience and may call for additional intervention on the part of the facilitator. A frequent issue in debriefing women on the high ropes course experiences is the need of participants to somehow look at how they failed rather than how they succeeded. One woman successfully climbed 50 feet up a tree and proceeded across a high wire to reach her goal tree, only to claim, once she was back on the ground, not really to have ''done it.'' When the facilitator questioned her about this, she said that she couldn't claim full credit because she had not looked down. To encourage the participant to take credit for this success (and by analogy other successes in her life), the facilitator asked her to explore her route visually and explore ways to fully credit herself for her accomplishments. The next step was to discuss with the participant other areas of accomplishment in her life for which she had previously been unable to take credit. As the example suggests, the ropes course experience provides the analogical distance to allow participants to begin to look at recurrent patterns in their lives.

Again, it is the metaphorical character of the experience that provides opportunities for growth. Once on the high element, each participant places herself in the hands of others in order to feel safe; one's response to situations in which trust is required becomes apparent. This high ropes experience involves personal risk taking, but at the same time it involves learning about one's interactions with others. Participants are engaged in a new arena so that they cannot simply depend on old coping mechanisms, but instead are brought out of their ''comfort zones'' so that issues can be addressed. An important aspect of the experience is that while the physical dangers feel very real, they are not. Although each participant is high off the ground, she is roped to a belayer so that the fears she experiences are based on perceived rather than real risks. The analogical distance allows people to consider how they approach risks, examine the degree to which they can trust, and reflect on ways in which they might change (Bacon, 1983).

Application of these ideas to different groups shows how the training is carried out, while at the same time raising rich and

complex issues about the use of adventure-based learning for personal growth and professional development. In the remainder of the paper we highlight other dilemmas and concerns that must be addressed if ropes course training is to have its full impact for women of various backgrounds confronting different issues.

The skilled facilitator deliberately uses the ropes course as a tool that is adapted to the client's needs. The same physical setting can be used to create very different metaphors for different groups. To illustrate this point, consider different approaches taken in work with court-adjudicated female adolescents in a secure facility, and work with women executives. For both groups, ropes course experiences have served as a facilitative process, and in both cases the analogical distance has been helpful, as has been ''disturbing'' the system in order to help people look at their behaviors in a different way. The juxtaposition of the two cases illustrates the versatility of the ropes course.

The experiential training initially helped the facilitators to diagnose a severe lack of problem-solving skills in the court adjudicated adolescents. Once identified, the training could be used to help the teens build skills in problem-solving and conflict management. For example, on the first training date the teens were led through an exercise asking them to create a behavioral contract with paints and markers on a sheet. Once the contract was complete, they were charged with the task of placing the contract high on the wall of their gymnasium. This task was extremely challenging for the teens. They were unable to sequence the tasks (e.g., some of the teens were ''hanging out'' on one another's shoulders close to the wall while others were far from finishing the task of applying tape to the contract). In subsequent sessions, the teens were faced with numbers of new problem-solving initiatives. Over the course of time they developed the awareness that their problem-solving success depended on their ability to plan, focus, and follow through. In this case, the low ropes course experience was used to develop fundamental problem-solving skills.

In contrast to the teens, the female executives were a high functioning group possessing sophisticated problem-solving skills. Their concerns focused on using all of their team members as a resource and having the confidence to apply their problem-solving skills to

unfamiliar contexts. Many were heads of their own companies or teams and tended to be strong leaders who were comfortable in asserting control in groups. The challenge for these individuals was in trying out new behaviors. After leading a ropes course exercise emphasizing a shared leadership style, the facilitator used the debriefing process to help participants examine the links between group process and outcomes. The analogical distance of the ''learning laboratory'' gave the participants the safety to diagnose behaviors and make plans for change where appropriate. For example, one very strong leader realized that she frequently prevented the ideas of quieter colleagues from emerging for group consideration. She used the next exercise to participate in a manner that allowed her own ideas as well as those of her colleagues to be heard.

Although female professionals like those described above often have strong problem-solving skills, they may not always have the confidence to strike out in new directions and take risks in using those skills in unfamiliar contexts (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Melia, 1986). The female president of a public relations firm that we worked with raised exactly these concerns with regard to her employees. She hoped to turn more responsibility over to her largely female employees, while at the same time she wanted the group to engage in the kind of risk-taking that would ensure the firm's continued success. As the team leader, she also knew it was important for the team to understand the ways in which their work fates were interdependent. Improving and maintaining communication within the group was thus an important priority. This is like many team development situations involving women, in which risks are an important part of work life, yet where risk-taking may be difficult for women to engage in comfortably. So, how does one increase risk taking without losing important communication and community building skills? Often in competitive situations of this sort we hear people resorting to war metaphors such as ''we are at war,'' or ''the competition is killing us.'' How, then, does one avoid war metaphors yet obtain high performance and risk taking? Ropes course initiatives, when carefully tailored, provide ideal opportunities for exploring risk-taking while maintaining good communication and avoiding war metaphors. In the aforementioned consultation, the facilitator used the low ropes initiatives described earlier to

focus on building a strong team. Once the group had established their effectiveness as a team, they then shifted into combining team activities with a focus on personal growth–or as the team put it–how to ''live by the ropes.'' Personal growth metaphors were developed on the high ropes course with participants focusing on a real risk each wanted to take in her daily life. This intact work team who had experienced a series of ropes course trainings with themes related to risk-taking, gathering one's resources, welcoming new members, and reaching for more in tough times, observed shifts not only in their professional experiences but also in their personal lives. One team member who had been unhappily living with her spouse's ''old world parents'' described the risk-taking on the ''Pamper Pole'' as enabling her to risk family conflict so that she and her spouse could take the long-wanted step of moving to their own home. Another team member was able to bring about change in one of the most debilitating parts of her life. Years ago she had given up driving, but through the conscious focus on appropriate risk-taking, she successfully attempted driving again after the ropes course training and thus found a bridge to the new behaviors that she wanted to adopt.

The situations that we have discussed thus far have dealt with cultural specifics related to gender. Many additional cultural issues having to do with race and ethnicity have emerged in our work with women. Although ropes course training is intended to be culturally neutral, its roots in white suburban experiences show up in a variety of ways and can often be impediments. We are frequently reminded of the potential limitations of ropes course training that must be overcome if the training is to resonate with various cultural backgrounds. For example, an African-American consultant who has been working with us exploring the possible uses of ropes course training with inner city youth, discussed how alien the woods environment might be to urban youth, perhaps creating too much analogical distance for the ropes course experience to be growth enhancing. Moreover, she raised concerns about the deeply racist ''jungle'' stereotypes some people hold toward African-Americans. On the course that day the adolescents themselves were concerned with how those not from African-American heritage would view

them as they climbed high in the trees. How, then, does the facilitator ensure that the ropes course activities work for all participants?

The best approach to ensuring culturally responsive ropes course programs is, of course, to have culturally diverse program designs delivered by facilitators from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, most facilitators continue to reflect a narrow spectrum of American culture. Consideration should be given to careful inclusion of trainers from many cultural groups. It is equally important that all facilitators, regardless of their cultural background, look at ways of creating positive experiences for all participants (Reddy & Jamison, 1988).

When presented effectively, the ropes course can be a dramatic and dynamic tool for personal and professional growth. We continue to explore ways of developing inclusive ropes course experiences. In one recent example, one of our groups included recent immigrants from Asian communities who were clearly uncomfortable at being expected to be assertive in a large group. In order to encourage participants to bring their ideas forward, we redesigned the experience to emphasize planning periods and debriefs in pods of three. We learned that individuals who find it culturally unacceptable to speak out in large groups make many contributions in more intimate settings. The larger message for the facilitator is to constantly consider the group's concerns and potential areas for growth. Moreover, we challenge facilitators to take the ropes course experience beyond the culturally ''sensitive'' arena into the direct use of the course as a forum for addressing issues such as racism, prejudice, and intercultural conflict. Too little is currently being done to explore the potential of the ropes course to impact deeply held cultural beliefs.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout this paper we have discussed ways in which the ropes course is beginning to be used to facilitate personal and professional growth in women. We have suggested that the course can be adapted to widely diverse groups dealing with different issues. We have indicated that the analogical distance and the metaphorical presentation may well be key to the experience. Given the richness

of this experience, how does one begin to look at impact? Only recently have facilitators begun to look beyond the initial responses they observe at the ropes course and consider possible impacts for participants and their teams. The few extant evaluations have focused almost entirely on social development in adolescents (Snow, 1992). An interesting paradox becomes apparent when one begins to consider why ropes course training would have an impact: The success of the ropes course seems to depend on analogical distance, yet other work indicates that the closer an experience is to one's day-to-day life, the greater the likelihood of transfer. The paradoxical effectiveness of distancing may depend on effective debriefing that links the training back to personal experience (Eitington, 1984; Gass, 1991; Gass, Goldman, & Priest, 1992; Snow, 1992). Subtleties in the debriefing process will thus be an important focus for study.

Concerns with impact will also need to be tied to questions of how the impact to participants and their teams can be prolonged (Eitington, 1984; Gass, 1991; Gass, Goldman, & Priest, 1992; Snow, 1992). Special consideration of women's experiences will be important here, too. As indicated earlier, we have found that participants may attempt to minimize their experience, which could reduce impact. The response of significant others can exacerbate this minimizing because sometimes significant others simply don't believe participants completed a high ropes course experience, or are unable to comprehend fully what participants have accomplished. We have explored various strategies for prolonging impact. Among our methods has been to use photographs of participants at dramatic points in the ropes course training. For example, while working with emotionally disturbed adolescents, we would enlarge photographs of particularly healthy moments into poster-sized pictures and hang them throughout the school. Videotapes have also proved effective as reminders of the experience. Yet for greatest impact, visualization strategies may need to be combined with a host of other carryover techniques. The debrief is likely to be the most important carryover technique, especially when expanded into the development of a written personal or team action plan. Ideally these action plans express visions, goals, techniques, and strategies individuals will use to attain those goals (Dahl & Sykes, 1988). A final way to

renew and build on the training is to hold a series of spaced trainings–perhaps about every four to eight months (Reddy & Jamison, 1988). Each experience in sequenced training must then be carefully crafted and focused on a particular theme appropriate to the group's needs at that point. Ultimately, these variations in the training and follow-up will be important to conceptualize theoretically if future evaluations are to be effective in capturing the differences in the impact of various ropes course trainings on women's personal and professional growth. The model we have proposed and illustrated here may provide a starting point for initiating next steps in characterizing when ropes courses will enhance women's lives.

NOTE

1. About 15 years ago Karl Rohnke was running a workshop for current and prospective ropes course trainers at Triton High School in Byfield, Massachusetts (K.R. Rohnke, personal communication, August 18, 1993). At that time workshop participants would work on inventing new initiatives as part of the ropes course construction aspect of the workshop. What is currently "The Mohawk Walk" was invented by participants in the Triton workshop. When deciding on a name for the new event, two of the creators were Kahanwake Indians from the Mohawk Tribe. The two suggested that the initiative be named "The Mohawk Walk" after their tribe. Given the Mohawk Indians' unique ability for working high construction, the name was doubly appropriate.

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