

# Chapter 12

## Safety on and off piste

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*"Safety doesn't happen by accident"*

*Unknown*



**Learning objectives** – at the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following:

- Understand why Safety, Enjoyment and Learning (SEL) form the cornerstone of what we teach.
- Understand how we effectively manage our guests in different environments.
- Understand and appreciate different leadership approaches and how they apply to the guests in our care.
- Know the 10 FIS rules for the conduct of skiers and snowboarders.
- Understand that when it comes to avalanche safety that prevention is better than cure.
- Understand the remit of IASI qualifications with regard to skiing off piste with our guests with the caveat that ski school and national/local regulations take precedent.

### **Topics covered** - part 1

- Why SEL?
- Effective group management – The Triple 'A' Approach.
- Leadership.
- The FIS Rules for the conduct of skiers and snowboarders.

### **Topics covered** - part 2

- Avalanche safety – observation and terrain.
- Types of avalanche.
- Avalanche safety equipment.
- Qualifications, remits and regulations.

# Introduction

This chapter covers the very important subject of safety both on piste e.g. marked runs within the boundaries of the ski area (or other environments/facilities) and safety off piste, both within and beyond the boundary of the ski area. Keeping our guests safe is of paramount importance but it is also of great importance that we look after our own safety and that of other users of the environments in which we work and play. Due to the extent of this chapter it is divided into two parts: the first part covering safety on piste, which is relevant to all snowsports instructors, no matter what level of qualification or whichever environment we are operating in, be it artificial, indoor, mountain environment etc. Part two then covers safety off piste but, in reality, this section is only an overview of some of the most relevant topics, in part, because it is beyond the scope of this manual and because there are some great texts available by leading experts in this field, which we highly recommend.

So, the suggestion is that this chapter be seen as a 'starting point' or 'reminder' of some of the most pertinent information regarding safety on and off piste. And as was pointed out way back in chapter 1, a manual is in no way a replacement for education on courses or practical experience, it is simply 'part' of the overall education process.



Pisted terrain in Hintertux, Austria



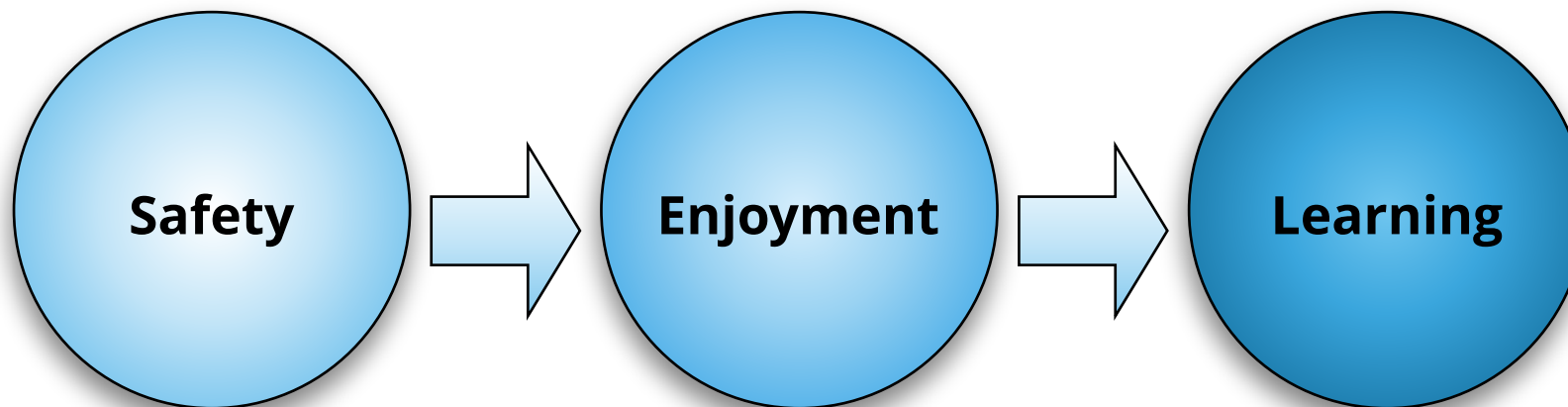
Skiing off piste in Courmayeur, Italy

# Part 1 – Safety on piste

## Why SEL?

The acronym SEL has been around for a long time and for us, in IASI, it is the foundation of how we approach teaching our guests both on and off piste. In fact, we are so passionate about this that we have structured our teaching assessment criteria for instructors under the three headings of **safety**, **enjoyment** and **learning** (see the documents section on the IASI website).

The order of these three principles is also important as was alluded to earlier in chapter 5. Our guests, first and foremost, need to 'feel' safe and 'be' safe. They need to have confidence that we will look after them. This means that we are constantly aware of potential dangers and are making good decisions regarding the content of our sessions and how we manage the group (more on this in effective group management). The next priority is that our guests have a great experience and enjoyable time and this is covered brilliantly, by Pete Gillespie, in chapter 13 – the guest experience. Once these two factors are in place the stage is set for learning to take place. Of course, making progress and successfully acquiring new skills goes hand in hand with enjoyment. If our learners are succeeding then they are far more likely to enjoy themselves.



# Effective group management – The Triple ‘A’ Approach

Managing our guests safely in the various environments, in which we work, is one of the most important aspects of being a snowsport instructor. And when this involves a ‘group’ of guests the challenge is even greater. In IASI we have what is called, The Triple ‘A’ approach: Authority, Awareness and Activity. Rather like SEL the order of these is very important as can be seen from the explanation that follows.

For each of the ‘A’s we, as snowsport instructors, need to ask ourselves a series of questions to ascertain if we are dealing effectively with our groups and to allow us to reflect on our practice.

## A1 – Authority

### Reflective questions

- ▶ Can our learners hear us?
- ▶ Do we know their names?
- ▶ Do we set the ground rules?
- ▶ Do we have a presence?
- ▶ Do they know whose boss?



While some of these questions may seem somewhat autocratic, that is exactly the point. Once we develop trust and get to know our guests it is much easier to relax the degree of *authority* that is required to maintain safe control. This follows a similar pattern to Mosston and Ashworth’s Teaching Styles, as covered in chapter 17, where the decision making process between teacher and learner gradually shifts more to the learner as we move along the spectrum from Command to Inclusion and beyond.



## A2 – Awareness

### Reflective questions

- ▶ Are we aware of what is going on around us?
- ▶ Are our guests in the most suitable places?
- ▶ Are we keeping tight enough control over our guests?
- ▶ Are we constantly aware of potential dangers?



When we have several people in a group it is very easy for us to focus our attention on individual learners and indeed, this is a good thing. However, we need to be able to do this while maintaining a good level of awareness of what the rest of our group are doing, where they are positioned on the run and if there are any potential dangers. So, our attention needs to constantly switch from, and move between, the narrow focus of an individual, to the whole group, to the environment and so on.

## A4 – Activity

### Reflective questions

- ▶ Is everyone doing enough?
- ▶ Are we including enough variety in the session?
- ▶ As activity increases does our level of awareness increase to match the requirements?



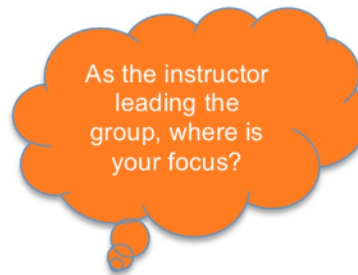
The acronym MCA is often used and means – maximum class activity. This is certainly a desirable goal for the sessions that we run but we must be able to increase our level of awareness to match the amount of activity. The more skilful instructor is able to readily use the inclusion teaching style (see chapter 17) in order to deal effectively with mixed ability levels but this requires a heightened sense of awareness to effectively manage all of the learners.

So, to sum up, effective safe group management requires The Triple 'A' approach. Sufficient **'authority'** to keep control, heightened **'awareness'** of all activity and enough **'activity'** to avoid boredom.

## Leadership

Leadership is a huge topic and could easily warrant a chapter of it's own even in relation to snowsports. However, for the purposes of this chapter we are more interested in the safety side of 'leadership' and how as a snowsports instructor being a good leader is all about sound *decision making* in the different environments that we operate. Each of these environments provides their own unique challenges. The 'artificial' environments that we are talking about include outdoor dry slopes (dendix, snowflex etc.), indoor rolling carpet slopes and indoor snowdomes. These are all largely **'closed environment'** where there are fewer variables to contend with than their counterpart: the **'open environment'**, which includes on piste and off piste in mountain resorts. In one sense closed environment and open environment can be seen as being on a continuum with more and more variables needing to be contended with the more *open* that environment is e.g. weather, visibility, snow conditions, busy slopes, obstacles (rocks, trees) etc. Through experience we learn to cope better with these variables and how best to make decisions and to what extent we can allow others to be involved in the decision making process.

As part of the Alpine and Snowboard Level 2 qualifications leadership in a mountainous environment is an assessable element. Two models are considered in terms of helping student instructors identify and understand their preferred leadership style. These are the **Action Centred Leadership** model and the **Decision Centred Leadership** model (as show in Figure 1 and 2 on the next page).



Developing the individual

Figure 1



Group democracy

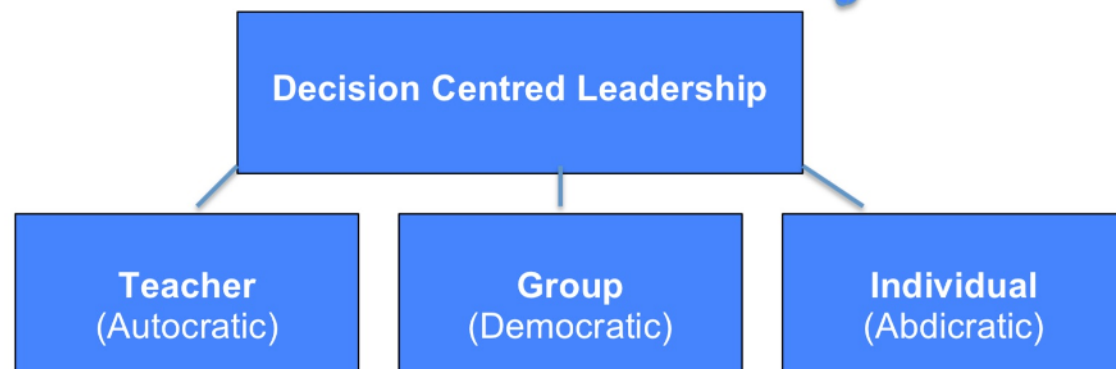
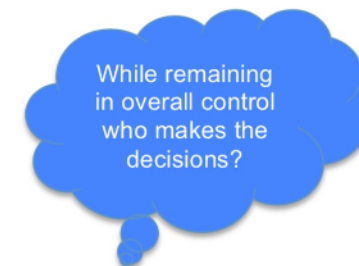


Figure 2



## Specific 'leadership' challenge

One of the greatest challenges we face as snowsport instructors, which requires sound decision-making, is leading in poor visibility and **whiteout** conditions. A whiteout means that it is difficult to differentiate the snow from the sky and everything literally seems 'white'. As will be discussed, when talking about off piste and avalanche safety, in part 2 of this chapter, prevention is better than cure so, if we have checked the weather forecast then it may have been possible to pre-empt the poor visibility and move to a better location, such as tree-lined runs that increase definition and make navigation much easier. But, it is not always possible to avoid whiteout conditions and dealing with the situation effectively and safely is made easier if we have knowledge of and carry out the following:

- ▶ We have a good knowledge of the resort, the pistes, various landmarks etc.
- ▶ We are aware of how the pistes are marked e.g. in France the pole on the skiers/snowboarders right has luminous orange on the top part of the pole while on the left there is no luminous marking. This is different in some other countries such as Switzerland where there is a larger luminous marking on the pole on the right and a small luminous marking on the pole on the left. However, the important reason for this is so that we know if we are on or off piste!
- ▶ And following on from the point above, we should be aware that different countries number and name their runs differently. Again using France as the first example, the runs are named and go from a higher number down to '1' on each successive piste marker or 'panneau', whereas in Austria the run is numbered and each marker has the same number all the way down.
- ▶ We ski/ride for shorter distances than we would in good visibility.
- ▶ We assign one of the stronger skiers to the back of the group.
- ▶ We have some agreed signals or audible shouts to be used if someone falls or loses visible contact with the person in front.

### REFLECTION:

Who should be making the decisions when leading in whiteout conditions?





# FIS Rules for the conduct of skiers and snowboarders

The Federation International de Ski (FIS) is the world governing body for winter sports and, as such, sets the rules including the 10 rules relating to the conduct of skiers and snowboarders. In essence, these rules are like the 'rules of the road' for skiers and snowboarders. As instructors, it is our responsibility to both teach these rules to our guests and lead by example so that we continually show good practice both when teaching and in our free time skiing/riding. What follows is a list of the 10 rules followed by additional author comment.



## Respect for others

*A skier or snowboarder must behave in such a way that he/she does not endanger or prejudice others.*

### R1 - Author comment

This first rule is really an all-encompassing rule with the rules that follow giving more detail of exactly what this means. However, common courtesy to others is certainly an important element of this rule.

## Rules of Conduct

# 2

### Control of speed

*A skier or snowboarder must move in control. He/she must adapt his/her speed and manner of skiing or snowboarding to his/her personal ability and to the prevailing conditions of terrain, snow and weather as well as to the density of traffic.*

#### R2 - Author comment

This rule is so fundamental to the safety of oneself and others. Collisions between people often result in greater injury than simply falling over by oneself. Our guests need to be constantly reminded about this and the need to be continually aware of other slope users.

## Rules of Conduct

# 3

### Choice of route

*A skier or snowboarder coming from behind must choose his/her route in such a way that he/she does not endanger skiers or snowboarders ahead.*

#### R3 - Author comment

This emphasises the need for us to help our learners understand how to choose a good route when skiing or snowboarding and the need for us to give them a good balance of following others and choosing their own line during lessons.



Rules of Conduct

# 4

## Overtaking

*A skier or snowboarder may overtake another skier or snowboarder above or below and to the right or to the left provided that he/she leaves enough space for the overtaken skier or snowboarder to make any voluntary or involuntary movement.*



### R4 - Author comment

The emphasis here is that the skier/snowboarder in front always has the right of way and when overtaking a slower skier or snowboarder, particularly in a 'learning zone', to not only give plenty of space but to also reduce one's speed.

Rules of Conduct

# 5

## Entering, starting & moving upwards

*A skier or snowboarder entering a marked run, starting again after stopping or moving upwards on the slopes must look up and down the slopes that he/she can do so without endangering himself/herself or others.*

### R5 - Author comment

This is all about getting your guest to develop the 'habit' of always checking up and down the slope before starting off.



# Rules of Conduct

## 6

### Stopping on the piste

*Unless absolutely necessary, a skier or snowboarder must avoid stopping on the piste in narrow places or where visibility is restricted. After a fall in such a place, a skier or snowboarder must move clear of the piste as soon as possible.*

### R6 - Author comment

This is certainly one of those rules where leading by example is of paramount importance and is very much part of effective group management discussed earlier. An additional point worth mentioning here, which is not covered specifically in the rules is the importance of moving away from the top of lifts to a safe waiting point. This is typically further away than our guests tend to move!

### R7 - Author comment

There can be a number reasons why skiers or snowboarders may need to climb or descend the slope 'on foot' but it is worth emphasising to our guests that taking skis off should be a last resort as it is much easier to grip with skis on. The majority of plastic ski boots do not have good grip (unless they have a vibram sole such as those on touring boots) so, taking skis off to walk up or down can be very dangerous especially if conditions are icy.

### Climbing & descending on foot

*A skier or snowboarder either climbing or descending on foot must keep to the side of the piste*

# Rules of Conduct

## 7



## R8 - Author comment

What is important here is that our guests understand what all the different signs and makings mean and this is something we can cover during lessons. Our guests have so much to 'focus on' that sometimes they do not even notice some of the signs. For example, on draglifts it is common to see signs, on the pylons, reminding users not to turn on the lift track! Rather than simply make your guests aware of these signs, tell them that reason is to avoid straining the lift cable or possibly derailing it! People tend to be more understanding when they understand the why.

## Respect for signs & markings

*A skier or snowboarder must respect all signs and markings.*



Rules of Conduct

8

Rules of Conduct

9

## Assistance

*At accidents, every skier or snowboarder is duty bound to assist.*

## R9 - Author comment

While this is completely correct, our guests should be reminded that safety of oneself comes first and that one should always assess the scene before rushing in to help and perhaps ending up as another casualty.

# Rules of Conduct

## 10

### Identification

*Every skier or snowboarder and witness, whether a responsible party or not, must exchange names and addresses following an accident.*

### R10 - Author comment

This is perhaps a timely reminder of the need to have adequate insurance which covers winter sports and includes off piste if you intend to ski outside of the markers.





## Specific snowsport instructor rules

In addition to the 10 FIS Rules for the conduct of skiers and snowboarders there are an additional four rules that the snowsport instructor must follow:

- 1) The Snowsport School (and its instructors) are responsible for placing their guests into classes according to their ability.
- 2) The instructor should not allow their guests to take risks beyond their ability while taking into account the weather and snow conditions.
- 3) The instructor must remind guests that during lessons that they do not have priority on the piste and they should respect the rules of conduct (as set out earlier).
- 4) The instructor must teach their guests the aforementioned 10 FIS rules of conduct.

**NB:** This concludes part 1 of this chapter. The next section covers safety off piste. Please note that part 2 is a separate PDF document. Summary key points and references for both part 1 and 2 are at the end of the part 2 PDF.