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**FEATURE**

# Lead the WAY

## 10 Qualities of a Great Trail Leader

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY TOM SEVERIN,  
ADDITIONAL PHOTOS BY BUDD STANLEY







**You've driven the trails numerous times. Have hundreds of hours of 4WD experience under your belt (some of which, of course, is spent outside of the vehicle). You're good with people, and feel your managerial skills are top notch. You'd like to be Trail Leader for an upcoming excursion. What's next?**

First, I commend you for wanting to take on a leadership role. As a certified professional 4WD Trainer with more than 40 years of off-road experience, I know the value of a good Trail Leader. Our hobby could use more people willing to step forward and fulfill this role.

Being a Trail Leader is not an easy task. It involves skills, personality and patience. Here are my Top 10 qualities of a great Trail Leader.

**1.** You must have good 4WD skills. This is a huge category, and includes reading the terrain, picking lines, spotting, recovery, vehicle repair and the Tread Lightly philosophy, to name a few.

**2.** Know the trail. Drive it at least one time. Get familiar with the terrain and trail. Learn the difficulty level of the obstacles. Know the location of campsites, gas stations, parts store(s) and rest areas. Pick out back up campsites and a safe spot to air up at the end. Is there a fire ban? Any trail closures? Does the group need permits? Phone calls ahead of time can minimize surprises.

**3.** Keep the gang together, especially at difficult obstacles. Don't let the drivers split up or spread out. A driver can peel off in the wrong direction. Others follow him, and pretty soon several drivers are lost. Have you heard of the accordion concept? Everyone keeps an eye on the vehicle behind and slows down as needed so as not to lose him. Don't rely on that as it doesn't work well. Keep an eye on three vehicles behind you. Stop and let the group close up frequently.

Schedule your stops for 10-100 (bathroom breaks) and photo ops (more on communications later.) Then make sure you don't leave anyone behind. I am still looking for several vehicles that left the lunch stop



You must have good 4WD skills that include reading the terrain, picking lines, spotting, recovery and vehicle repair.



Know the trail and the terrain you are going to be in.



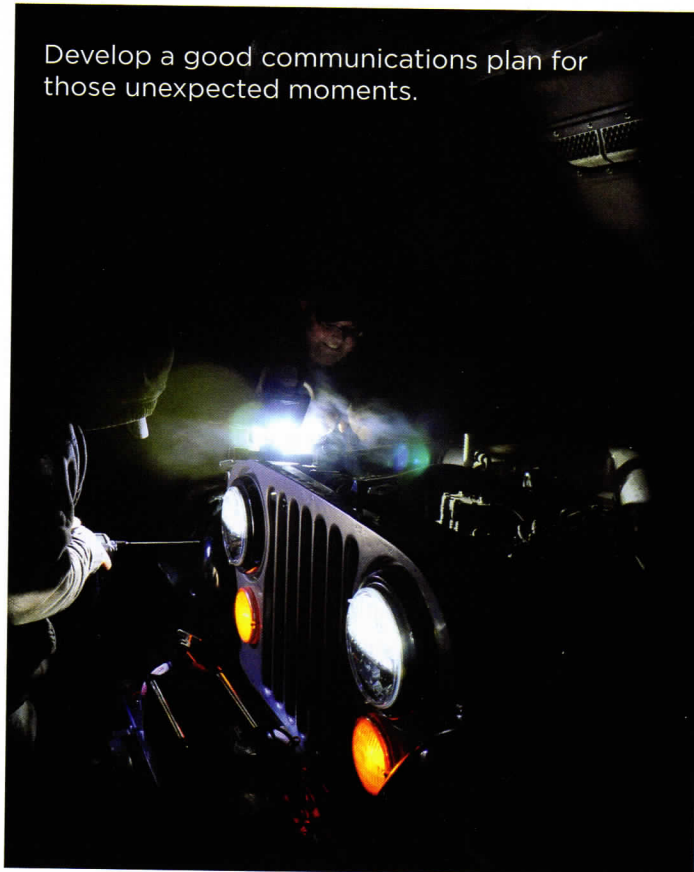
going the wrong way! Thanks to a sharp Tail End, who chased them down! Don't split the group unless absolutely necessary. The most common reason is due to a breakdown that can't be repaired on the spot. Make sure everyone knows what they are to do, as well as where and when you'll meet up again. Try to stay in radio or phone contact. Follow the buddy system: No vehicle goes off by itself.

**4.** Start on time, and keep the team on time. You can adjust trail time by adding or deleting stops. Don't cajole or push the team, but don't linger at a stop more than necessary. Maintain a good pace throughout so you end on time. It's always better to arrive at the campsite earlier than later.

**5.** Develop a good communications plan. This includes written instructions before the trip, as well as briefings and radio gear. Include spotting hand signals too. Your tailgate briefing at the trailhead is an important part of your communications package. Do a radio check before leaving. Know some history of the area and names of geography features that you can share during the trip.

**6.** Know how to sequence the vehicles. High difficulty - alternate those with winches. Place ham radio guys in back. They have the power to ask for a repeat of information that was difficult to hear on the less powerful radios. Have any newbies right behind you. They will follow your cues. Lay down an easy line so the newer driver can

Develop a good communications plan for those unexpected moments.



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follow you. Once identified, put the slowest driver behind you to pace yourself.

**7.** Be a people person. Any number of issues can crop up during a ride. Your guests come first; do everything you can to deliver a quality experience. Patience and understanding are a necessity in any Trail Leader. You'll encounter a wide variety of skill sets and personalities while enduring a whole range of circumstances.

**8.** Handle pressure well. You cannot relax and follow the vehicle in front. This can be a nerve-racking position, especially during inclement weather, vehicle breakdowns, very slow drivers, bad behavior and other challenging situations. If the risk is too high, be willing to change plans.

**9.** Be considerate of others you encounter, and encourage the same in your group. Slow down when approaching vehicles, pedestrians, campsites and cabins. This will minimize dust. When passing, don't insist on right of way even if it's normally yours. If you have only two or three vehicles, pull over and let the larger group pass. Adjust to the situation, and be polite.

Generally speaking, four-wheelers are a nice bunch. So are other types of trail users. No need to think or act competitively. Always be friendly, and encourage that in your team. Be willing to share gear or

a campsite with someone in need outside your group. The good deed will be repaid someday.

**10.** Treat your position as Trail Leader with respect. Since you reach a rest area or campsite first, hold back and let others grab the prime spots.

Being a Trail Leader carries with it much responsibility. You are expected to know the route, coach others through difficult obstacles, deal with bad behavior, have a backup plan for many unknowns, and keep a cheerful attitude throughout. But the rewards are tremendous.

**A note to clubs:** Everyone needs to start somewhere. Let a willing member be the Trail Leader even if you are uncertain of their skills and ability. Pair them up with an experienced Trail Leader who will not let them fail! The same goes for spotting. Get some new blood out there learning to spot and building the trust of the group. Have your normal go-to-spotting-guy stand behind them coaching but not giving the drive instruction himself.

*Tom Severin, 4x4 Coach, teaches 4WD owners how to confidently and safely use their vehicles to the fullest extent in difficult terrain and adverse driving conditions. Visit [www.4x4training.com](http://www.4x4training.com) to develop or improve your driving skill.*

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