

An Adventure At Rat's Nest Cave

In 2002, I became the Manager of Engineering of a major Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) company based In Calgary, Alberta. This was my first stint as a manager of engineering and I was responsible for the technical quality and execution of all the engineering work. This included the administration of over 700 engineers and support personnel spread across all the engineering disciplines. One of my first task was to bond all the discipline managers into a cohesive team that would intuitively work together and support each other. I wanted to do a teambuilding function which was unique and definitely "out-of-the-box". It had to be so unusual that the participants would always remember it.

Fortunately, I had the support and leadership of Chris, the company's Organizational Excellence Manager. Chris was quite a character, and he was way ahead of his time in developing exceptional programs for high performance teambuilding. He suggested that we try spelunking in some caves close to Canmore, an hour's drive from Calgary. This turned out to be a fantastic teambuilding experience.

Here is a short description of our adventure:

Oh rats! Coming down the "Laundry Chute" didn't seem right now like such a good idea. I was lying flat on my back on a steep incline and the light on my helmet was reflecting off the rock walls 6" in front of my face and above my shoulders. Our guide, Karen who was leading the group, had already proceeded further down the chute and she had disappeared into the darkness. Looking down between my boots which were firmly braced against the walls to keep gravity from pulling me down further, I couldn't see any reflections from her light. It was pitch dark below me.

Four of our team members had decided to follow our guide down this most narrow and twisting part of the cave. We were all alone now. As I looked up, I could see a pair of boots flailing away trying to get a grip on the slippery surface of the chute which had been carved out by rushing water eons ago. I had just passed the narrowest part of the chute and for an average sized person, even I felt that it was rather tight. I wondered how Bob, who was a larger person than me, was going to fare?

"I'm stuck!" yelled Bob, as his legs continued to flail trying to squeeze through. "It's OK, Bob!" I yelled back, trying to sound reassuring. "Once you get through that part, the chute opens up!" "I'm **really** stuck!" Bob called back, this time with a little hint of desperation in his voice. Oh great, I thought to myself, here we are stuck in the chute and the guide never told us what to do in such a case.

I heard a distant voice from Quinn who was further up following Bob. "Bob, try to move over to your left, there is more space there!" The cross section of the chute at that point was like a tear drop shape laying on its side, and Bob had wedged himself tightly



against the narrow side. I could see Bob trying to move over, but it was hard as he needed to pull himself up slightly to dislodge himself and he couldn't get sufficient grip on the smooth rock surfaces.

It is a good thing that I was not claustrophobic, but I did have a flashback to the time I had to squeeze through a tiny 12"x16" elliptical manhole to get into a narrow boiler steam drum. I definitely recalled my fear then of being stuck and forgotten in such a tight space. No time for such thoughts! What seemed to be an indeterminately long time passed. I guess we were only stuck there for less than a minute, but it sure seemed so much longer. We finally heard Bob cry out, "I'm free!" At last, thank goodness! And with Bob sliding down towards me, I released my foothold and continued down the chute. It was fast and slick. I remembered Karen had given us some instructions as to what to do once inside the chute, but it was all a blur once you're in it! As I continued twisting and turning down the chute, I had this silly thought wondering why the water, which had carved out this chute, didn't do it in a more straightforward fashion. Engineers tend to be such "linear" people!

Suddenly, I felt a rope to the right of me and I vaguely recalled that it was there for a reason. As I couldn't remember exactly why, I grabbed it anyways. Without warning, I popped out of the chute into an open chamber in the cave and proceeded to slide down a steeply inclined rock plate that was so smooth, it was difficult to stop. I held onto the rope to slow down my descent, but the rope was too short. Karen was already there waiting further down on the left side of the rock slope by the wall. "Move to the left! Move to the left!", she yelled at me as I continued to slide down struggling hard to stop, but without success. I remember looking down below my feet and saw the edge of the rock slope vanishing into the darkness and I thought I was going to fall over the edge into the black abyss! Then she grabbed me by my legs, braced herself and swung me over to the left wall where the footing was flat and solid.

Now I knew why Karen went so far ahead. She had to position herself to help us move off this slippery slope. I felt momentarily safe and under control by the side wall. Then Bob popped out down the slope, but he wasn't holding onto the rope and he was too far over to the right, and too late to move over to the left. Karen grabbed him, but Bob was heavier and he was coming down much faster. I saw that Karen was having difficulty in swinging him over, so I reached out and grabbed onto his arm and pulled hard so that Bob was safely sitting literally on top of me. Then Quinn came flying out and Bob had to grab a hold of him. And finally, Lynn emerged and we all held onto her. What teamwork!

We sat there for a little while catching our breath, watching our light beams from our helmets dancing on the cave walls in a surreal fashion. We looked at each other with a sort of bewilderment, like "Wow! We did that!?" We now understood why it was called the "Laundry Chute", and it was, as Karen said, the best part of the cave tour. Was it exciting? Yes, it was! Was it exhilarating? Without a doubt! Would you do it again? Most definitely, but Bob might have second thoughts!



This is just a short description of the caving adventure at the Rat's Nest Cave, located surprisingly in Alberta, close to Canmore. They say that when team members share an experience like this, it changes their relationships permanently in a very positive way. None of us ever did caving or spelunking like this before. We had coveralls, hard helmets with lights, rubberized gloves, and safety and rope harnesses. We were forced to crawl on our bellies, slide along our backs, contort our bodies into positions you would not think possible to squeeze ourselves into crevices you would believe too small to fit. In some cases, for a big guy like Chris, the openings were indeed too small! One member mentioned that for once, he was glad he wasn't a big, beefy guy! And you had to get very close and "in your face" with the rocks in the cave, judging by the big dirt smudge on another member's face, he must have got really intimate with one of those smooth boulders! And for those with inquisitive minds, no, we did not see any rats inside the cave, although the guides assured us that there are rat nests near the cave entrance.

All in all, everyone had a great time, or at least a unique experience that we would definitely remember for a long time! These memories will still be fresh in the minds of those so fortunate to have participated. Life is full of wonderful moments like this!

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