

The Myth of Plan A

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director | 6 min read · May 2026

Will Smith once said: "I don't have a Plan B because it distracts from Plan A."

It sounds compelling. For dreamers and go-getters, it might even feel motivational. But in the world of experiential education and outdoor programming, it isn't just unrealistic — it borders on negligent.

Nature is unpredictable. Transport fails. Group dynamics shift without warning. Plan B isn't a distraction. It's a professional obligation.

Why Contingency Planning Is Non-Negotiable

In experiential settings, conditions can change within minutes. A strong Plan B ensures:

- **Learning objectives remain at the forefront** — the backup must preserve the original intent, not abandon it
- **Staff respond quickly and confidently** — preparation removes hesitation and enables fast, calm pivots under pressure
- **Clients see your professionalism** — being ready under pressure builds trust in ways that smooth delivery never quite achieves
- **Time is used purposefully** — a good Plan B keeps momentum and meaning alive

Plan B isn't a fallback. It's a parallel road to the same destination.

Steak or Salad? The Value of True Alternatives

You order a ribeye. They're out. A sirloin is a reasonable substitute. Chicken is a very different meal. Ice cream is a different experience entirely.

Programme design follows the same logic. A strong Plan B must preserve:

- **Learning outcomes** — communication, resilience, collaboration, or whatever was central to Plan A
- **Level of engagement** — the physical, cognitive, and emotional demands should be maintained
- **Tone and structure** — it should feel equally intentional, with clear facilitation and space for reflection

Understanding Complexity: The Cynefin Framework

Most disruptions in outdoor programming fall into what David Snowden's **Cynefin Framework** describes as the *complex* or *chaotic* domains — situations where there is no single right answer and the approach must be adaptive.

In these contexts, effective leaders accept uncertainty rather than resist it, use safe-to-fail options, and stay open to emergent outcomes — learning that arises organically from unplanned situations.

Aligned Alternatives in Practice

| Plan A | Plan B |
|------------------|--|
| Technical canyon | Open stream with challenge tasks and easy egress |
| Kayak expedition | Land-based navigation trek with team roles |
| Rock climbing | Leadership hike with purposeful constraints |

These aren't lesser options. They're equally valid paths to the same learning.

Better Questions Drive Better Decisions

For providers: Does our Plan B deliver the same core learning outcomes? Have we equipped staff to deliver it confidently? Can our contingencies adapt to real-time surprises?

For clients: Have we seen both Plan A and Plan B in the proposal? Do the alternatives reflect the same commitment to learning?

Plan B is not about compromise — it's about competence. In the real world, the ability to adapt isn't a bonus. It's the point.

Mike Thomas

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