Mr Andrew Tam’s tanned complexion suggests that he spends a fair bit of time out of the office. A senior manager at the Office of Student Life, the 39-year-old is the Singapore Management University’s (SMU) resident adventure man. He is in charge of the ExPLOR (Experience–Plan–Lead–Organise–Reflect) programme. His role is like that of an outdoor adventure trainer, and he helps students turn textbook management principles into adventures over mountains and seas. By lending a guiding hand as the students plan and carry out their outdoor adventures, Mr Tam hopes they will learn leadership skills when they embark on their corporate journeys.
A day in the life of...

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Grooming leaders through adventure

LEARNING THE ROPES: Mr Tam giving students a hands-on lesson on sailing a boat.

By Raymond Poon

8.30am
Mr Andrew Tam starts work, but he is not in the office. Instead he is at the Pick & Bite café in the Singapore Management University (SMU) having breakfast and checking his e-mails via the wireless network. Students who know his daily routine meet him here and discuss their outdoor adventure projects.

10.30am
In his office, Mr Tam checks for requests from his colleagues, and then gets down to doing paperwork — checking safety plans and an assortment of vaccination and medical clearance forms submitted by students.

Noon
It is brainstorming time. There is a mouse trap on Mr Tam’s desk, which he stares at, wondering how he can use it during the orientation camp for 1,200 freshmen in August. An idea glimmers in his head: blindfold students and have them weave their way through an obstacle course of mousetraps, guided by the commands of unencumbered fellow students. It will be a lesson in trust and communication.

2pm
A boat in Raffles Marina becomes a classroom. He teaches students participating in a yacht expedition how to sail a boat and their roles on it. The captain, navigator and chef are to a boat what a chief operating officer, operations director and human resource director are to a firm, he tells them, and asks which roles they fill in the team. Raffles Marina is an important partner in the university’s programmes and they discuss how SMU students can help the Marina conduct its corporate adventure-training programmes.

5.30pm
In the office, Mr Tam has a quick meeting with the 15 students he has spent the past year grooming as senior facilitators. They, in turn, lead 108 facilitators, and will guide the freshmen during the orientation camp.

7pm
He conducts a workshop for a group climbing Mt Kilimanjaro. Up to three times a week, Mr Tam stays beyond office hours to meet students. He gets them to role-play scenarios and think of the challenges ahead. He points to one of them. “This person has to turn back because of injury. What will you do?” he asks. As they take action, Mr Tam observes them. Later, he will discuss with them the difficulties they faced.

9pm
The workshop is over, and it is time to call it a day.

Raymond Poon is a freelance writer.

What does it take to be an outdoor adventure trainer?
You should have a passion for adventure and an active history of involvement in sports and be able to design activities that bring textbook theories to life. Good communication and interpersonal skills are also important.