

On the legs...

Geoff Dodds, consultant and rower, shares some reflections on what rowing can teach the professions.

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For anyone who has ever rowed, the headline of this article will have meaning. It's one of the most used phrases of rowing coxes, as they strive to encourage their eight oarsmen (or women) to make the boat move even faster.

Why? Because for those who don't know, in spite of appearances, rowing is not about pulling with the arms, it's about pushing with the legs. The real power comes from the legs and in a race the legs tire much less quickly than the arms. The arms are just the limbs that happen to connect the person to the oar.

So what? Well, it struck me the other day, as I was being encouraged to relax my shoulders and push on the legs, that this was a good analogy for organisations and brands.

Many organisations spend most of their time and effort on marketing and promotion – the rowing equivalent of pulling with the arms – rather than focusing on where the real power lies, their brand. Marketing and promotion are what people see and they assume that this is therefore what is important. What they don't see is that the real power comes from the brand.

Get the brand right and you don't need to spend as much time and effort on marketing and promotion. And when things get tough, the organisation has more resilience to weather the storm and prevail against its competitors.

A recent example of this is the Labour Party campaign in the 2015 election, vigorously and professionally executed, but against the wrong brand positioning.

Excited by this observation (I get easily excited...), I began to look more at



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what organisations might learn from rowing. Bear with me, there's more to this than meets the eye.

Making the boat go faster

What is immediately interesting about rowing is that you can put eight highly experienced oarsmen in a boat and, even with practice, have a terrible row. So what is it that makes the difference? What makes the boat go faster?

It may come as no surprise that much of the credit goes to the cox.

Is the cox the equivalent of a CEO? Well, in truth the cox doesn't have such a clear position of authority. They are there to steer the boat and coach the crew. But they probably wouldn't be called "the

boss". That, in itself, is an interesting observation – a CEO who is more of an equal, but with a very clear dual role as steersperson and coach.

So what is it that marks out the good cox?

Getting the crew to relax

The first quality I have noticed is the ability of an experienced cox to feel the tension in the boat. It's as true of rowing as of any sport that relaxation leads to high performance. There can't be many sports where the work rate is as high as rowing and yet it is the crew that can relax that will win. This is why the university boat race is often such a poor spectator sport. The crew that gets ahead is able to relax and thereby maintain the lead.

I have discussed relaxation with people from many different organisations. Those with a relaxed culture are the ones that are able to perform to their full potential. Those where fear dominates are the ones where people under-perform.

Many teachers complain of an atmosphere of fear and tension. Driven by the spectre of Ofsted and other testing regimes, only the strongest heads are able to absorb the pressure and enable a happy, relaxed atmosphere to exist in the school. This affects the performance of staff and pupils alike.

So the ability to sense the tension and then enable a crew to relax is of prime importance. What does the good cox do to achieve that?

Good cox, bad cox?

The first thing is that they have, and make use of, the **right personal quali-**



ties. A good cox is decisive, authoritative, in control and generally has a strong sense of humour. How else could they survive being up at the crack of dawn and gazing at eight sweaty oarsmen?

Humour is a powerful enabler of relaxation. Just as you are becoming really frustrated with your own or others' performance, the cox makes you smile.

The second is to **focus the attention** of the crew and distract the 'inner judge'. However skilled and experienced, most of us have that voice in our heads that tells us we're not as good as we could be. Some of us think they are good and it's everyone else who is at fault. Either way, there is an inner mental discussion going on which damages your ability to perform.

The trick is to get everyone focused on one thing at a time, leaving no space for distracting, judgmental thoughts. This is the 'Inner Game' at work (thanks to Timothy Gallwey). The fact is that, with total focus of the mind, the body is enabled or rather released to perform at its best.

In so many organisations, the CEO either provides no focus, or they demand attention to too many conflicting priorities.

The third is to **provide instructions and encouragement** in equal measure. The good cox will never forget to praise the crew and individuals for the smallest improvements made in response to their instructions: "Push on the legs... yes, that's better, I really felt the difference there."

The good cox will recognise that, whilst they are dealing with a crew of eight, they are also dealing with eight individuals, each of whom has his or her own emotional needs.

The fourth is **constant communication**. It's amazing how the attention drifts when there is a period of silence. The good cox almost never stops communicating. Instructions, reflection, praise. Repeat.

The fifth is **reminding people of the goal**, especially when it really starts to hurt. We are fortunate in rowing. The goal is pretty clear. To beat the competition in the next race. But you spend a lot of time in rowing training for that race. So the cox needs to conjure up that goal at critical moments: "We're coming up on the other eight – now give me ten hard pushes on the legs."

In many organisations, the goal is either unclear or forgotten. How many CEOs take the time to update their people regularly on progress towards their agreed goal? Many people work their socks off for their organisation. They need reminding of why they are doing it and praising for their extraordinary efforts.

And while on the subject of work rate, one would think that eight people applying their full strength over a sustained period in a boat would guarantee success. The truth is that eight people working perfectly in harmony at a lower work rate are far more likely to win. Working together is more valuable than working harder.

Finally, what I've noticed is that routine can be important but can also lead to boredom and complacency. It's hard for one person to introduce new ideas, new thinking, new challenges. But it is really important constantly to try new things. Sometimes that means introducing new people – perhaps an additional coach, with different ideas. Sometimes it is about the team leader bringing their own new learning and ideas into the organisation.

Ten lessons

So, how would I sum up the lessons of rowing? What can we learn from a good cox?

- 1 Focus on what really counts – get the brand right
- 2 Feel the culture – reduce the tension, get people to relax and enjoy their work
- 3 Balance authority with humour
- 4 Provide focus on one thing at a time
- 5 Keep reminding people of the goal
- 6 Give instructions and encouragement in equal measure
- 7 Praise the whole team and the individual
- 8 Get people working in harmony
- 9 Communicate constantly
- 10 Inject new thinking



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