



Calli



Top whitewater paddler and level five Coach Simon Westgarth explores the complex subjects of group dynamics and leadership in a whitewater environment...



So often when sat in the bar with a bunch of paddlers, tall tales and wild stories unfold of high water and near death moments. Normally I sit there taking it all in, whilst wondering why so many minor incidents become major accidents.

Now people can be unlucky; near innocent actions, benign river features or gear failure can lead to a chain of events that push an unfortunate incident into a life threatening experience. However most of the time, the inevitability of an incident unfolding could probably be traced back to the group behaviour at put in, if not further back to the individual motives for going paddling, and how these influence and affect the group dynamic on the river. There is no doubt a poorly functioning football team would be the scorn of their fans, whilst the players themselves

probably would dread tying up their boot laces every Saturday afternoon. No one wishes to be part of a bad team, no matter for what reason.

'Kayaking is not a team sport' I often hear. Well in truth it is not, however on a whitewater river or exposed sea crossing, paddlers form groups to ensure a greater sense of safety and if needed are able to execute rescues.

The formation of normally small groups is in itself, a characteristic of both whitewater and sea kayaking, and as such can be observed and analysed. In the formation of paddling groups, elements of individual psychology, group sociology, and communication govern the groups' effectiveness to perform and function. This group dynamic is often felt when things do not go to plan; a miscommunication leads to inappropriate action, or



neg the Shots

personal ego dictates an incorrect decision. Conversely when everything goes to plan, the group seems to function effortlessly, and a good day on the river becomes an excellent experience as a group of paddlers.

The area of group dynamics is a huge subject, and this humble publication is not the realm of such in-depth academic contributions. Instead we will look at three central themes behind group dynamics, and with numerous anecdotal examples. We will attempt to give you some tools to influence and coerce positive outcomes, and identify key issues that inhibit a group and individuals to contribute positively towards the group dynamic.

The Individual - Motives and Ego

Naturally all groups are made up of individuals; these individuals bring their own self with its ego and motivations to the group. For most people, the personal projection of themselves within the group is very important, how their peers, friends and possible rivals perceive them; helps to contribute to their decisions, rationale and resulting actions. We all wish to be thought highly of by our peers, yet in what way? How we project ourselves, and the ego that drives the decisions that help form the self's projection, are fundamental in the shaping of our motives and the desire to fulfil these motivations. If an individual within the group has strong desire to undertake a section of river considered possibly beyond the realms of the group, through persuasion either negative or positive, the person's ego can lead the group into misadventure. Alternatively if a strong paddler displays no real motive for any specific river, the individual can be simply lead to a less challenging river based on other individual's decisions.

The role of the ego for an individual is pivotal in determining their basic

comprehension of an experience. As such if the paddler's ego is overly confident, they may open themselves up to harder challenges without comprehending the dangers or risks involved, where as a more timid character may never expose themselves to any wider challenge as their ego may continuously question their abilities. Needless to say, if a group is to have a positive dynamic, the group's individuals should be looking to contribute to the fluidity and direction of the group, yet not impose their will upon key moments or actions. Note though, there are exemptions to this ideal. For example in the situation of an acute rescue, an individual may, and possibly should command the collective actions of a group to ensure a successful outcome.

A common problem to be found with this command and follow model is that it is too often used to manage beginner groups on the river. A group leader, whether the person is a coach or senior member of a canoe club, all too often fits into the command role. In this role the commander undertakes all the decisions of the group collectively and as such takes away the ownership of important aspects of the experience, from the very individuals who would need to learn that valuable river sense. Unfortunately the above observation is common place, and all too often you hear of or see a paddler leading their group down the river, as if the group collectively were unable to master any of the elements of river running themselves. Clearly it is easy to point out these shortfalls. However with a beginner's need to have sufficient safety at hand, the welcoming contribution of experienced paddlers to the group's descent of a river should not be undervalued. Everyone has a part to play in the river experience and in no way should that role be a negative one. If your coach is 'Captain Commando' or your

club leader 'Major - I want to be in charge', either look for alternative solutions, or confront the despot. Be aware though these situations are never that straightforward to solve.

The Group And Your Role Within It

If we were all to don our red workers jackets and attain to work for the collective good, then ideally most of the group would simply contribute to the best of their abilities and we'd all be in the communist workers party. But alas on the river, we are merely moments in time, and our descent within this highly dynamic environment needs all the best of individual performance and collective responsibility.

Although an individual can judge their own ability within the scope of their experience, within a group, individuals can tend to judge others and then influence their performance. What ever the individuals motives are to induce

an outcome, their potential to be either constructive or destructive, can leave the group the exposed. Such actions, implying a negative outcome if a less experienced paddler wishes to run a new rapid for instance, or recounting in detail a previous incident on a drop whilst inspecting that same drop, or simply just unnecessarily pointing out the minor hazards on a rapid all can have various influences on other individual's performance and the group's dynamic. It is always important that paddlers within a group focus on the task at hand, i.e., where to go on the river, communicating the intended line and simply to enjoy the experience with your friends.

Communication; The Need for Concise and Neutral Language in Order to Influence Outcomes

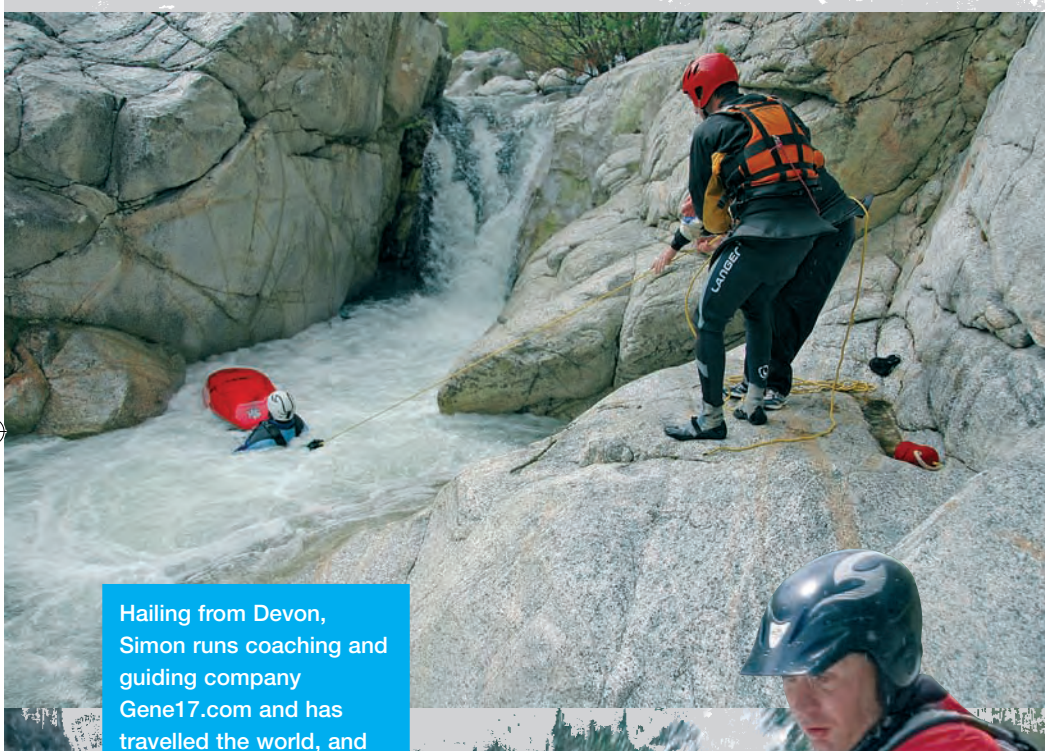
How we communicate as individuals is crucial for us to participate within a group and wider society. When speaking, in most cases it's not what we say, but how we say the message that we wish to convey that counts, where tone, specific word emphasis and body language often say more about our actual message than the words themselves. Thus how to describe where to go on a drop, and communicate the line on the next rapid, can lead to all number of comprehensions and result in a wide range of outcomes. Some paddlers busy themselves in explaining every detail of the rapid or describe every hazard just down river, leaving the listening paddlers to project all kinds of whitewater hideousness within their own mental imagery. Naturally the imagery projected whilst waiting in an eddy before a gorge comes with its own emotional attachments, namely fear and its negative impact on personal performance.

When reading the following descriptions, consider your response and whether you can remember the line on the rapid.



"Enter a metre from the right, careful with the pour-over, move fast to the centre to avoid the big hole on the right, it's very sticky, that's where Paul ate it yesterday!" Or "Start tight right and go to the centre".

In the first description there is too much detail, the hazards are identified and a negative outcome relating to someone else in or known to the group is highlighted. Why should there not be more detail, you may ask? Paddlers tend to hang on every detail, and as such if you do not give any, they can instead focus on the task of making the correct line. Surely the hazards need to be mentioned? is another typical response to the above approach. Well, whether the hazards are benign or extremely dangerous, if they are not recognisable from the kayak, then the rapid should always be scouted, and during the inspection the hazards can be indicated. However, if in the description of the line from above you mention the hazards, paddlers tend to look for these, as they wish to know where they are so they can avoid them. And thus, like any target fixation the paddler often becomes drawn towards the hazard and away from being focused on the task of running their line down the rapid cleanly. Lastly, by simply relating a previous outcome to the rapid, paddlers tend to dwell on their thoughts and emotions attached to that outcome, and often leave the eddy above the rapid, trying to avoid the same fate, fearful of their own potential experience and clearly and easily lose concentration on their own paddling and where they wish to go. The experienced paddler's role should be to indicate where to go, with a concise description, using neutral language and to imply no outcomes at all.



Hailing from Devon, Simon runs coaching and guiding company Gene17.com and has travelled the world, and visited every continent (except Antarctica), in the search of the perfect river! Freestyler, adventure paddler and one of Europe's most progressive coaches, he has also filmed and directed a number of critically acclaimed paddling videos. For more info head to www.gene17.com





As paddlers, when entering a rapid we only have control of our own paddling, we cannot change the water level, or move the hazards, or make the rapid easier. In this assumption, paddling is all task driven and as such the paddler should focus on the task at hand, not the one big rapid later on in the run, or their line on the last rapid. The paddling is right now, the experience is in the present and as such where are we going and what we need to do are the only fundamental questions we need answering! Therefore, the use of concise language to give clarity to those questions is pivotal to the paddlers in a group being focused on the task at hand. Simple instructions such as, 'enter on the right move to the left', is about as complicated as the language should get. The use of neutral terms that do not imply an outcome, are also very important.

When giving feedback, or simply sharing the moment on the river, the use of language is important. If someone has a great line, tell them so, if the line was not so good, comment on what parts were good, and go back and have another go with them. The development of roles within the group are important, and at the end of the day, these are the people you have chosen to share your paddling with, so you best enjoy the river together.

Before, After and on the River

There is no definitive list of do's and don'ts, and as such it's hard to give weighting to any specific point, as at any moment in time certain aspects of a situation may appear to be more important than other factors. What is important is that individual actions are considered, reflected upon and then possibly questioned by other individuals within the group. This is not to manufacture a confrontation, by being reflective and ultimately evaluating what works, improvements can be found from these positive actions.

Right from the planning of the trip, where to go, when to go and who will be part of the

group, the group dynamic starts to form. Look to bring paddlers who contribute to a positive dynamic, try to avoid having the club hero or head coach run the show both before and on the river. Try to avoid recounting wild river stories en route to the river or at the put in, bar stories are for the pub, and not the river. Everyone on the river has the same role, and that is to look after everyone else, communicate instructions through the group. Using the buddy system may introduce the concept of group awareness, but is limited in that you are only looking out for one other person, it's a group experience, and as such the group should work together to ensure everyone is on task and adding to the groups dynamic. It's not meant to be a group management project and certainly not solely the realm of the command and follow model, instead the trip is about a group of paddlers going kayaking working together to have positive outcomes and, most importantly, have fun.

At the first significant drop on a river, how the group functions, the promptness of the decisions, and the swiftness of the descent will indicate a lot about the dynamic within the group. If the drop needs everyone to inspect before any kayaking can be done, be sure everyone takes their throw-bag, paddlers can slip and fall in, and other groups may run the drop blind and you may need to rescue them! As a senior member of the group, ask people to look for their line, explain where you will go, and ask the group what they wish to do. When I'm coaching I select the most confident individual first and then the least able paddler. I speak to everyone individually as I do not wish other individuals to influence the personal judgment of specific paddlers. With the most confident paddlers readying themselves for the drop, I have those paddlers that are up for the drop but are not certain as to where to go or whether they wish to, go through an open task focused conversation, focusing on what to do, leaving them the question, 'do I wish to

go?" During which time I ask those paddlers who do not wish to run the drop to walk around straight away. This is in part to have rescue cover below the drop, and to make a change in decision a little more effort to undo. Why do I do this you may ask? It is because the individual's first decision is often their most rational, and to change their decision based on how someone else ran the drop, and to question their own ego's projection that they feel they're as good as the 'drop running' paddler, opens the door to ego-paddling.

When each paddler is ready to run the drop, they signal their readiness, the go signal descends through the line of paddlers, from those on the lip of the drop, down through the throw-bag team and safety boaters below and then echoes back up the line for the paddler to go. This signal should be clear and positive; no one waiting above the drop wants to see the go signal delivered by a less than enthusiastic paddler. These critical communications can influence a paddler's performance and resulting outcome. If someone did not run the drop to plan, or if the uncertain paddlers within the group are still not sure, have everyone who has run the drop do a few runs, it is often on the second run that the paddler is more focused on the task and not so concerned about a negative outcome. This tends to have positive influence on the less confident paddlers, and as such they can simply join in with the drop running party.

No matter what happens on an individual's run, it's all about those moments together, the feeling of nailing the boof, the smiles on your friend's faces and the adventures yet to be had. Building a positive group dynamic can take time, and it may mean you lose some individuals from your paddling crew who detract from the group's fun. The important thing is that our paddling is here and now, no one has the right to lessen your experience, only yourself if you choose to do so. So fire it, look to where you need to be, put a smile on your face and GO! 