



## Surmounting New Challenges: 5 Leadership Suggestions



***“The most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.”***

24-years ago today I participated as a crew member in the first ever crossing of the English Channel in a Chinese dragon boat, to raise money for Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Recently, I stumbled across some old memorabilia of that experience which evoked fond and powerful memories.

As I reflected on the success of this ambitious venture, in terms of achieving the crossing and fund-raising goals, it occurred to me that like so many things in life the most important thing is not the triumph but the struggle. That perhaps explains why I have always been drawn to the above quote from Pierre de Coubertin founder of the modern Olympic movement.

This, like so many other life experiences, shaped and influenced my approach to leading teams and achieving goals throughout my career.

Whilst there were many more learning outcomes from this expedition than those explored here-in. I thought it would be insightful to share some observations that leaders looking to harness the connective strength of teams might embrace. Especially in the context of facing, and successfully overcoming, new challenges.



### Purpose

*“Connecting people with a vision elicits initial engagement. However, connecting people with a purpose is more likely to secure collective responsibility and discretionary effort.”*

Prior to an initial meeting held at the Amathus Dragon Boat Club, at the Albert Dock in Liverpool, in January 1997 I was clear about the objectives to [a] cross the channel and [b] raise money for charity. But, I had absolutely no idea what a Chinese dragon boat was.

In all honesty, I turned up because my employer was a corporate sponsor of the expedition. As an aspiring young-man I was keen to please my boss who had suggested “it would be good for the department to be represented.”

Like so many people asked to join a team, with only a small amount of insight, my initial engagement level was low.

I now recognise the expedition leadership team understood the importance of engaging with the purpose and cleverly executed an uncomplicated strategy at that first meeting, to maximise engagement.

The expedition leader opened by explaining:

- the history of the Amathus Dragon Boat club and his involvement as a founding member,
- how it had been a life-long personal ambition to take a dragon boat crew across the channel,
- the magnitude of challenge ahead, the training schedule, and his personal expectations of us all.

Then, representatives from Guide Dogs shared with us the:

- exceptional work they do,
- the challenges of a charity competing for donations against many other worthwhile causes,
- costs associated with training dogs, and importantly how funds raised from this expedition would be spent.

Having slowly built a positioning message, the first morning concluded with presentations from our visually impaired crew members. They shared powerful life experiences and provided us with just a glimpse into how having a guide dog was, for some, a life enhancing experience. Not least because of the bond between the dog and its' owner.

Providing visibility of the importance of the fund-raising goal, and how that translated at a personal level to improving the lives of others, embedded a deep-rooted belief in the value of the endeavour.

The expedition leader, by sharing his hopes, dreams, and aspirations demonstrated passion and authenticity. That transparency made me feel connected, and aligned, at a personal level.

This collective ability by the leader and key-stakeholders to communicate an inspiring vision, and a deep sense of purpose, is what secured my commitment.

It was that connection to the purpose and the responsibility I felt to the team, because of that connection, that provided my resolve to dig deep during 6 months of training alone, at team training sessions, and at difficult times during the channel crossing. Even when I felt there is nothing left in the tank!



## Communication

*“When you delegate control; concise and effective communication, regular feedback, and confirmation of understanding is so important to building trust and confidence.”*

Like many of the absolute novices, I was keen to get into a dragon boat at that first meeting. Instead, that afternoon, I was afforded one of the most important experiences of my life.

Representatives from the Guide Dogs association and our visually impaired crew mates gave us an induction

on how to guide a visually impaired person which, as I subsequently reflect, perfectly demonstrates the importance of effective communication.

We were shown the ‘text-book’ approach and then rotated among our visually impaired crew mates and their spouse, partner, friend, or family members to observe them guide, and be guided.

Two things to note about guiding. As a guide you:

- do not hold the person you are guiding. They hold you. They place a hand on [a] your shoulder if you are walking in front or [b] your forearm if walking side by side as a means of interpreting non-verbal clues derived from the guides body language.
- must be capable of explaining clearly and concisely the environment and the potential hazards in the environment.

Having observed ‘best practice’ we were then partnered with our visually impaired crew mate and given the responsibility to learn to guide them.

**A good lesson for anyone in coaching. Having received a demonstration of what good looked like the first evolutionary experience as a guide was safe, short, and closely supervised.**

After we were introduced, and before I attempted to guide under supervision, my crew mate and I sat and talked. He took the time to explain to me the extent of his visual impairment and his own personal preference for how he liked to be guided.

He patiently and systematically explained to me, practical real-life examples of how to guide through doors, up and down stairs, in narrow corridors, across roads etc. He would pause and allow me the opportunity to practice my guiding. Afterwards he shared that he was actively listening to my words, pronunciation, tone. Therefore, while building my confidence to communicate in a clear and precise manner, he was improving his ability to listen, and reinforcing understanding through confirmation.

My first experience of guiding was terrifying. Similar, in many respects, to the experience of being handed my first child by the mid-wife a few years later. In that moment I felt a deep sense of responsibility and a crisis of confidence.

I use this analogy because, for me at least, guiding for the first time even supervised was being like an inexperienced parent. I felt the need to focus on the essentials and I was constantly seeking re-assurance: i.e., “am I doing it right”.

After an initial guiding experience with my crew mate, those of us without a visual impairment were then paired off to practice our guiding technique. Taking it in turns to be blind folded we, albeit briefly, experienced being guided ourselves.

**This was an excellent example of the importance of empathy and how that translates into how we communicate.**

Incidentally:

- to put your trust in someone else who has greater visibility is initially scary, but also very empowering, i.e.: to realise that you do not always have to be in absolute control of the journey once you have agreed the destination,

- at a purely personal level, whilst being blindfolded and confidently guided by someone else, I noticed the more we practised the more I became conscious of other things around me. My reliance on other senses heightened. Interesting that, in the context of how often we become so focused on one thing to the exclusion of others!



## Preparedness

*“Sudden and unwelcome disruption can arise at any time. Trained, knowledgeable, people with the capacity, and capability, to perform under pressure are more likely to deliver positive outcomes.”*

At the age of twenty-six having not done any regular exercise or competitive sport for eight-years and having lapsed into an unhealthy regime, I was not in the best of shape and there was no balance in my life.

I would come in from work at 6pm. Pour myself a large glass of single malt, shower, eat and start work at the kitchen table at about 8pm until the early hours of the morning. How easily bad habits creep up on us!

I remember thinking during that very first meeting that everyone in the room was better prepared than I was. For example: my visually impaired crew mate had already paddled a canoe around the entire Great British coast the year before.

Individual fitness was such an important factor in practice sessions at the Albert Dock, given the physicality involved in paddling a Dragon Boat. I was using muscles in my back, and core, I did not even realise I had and in those early days of training, I was hopeless.

The more I practised on the water, the more fatigue set in. I was puffing and blowing, making mistakes, and causing blade clashes with other paddlers because I couldn't keep pace.

In preparing to perform there was a need for me, driven by a personal accountability and collective responsibility, to make some radical and much needed life-style changes. The saying goes 'working all hours that god sends' had become the norm. But I was sustaining my discretionary work effort with the help of 2 bottles of red wine and a pack of Marlborough gold every evening.

I don't mention this because I want to explore the benefits of eating healthy, exercising regularly and work-life balance. We are all increasingly aware of those benefits. Instead, I wanted to explore preparing to perform from two different perspectives.

**Very often when we make plans it is the low frequency high-impact events (that seem too remote to comprehend) or things we take for granted that threaten or undermine the achievement of our goals.**

A few weeks before the attempted channel crossing, the boats were being moving from Liverpool down to Dover,

where we would undertake our initial sea trials and training.

The important thing to point out here is that a member of the support team was a serving officer in the RAF with extensive logistics experience. With his knowledge and experience, he was the obvious candidate to take charge of planning the means of transport, and the route.

On route, the trailer carrying the boats became unstable on the motorway. Tipping itself and the towing vehicle over. The driver and passengers sustained more than minor injuries, but not significant to require hospitalisation. Both dragon boats were also damaged.

If anyone had asked me prior to the accident "what are the biggest risks to the expedition success." Moving the boats did not figure in my thinking. Yet the consequential impact, as is so often the case with low frequency and high impact events, put the whole expedition at risk given the damage to the boats and the time available to effect repairs. In the context of a pre-determined and unmoveable crossing date.

The expedition leader blessed the boats, before they went into the water, on the day of the channel crossing and the boats progressed steadily out into open water, from the safety and shelter of the harbour wall for the first time. The difference in the sea conditions at the point we moved into open water was noticeable.

I cannot precisely recall the exact moment disaster struck! We had been at sea for about an hour, so very early on, when the sister boat to the one I was crewing capsized.

A gradual accumulation of water in the boat meant it was running low in the water. If that was possible. A relatively small wave rolled the boat and sunk it just below the surface of the water.

We 'checked our boat', which meant the boat was stopped and stabilised by the paddles of the crew and we watched on as our crew mates were one by one rescued from a cold sea and taken onboard the support vessel.

A few weeks earlier during our sea trials, of boats designed for rivers, the support vessel that was guiding us across the channel had been training alongside us at weekends. Within the safety of the harbour, protected by the sea wall, the skipper had used his high-powered boat to replicate the standing waves we could encounter when in open water.

We systematically practiced safety drills, based on both crews deliberately capsizing the boats or reacting to a capsize event created by the standing waves the support boat was emulating.

Even within the confines of the harbour wall these were, at first, very scary moments until all crew members in the water had been accounted for.

In practising for the prospect of a capsize event we learnt that the boats would remain buoyant, just below the surface. Importantly we practised how to re-float the boats, over and over, until we became proficient.

So, when disaster struck and our hearts momentarily sank, we understood the boat would not.

We also knew the other crew had the knowledge and experience to re-float the boat, and a level of competence capable of performing in adverse and stressful conditions. Which they did.



## Pace

*“One of the most over-used words in business to provide context for speed and urgency. Pace should mean the right pace, based upon the readiness of the team and the context of the situation.”*

Half of the expedition crew was made up of experienced, competitive, dragon boat racers from the Amethus club. The other half comprised complete novices like me.

Before being allowed into the boats' we had a paddle familiarisation session and an orientation on how to hold the paddle, and paddling technique, on the dockside at the Albert Dock. That was something we would replicate before every on-water training session as part of our warm-up routine.

The combination of mixed technical ability and base-level fitness resulted in frequent blade clashes in those initial weeks of on-water training. Early consequences were a lot of stopping and starting.

**Everyone was pulling in the same direction. Just not at the same time!**

The expedition leader and more experienced paddlers [with the right skills] had developed over years the important muscle groups and increased cardio-vascular capacity [the right tools]. They understood that they had to moderate their optimal performance level initially, to allow us novices the opportunity to develop slowly over a longer-period.

Continuity of rhythm, i.e.: over-coming the stop/start, was not achieved by an urgency to go fast. But instead, by realistically building momentum and forward thrust, slowly and sustainably.

**The above is an interesting illustration of a learning experience for any mixed ability team, but not why I wanted to explore the importance of pace.**

On the day of the channel crossing, having been at sea for about 4 hours, both boats had reached the perimeter of the shipping lanes. For those who do not already know, the English Channel is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world.

We were 'checking the boats' (which as stated above, meant the boat was at a full stop and held steady by the crew placing our paddles in the water) waiting for our support boat to indicate when we would make our move into the shipping lanes.

As we waited, sitting barely above the level of the water, we watched these enormous super-tankers and cross channel ferries passing in-front. Occasionally adjusting our position to prevent the standing waves from these huge vessels from overwhelming us.

To put it into context. We were the equivalent of a toddler standing on the pavement of a busy road, with a continuous stream of HGVs from both directions. Like a toddler we

had no experience of crossing or reference of time and distance. In this situation the support boat represents the accompanying parent.

As our training schedule evolved, so did the frequency of our on-water practice at the Albert Dock. On water training evolved from initially 1-2 hours to an exhausting 5-hours.

I mentioned above that pace [i.e.: urgency and speed] was not as important as achieving a steady rhythm at the outset of preparation. But as the stamina and technique of novice paddlers improved, so did our pace. As momentum, and confidence, built over-time.

The closer we got to the date of the scheduled crossing our stamina training (maintaining a steady pace with intermittent 10-15-minute bursts of speed) was replaced with more traditional dragon boat speed racing.

In a 5-hour practise session we would practice paddling flat-out for 45-60 minutes with short interval rest periods. It was exhausting. More than once I wondered why we were focusing on speed when my perception was the expedition was a marathon not a sprint!

The other thing we would do in training, as we improved, was to rotate positions in the boat. Rotation was important for three reasons. It:

- improved overall core and lower back capability and by changing sides on the boat it ensured a single set of muscle groups did not become over-stressed,
- allowed the coach to find the optimal formation [i.e.: positioning the strongest paddlers to put at the back of the boat for when power was needed and the fastest paddlers at the front for speed],
- provided resilience of cover and allowed opportunity for rest, during periods when paddling could afford to be more deliberate, and steady.

Boats at stop in the middle of the English Channel, on the edge of the shipping lanes the crew was rotated. At that moment, the boats were optimised for power and speed.

The signal came from the support boat to go.

In addition to the obvious time pressure and the need for speed, conditions on the water became more difficult and dangerous.

We were paddling towards tankers and cross channel ferries directly in-front that were generating larger standing waves than we had trained for. We were paddling for the gap that these monstrous vessels would leave as they passed by effortlessly and with surprising speed.

Paddling as hard and fast as our bodies permitted, mindful that we had to clear the shipping lanes before the tankers either side, and yet far off in the distance, bore-down on us.

At that point you are committed. There is no turning back!

Super-tankers and ferries cannot see you in their path. Whilst our support boat was in contact with approaching vessels, their size and momentum meant they could not stop or change direction in time if we got into difficulty.

My perception of pace is therefore perhaps different to most. Shaped and influenced by this experience.

Context can be a major determinant of pace. For example, when sudden unwelcome disruption or conversely an

external opportunity emerges, there is often a need to pivot quickly. I advocate the importance of pace in these situations.

But I frequently observe that leaders only use the word to prove context for urgency. "We must deliver at pace". How often have you heard that?

In my view this only serves to position unrealistic objectives, create unnecessary pressure, and in the absence of adequate preparedness (through no fault of individuals challenged to deliver at pace), often results in disappointment or failure.

**Pace should not mean urgency and speed on all occasions. Not least because people cannot sustain operating with zero headroom for sustained periods. They become burnt-out, however resilient they are.**



## Leadership

*"Leaders need to be visible at critical moments. Real time situational analysis, a consequence of being visible and connected to your teams, is so important when faced with difficult decisions."*

Ordinarily when I am discussing leadership, I promote what enlightened people already know. That is, leaders are not defined by a title, seniority, or job description and often the most effective leaders use influence rather than formal authority.

However, there are times when we look to those with the title, seniority, and ultimate responsibility to lead effectively and decisively. This is often at moments of opportunity, uncertainty, or adversity.

It was still dark outside when we arrived at the boat shed on the day of the channel crossing. I recall that before selecting the starting crews, and their boat positions, the expedition leader said a few personal words of encouragement to the group.

He expressed his pride in what we had already achieved. He recognised how we had evolved from a group of random individuals into a team and, he offered personal thanks for our hard-work and sacrifice now we were on the cusp of realising his long-time dream.

At a time of heightened anticipation, and apprehension, before we launched into the unknown it was comforting and reassuring to be told to trust in our training and in each other, as he trusted and believed in us. Individually and collectively.

We then carried the 1-tonne boats down to the edge of the sea and warmed up on the sandy beach, just as the sun was coming over the horizon.

Before putting the boats into the water, the expedition leader blessed the boats.

He then took his position, in the sister boat to the one I was crewing, as the steersman. Standing at the back of the boat, with full visibility of the crew and the external environment,

in constant contact with the specialist external resource (the support boat) and as the name suggests steering the course.

As expedition leader, especially given the context, his presence in one of the boats was invaluable. Constantly communicating progress, cheer-leading with words of encouragement, monitoring the performance and well-being of both crews, throughout the crossing.

When disaster struck, and the boat he was steering was rolled by a wave and capsized, his crew were rescued from the water. He stayed with the partially submerged Dragon Boat, leading by example efforts to bail and re-float it.

At that juncture, having experienced a serious capsized event from a relatively small wave and before the most hazardous part of the crossing, he alone bore the responsibility for the decision to turn-back or proceed.

In assessing the situation, I observed he:

- sought expert opinion from the support boat captain on the sea conditions, tide times, and weather forecast given the impact of the extensive delay, and
- consulted with all the crew, some of whom were extremely shaken by the experience of going into open water and, some who were also suffering with early on-set hypothermia, before reflecting and making the difficult decision to continue.

Four hours into the crossing and with the boats holding on the edge of the shipping lanes, no land in sight ahead or behind us, I was already physically worn-out.

Many of my crew mates were experiencing severe seasickness. The prospect of my not being able to paddle flat-out for an hour and letting my crew mates down was playing on my mind, more than crossing that shipping motorway.

The expedition leader took the courageous decision to proceed. Putting trust in our preparedness.

I've no doubt the decision will not have been easy given the very real risk to the crews' safety and, how earlier events will have influenced the decision-making process.

On reflection years later, and with the benefit of lived experience, I now recognise the most important aspect of the leader being present in the boat, with us, on the crossing. Whilst acknowledging the importance of cheer-leading and steering the right course etc... his real time observations throughout, and visibility at that critical moment:

- enabled him to make the best possible situational analysis, in real time, to inform decision making, and
- inspired confidence with the crew, i.e.: we truly were all in it together.

As I said earlier, once committed there was no going back.

Spurred on and with land insight, about a mile out from Calais, the crews' side by side started our last burst towards the beach at Sangatte. Perhaps most notable now as a preferred launch point for migrant boats heading to the UK. Poor souls, how desperate they must be.

Both boats beached together at 4.19pm on Sunday 20 July 1997, having set off from Dover at 7.49am.

In concluding, I offer the following observation on the

importance of leadership. When faced with complex and difficult challenges. When the journey takes longer than planned and requires additional, sometimes discretionary, effort. Teams benefit from:

- having personally connected with their leader,
- a leader explaining the importance of their purpose,
- personal and collective responsibility, defined by their leader,
- effective and regular communication with a leader who cheers them on,
- training that prepares them to perform under-pressure, facilitated by their leader,
- a leader who sets the right pace based upon the situational context, and



*Leaving Dover Harbour - 29 miles to go*

- a true leader who knows there are some decisions only they can take and has the courage to be decisive, even when there is risk and uncertainty.

Because, when subject to external influences 'as planned' activities can bear little resemblance to the actual 'as achieved' route, which is usually non-linear.

**Despite the twists and turns of real-life situations, which are often more complex, more difficult, and occasionally more interesting, leaders do not lose sight of the ultimate objective or, the importance of engagement with purpose, effective communication, preparedness, pace and ultimately teamwork.**



*James Howard (left) with buddy Steve McDonald, tired but triumphant at Cap Blanc, France*