

White Water Kayaking

This week I took some time to reflect on my memories of when I truly enjoyed White Water Kayaking and how some things really influenced me later in in life in Leadership roles.

At an early age I was introduced to White Water Kayaking. When travelling down the road if you saw another car with boats strapped to the top you likely knew who the driver was and how skilled they were at the sport (the early adopters) whereas today you can find many cars with boats on top and have no idea of their skill level ... (the veneer followers).

As I slowly became involved in the competitive side of the sport I started to understand that we had one of two different types of a competitive challenge. 1) you could participate in the strictly competitive down river race where you had to accomplish the shortest time from the starting point to the finish line or 2) the slalom event where you had to navigate down the course through a series of gates typically around 20 or so.

Down River racing was like doing mass production where skill was minimal but you relied heavily on your strength and the state of your equipment ... the lightest boat and a strong paddle. Whereas in Slalom you really needed skill and the ability to read water currents to accomplish the best overall lapsed time ... indeed equipment was important but it may not actually portraint the overall potential accomplishment. So Slalom racing was like doing a Mixed-Model or small lot production.

In both Down River and Slalom racing the key to having a competitive edge was that as an operator you needed to practice and practice a lot. Practice helped to create muscle memory that could be recalled once you were in a competitive environment. But was practice enough?

NO !!!! We needed an observer or what is also known as a coach. The coach would look at your style and give you tips to improve your technique, how to eliminate time wasters and most importantly mentally challenge you to go that extra distance ... later in life these coaches would become known as Team Leads, Supervisors and Managers.

So as I approached my first competitive race I asked my coach what should I do in the starting gate ... his answer was simple. As the starter is holding the back of your boat and begins the count-down you reach inside to produce the strongest paddle stroke followed by an even stronger paddle stroke and as the count ends an your race begins with your ultimately strongest paddle stroke and you keep that pace until your race is completed.

Hence later in life while working you need to give your best and sustain this energy during your daily engagement while being totally engaged within your environment.

You need to be aware of your environment but will likely rely on your muscle memory to accomplish tasks that you learned during practice.

If you always do what you have always done, then you will always get what you have always got.

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Lessons from my Paddling Days

So what else did I learn during those formative years? ...

Start Strong ... if you do not have a strong start the rest of the race will likely be awful and you will be discouraged right from the start and this discouragement will only amplify during the race.

When you are competing in a Slalom event even though your overall time will determine your ranking, the race actually consists of several mini races joined together. Let me explain ... in a Slalom race you are challenged to navigate through a series of gates (typically 20-23) you gain penalties if you miss a gate or touch a gate. If you view the race one gate at a time then if you blow one sequence it will not discourage you for the entire race ... hence I am a real believer of Hourly Run Boards.

When I started racing Slalom the rules stated that the end of the pole had an imaginary line that continued through the water to the bottom of the river so you really needed perfect technique to navigate the course ... later that rule was changed that the pole penalty ended where the pole ended ... this dramatically changed the way we raced as the sport now embraced "Sneak Boats" .. Now all we need to concentrate on was the orientation of the boat and make sure we never touched a pole. Weight to boat volume became a huge KPI if you intended to win and as you approached a gate you focused on submerging your boat to sneak under a gate ... or as I now know as SMED to externalize the motions that could impact our set-up.

One of my biggest learnings to this date stems from the following ...

My coach or observer was not big on giving complements or acknowledging our capabilities. I was not the strongest or most capable paddler on our team but I did have a need to be acknowledged and perhaps complemented. But try as I did, it never seemed to happen.

So frustrated with my coach I decided to take a week away from work to really concentrate on my paddling. I went to our practice area and focused on improving my elapsed time ... I worked hard to improve my skill and technique and over the course of several days I really did accomplish a significant improvement. So I started to eagerly look forward to our next team practice where the coach would be present and how could he not be impressed with my accomplishment.

Our team practice day arrived and there he stood with his stop watch and clip board next to the side of the river. I paddled my sequence and within my soul I knew that I did a personal best ... I slowly glided next to the coach and glanced into his eyes looking for that compliment or acknowledgement of a sequence well done ... but the response was

"You didn't fall in"

What? I exclaimed ... the purpose is not to fall into the water. The coach responded by stating that he could see that I had improved but since I did not fall into the water I did not have a new edge and that was the purpose of practice where it is OK to fail.