

Confidence To Paddle

George Fell looks at the role of confidence in a paddler's development...



Meet the team. Emma is a solo open boater, who's really driven to improve. She turns up to every coaching session, and always wants to do more. When she started learning to canoe she really struggled accelerate it. She asked for some tips, watched a load of video clips, found some changes that worked for her and practised them. Since she started canoeing about five years ago it has become a really big part of her life.

Henry is a white water kayaker. He loves going paddling, but he's less enthusiastic about getting coached. He does occasionally turn up to his club's coached session, but he feels like he's being told a load of basic stuff that he already knows. When he messes up a line on a rapid, he gets frustrated with himself and feels like he ought to be able to do better.

Jamie enjoys sea kayaking. She's been boating for years, but feels like she isn't getting any better. Her friends are starting to paddle more committing trips and she finds herself torn between wanting to paddle with her friends, but not wanting to hold them back. She finds herself finding reasons to justify dropping out of those trips.

Why do different boaters behave totally differently to one another? Why does one paddler get fired up by a challenge when another backs away from it? Why does one paddler seem completely unaffected by a potentially serious swim, whilst for another having a minor wobble is a huge setback?

In this edition of Coaching Corner we're going to look at the role that confidence plays in a paddler's enjoyment

and development. Specifically their confidence in their abilities as a paddler - sports psychologists might refer to this as self-efficacy.

As coaches we work to develop a paddler's skills and rightly so - a paddler who's confident to try a move but doesn't have the skills to achieve it is going to fail, but equally a paddler who lacks the confidence to try a move is never going to find out whether or not they can do it, and is going to struggle to improve. Sometimes the paddler's belief in what they can achieve with their skills is as important as the skills themselves.

How do we help paddlers build their confidence?

● From their experience

It's often said that success breeds success. It's much easier to believe that you can achieve something if you've already achieved something similar.

As coaches we can help the learners choose achievable goals, to help them break those goals down into achievable, bite sized chunks, and we can help them make links between a new challenge and one they've already achieved (for example "in the middle of the next rapid we need to slow our canoe down and ferry across the flow, that's just the same move we were practising a couple of rapids ago". We can celebrate their successes and help them notice their progression.

● From other people's experience

Sometimes a big step to believing that you can do something is knowing that it can be done. In the last coaching corner

we looked at the role of demonstrations in our coaching. Sometimes the demo just shows that it can be done. "Site Zed" rapid on the Stikine or was a portage until Ben Marr paddled it - now it gets paddled most years. As coaches we might demo a move, but a successful demo from another paddler at a similar standard to the person we're coaching might be even more effective in building their belief. Potentially the demonstration doesn't even have to be real - for some paddlers visualising a successful outcome helps them build their confidence to try it.

● Telling them

Sometimes all it takes is for the coach to let the paddler know that you think they can do it. Of course this comes with some risks attached; in the long term I don't want the paddlers I'm working with to be dependent upon me for their decisions, plus if I say that I think they can do it and they blow it, will they still believe what I have to say?

● Emotional state

I'm going to make an artificial distinction here between how people are feeling on the day (their normal ups and downs) and their more stable traits (how they tend to feel about themselves). In terms of their emotional state on the day, the better we know the paddler we're working with, the more we can be attuned to their mood and adapt our coaching accordingly. The venue, the task and the feedback might all be influenced by their emotional state as much as by their technical needs.

One interesting theory (reversal theory)

suggests that paddlers are generally in either a playful or a serious frame of mind and can switch suddenly from one state to the other. It seems to me that in the serious frame of mind paddlers often want lots of structured tasks; to believe they can succeed, they often want lots of information about how to do a task and perhaps also why they're doing it.

In the playful frame of mind they often just do it; or invent another challenge of their own. They're fully engaged in their paddling and their 'inside voice' is quiet. In that moment I don't think the paddler is aware of how confident they feel, but if they're not feeling confident in the environment to start with, they'll find it hard to ever get into that playful frame of mind. If we push the task too hard, too long, make the environment too difficult, give the wrong sort of feedback or just tire them out, we'll probably switch them from playful to serious.

I think it's much harder to change the way people feel about themselves in the long-term, and probably something that's outside our expertise. That said, here are a couple of ideas that could be useful to us as paddlesport coaches;

Mindset concerns itself with how much paddlers think they can change how good they are at boating, and how they know how good they are. At one end of a spectrum (fixed mindset), paddlers believe that their ability is relatively fixed, so that if you're rubbish at surfing, then you're destined to remain rubbish at it forever. If you fail to catch the wave, it shows that you're rubbish at it, so your confidence plummets. If your friend catches the wave, then they're simply better at it than you, and there's nothing you can do about it.

In contrast, with a growth mindset you can change your ability. If you're rubbish at surfing you can either decide it's not that important to you or you can decide to improve. If you want to improve, you do that by practising. If you fail to catch the wave, that might even motivate you practise harder instead of destroying your confidence in your ability as a paddler.

One great way of looking at mindset is the significance of the word 'yet'. It changes the sentence 'I can't surf' (fixed mindset) into the sentence 'I can't surf yet' (growth mindset).

I think that most of us have some situations where we exhibit a growth mindset and others where we exhibit a fixed mindset. If a fixed mindset is limiting a paddler's development, it's unlikely to change overnight.

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Some strategies that might help are:

- Praising effort rather than outcome e.g. 'well done – you really gave it everything on that run'
- Giving feedback about the change in performance over time rather than the performance itself e.g. 'Can you remember how that rapid went this time last year? You're looking so much smoother!'
- Avoiding comparing the paddler's performance to other people's
- Simplifying the task or environment to produce successes
- Introducing the paddler to the idea of mindset.

Identity concerns itself with who people who paddle actually think they are. Do they primarily see themselves through the lens of their gender, age, job, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, or some other way? Critically for us, do they identify themselves as a paddler. It's the difference between 'I'm a person who does a bit of paddling' and 'I'm a paddler'.

Of course both of these viewpoints are fine, and both can lead to paddlers who are motivated/demotivated, happy/unhappy, great performers/terrible performers, but a person who strongly identifies themselves as a paddler, perhaps with a fixed mindset, who links both their confidence and their self-worth to their ability to perform out on the water, is likely to be pretty unhappy when they can't achieve a move.

When we coach people who strongly identify as paddlers, we need to be aware that we're not just changing their performance, sometimes we're undermining beliefs that are part of who they are. It's not surprising that they sometimes resist us!

Let's look back at the paddlers we met at the start of the article and use some of the ideas in the article to look at them.

Emma approaches canoeing with a growth mindset. Canoeing is a big part of her identity. She seems really motivated. As a coach, as long as I can keep up with what she wants and what she needs I think she'll stay motivated.

For Henry, white water kayaking is a big part of his identity. He may bring a bit of a fixed mindset to his paddling. If I was coaching Henry, it'd be really important

for me to know why he was there. Not just what he wanted out of the day, but why he'd turned up to be coached. Was it really his choice or was there an external reason (e.g. the club says you need this qualification in order to take part in these trips)?

It'd be really important not just to meet his needs, but also to value his views and experience. If I wanted him to change an aspect of his paddling, I might approach it by offering the change as an option, and asking him to either test it, or find out what the pros and cons are compared to what he currently does. If I come up against a brick wall of 'no – you do it this way', then I need to back off.

Being part of a social group of paddling friends is a big part of why Jamie paddles. As her friends are pushing onto harder trips, she feels torn; her lack of confidence in her paddling ability makes her want to avoid them, but taking part in those trips is part of her identity.

If I was coaching Jamie, I'd want to have an idea of her actual paddling ability (i.e. is it her confidence in her ability or her ability that's holding her back?) If it is about confidence, I'd want to get at whether or not she really does want to progress in to those harder environments. If she does, then we'd need to work together to come up with plan to gradually progress her into pushier environments.

Alongside that we'd need ways for her to communicate how she's feeling, so we know when to change the plan. We could also work on some temporary coping strategies for when the environment is too hard. Clearly we'd need to already know each other pretty well and trust one another to be able to have those conversations.

As always, these stories come with the caveat that they just represent my opinions. People are really complicated, I'm convinced that nobody really knows how brains work, so if these ideas and stories help you coaching, that's great. If they don't – find something else that works for you!

In the next issue of Coaching Corner, we're going to continue thinking about confidence, look at some more tools to help build it, and think about how it affects not just the paddlers we're working with, but also us as coaches.