

In Search Of The Stoke

In this article George Fell and Georgina Maxwell ask what we can do as coaches, to help paddlers and groups of paddlers stay 'stoked'...

Here's a thought: if people enjoy their paddling; if they really, really love it, then they'll keep on doing it. If they keep on doing it, performing to the best of their ability and challenging themselves, they'll get better.

As the snowboarders would put it: 'it's all about the stoke'. Being out on the water, playing in the environment with a group of like-minded people, encouraging each other to try new moves.

Tune into the paddler

Most individuals who seek out coaching are already motivated to progress. So we should start by listening to them; what is it that they really want – what do they value in paddling (bearing in mind that it might change as they develop)? Without a shared vision of where we're trying to get to, how will we know what success looks like?

What are the goals for the current task, what are the goals for the day, what are their long term aspirations? Should these be common knowledge across the group, or are they best kept private? Can we set it up so the paddlers review their own

progress or even plan their own tasks and development, helping them to become more independent of the coach?

Does the paddler work through thoughts or feelings? Information or activity? If I'm coaching from the water I'll often start the session by doing a few moves, and notice who tries to copy me without needing any explanation.

Is the paddler looking for improved performance, or is it more about feeling and flow, about the friendship that comes from being part of a group, or is it something more spiritual that comes from being out on the water?

How do we avoid dampening a paddler's enthusiasm whilst we're trying to change their performance?

Can we encourage them to celebrate their attitude and effort as well as their successes? As coaches our feedback, (and everything else we do), demonstrates what we value. Do we really value effort and learning over achievement?

Can we encourage them to learn from their failures? Can we choose tasks that

provide the right mix of success and failure?

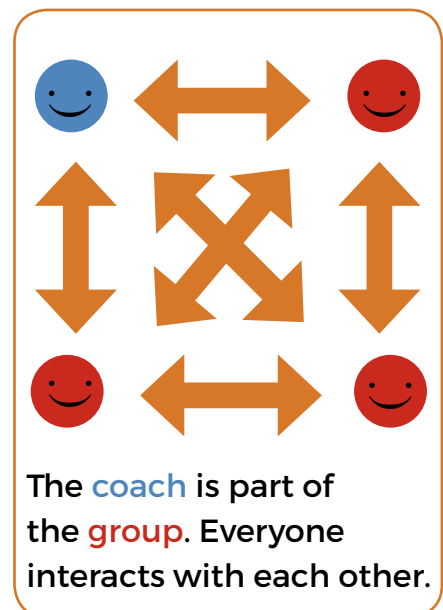
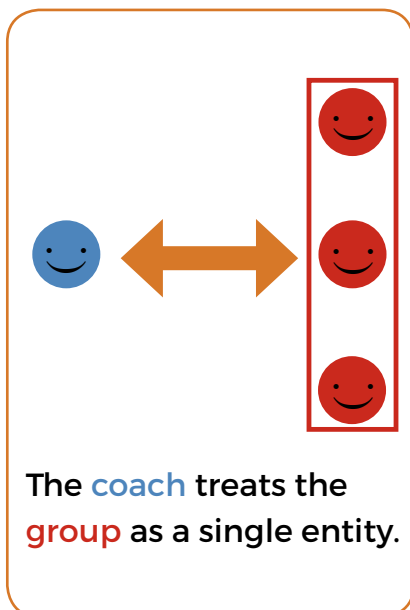
As coaches, I wonder if we're sometimes guilty of going too deeply into the technical, too early on; reaching an overload point where a paddler's performance falls to bits, diminishing their belief in their paddling abilities.

Perhaps we need to understand where the paddler is on their journey. Whether it's time to get all technical or if it's time to go and have some adventures. If a paddler arrives wanting to get into the technical nitty-gritty, with extremely high expectations of themselves, when what they actually need is some practice time, then we've got a real coaching challenge. How do we change their expectation from "tell, tell, tell, watch me, do it like me" into "let's play"?

Tune into the group

For some paddlers, it's all about their own individual experiences out on the water. For others it's all about the social vibe that comes from being part of a group.

If we're working with a group who don't know each other, can we help them get to



know each other? Can we set a task that involves the whole group, or that has them working together in smaller teams? Most people seem to be happier to challenge themselves and develop when they feel they're part of a supportive group.

There's a wonderful feeling of accomplishment when you move forwards in your paddling; that thing that you couldn't do has just become a new thing that you can do. It's great when you can share it with other people. It's even better when members of the team start to work together to complete or even set their own challenges, inspiring each other.

If we've got a group who don't know one another, we don't need to wait until they're physically on the water together before we start trying to develop the team. If the paddlers want it, social media allows the coach to build a relationship with our clients, show interest in their journey and give them the opportunity to get to know each other a bit before they get out on the water.

Working with a team rather than a group of individuals involves handing over more of the controls of the coaching session. As coaches I feel we can generally influence where a one to one coaching session is going, after all, we own half of the conversation. Often as coaches we're in a position of power where the paddler has bought into going along with our plans in return for (hopefully) improving their paddling.

We don't have anything like the same influence over the group dynamic; it's collaborative thing that evolves on its own. We can try to nudge it along, but we can't control it. What we do and how we behave will influence a group as much as what we say. Can we be a role model; being willing to try new things and make mistakes? Some coaches seem to have a great knack of evolving groups that can support, nurture, but also challenge one another.

A lot comes down to how we see our interaction with groups. Which of these

pictures is closest to the way you coach a group of paddlers? Are there different situations that suit those different approaches?

Tune into the community

All of our coaching takes place against the backdrop of the wider culture of the sport; the club, your group of paddling buddies, the centre you're working for, or even the SCA.

Hopefully the paddlers we're coaching can find some positive role models who inspire and encourage them. As coaches, can we help paddlers to keep motivated by signposting them to, or even helping to create positive communities and networks for their future?

A huge thanks to Georgina Maxwell for co-writing this article. In the next coaching corner we're going to look at how to help paddlers who've lost their paddling mojo.

ISLE OF SKYE SEA KAYAKING SPECIALISTS

Skills development and coaching for all abilities

Tailored skills courses

Personal performance awards






Multi-day expeditions

Discounts available for group bookings

07592 059577

www.southskyesekayak.co.uk

  [southskyesekayak](https://www.facebook.com/southskyesekayak)

 southskyesekayak@gmail.com