Crew: Rowing in an 8

Crew is in many ways the ultimate team sport. There are no individual star performers in a crew, only successful teams. Cornell University women's crew team competes against the best college crews in the U.S. While technical skill and strength are enough to move a boat, relationships and quality of coordination among the members create team success or failure. This video is filmed at Cornell's practice site on Lake Cayuga, New York. This interview of the women's crew was conducted before an important race.

Rowing Terms

- Cox, coxan - person sitting in the stern (rear of boat) facing both the direction in which the boat is moving and the rowers - navigates, instructs, leads the boat.
- Stroke - the lead rower, sits next to the cox
- Drive - when the rowers pull the oars through the water (contrast with recovery)
- Ratio - the relationship between the speed of the drive and the speed of the recovery (The speed of the recovery should be slower.)
- Recovery - when rower slides forward, with oars out of water, getting ready for the next drive
- Port - left side of boat
- Starboard - right side of boat

I. High Performance

Of all the teams these women have rowed with, none can compare to the performance of the team they were part of in their freshman year. This team always won. Members describe their first year together where they became a "family," living in the same house, rowing together throughout their freshman year, becoming friends. Although the individual team members have rowed with other teams in subsequent years, whenever they do get together, this team wins. As one member describes it, "We are happy that…our family is back together again." The special synergy of a high performing team is referred to as "sing," when the human and technical aspects of the boat are perfectly synchronized. This segment emphasizes the capacity of the team to focus its attention on high performance. It can be used to illustrate the classic case of how, in a group, "the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts."

Key Words

"effortless"
"It was easy."
"We had an attitude."
"There is no MVP (most valuable player) in crew."
"We had swing."

Before viewing the video, ask the class to watch the first segment, looking for an answer to the

following question: What are the factors that make this team more than just a collection of skilled, strong athletes? Class members will note that shared individual beliefs about the team's capabilities enhance performance in ways that cannot be predicted from individual level skill or strength.

The concept of aspiration level is relevant here since groups with strong shared beliefs in their performance potential are likely to perform more effectively than groups where members do not agree on the group's potential or share the belief that its potential is low. After viewing the video, ask the class this question:

Why are strength and technical skills not enough to win a race?
Answers typically include the following:

- Confidence in each other increases performance.
- Knowing that each is good at her own individual role (stroke is good, cox is good, etc.) increases aspiration levels regarding how well they can perform as a team.
- Lack of stress or worry about their competence permits members to focus on being a team.

Note to the class that the language the crew members have used reflects concepts that are not at the individual level (e.g., a perception) per se, but rather represent shared beliefs (attitudes and cognitions) at the team level. This discussion can be used as a basis for introducing concepts which create shared beliefs at the level of the team, such as:
   Accountability
   Membership or Identity
   Role Clarity
   Confidence

II. Adjectives that describe the best crew.

The women interviewed in segment I are now asked to describe their experience of this high performing team. They use such words as:

Key Words

   "unified"
   "in control"
   "confidence that we will be a fast boat"
   "excited to be rowing … our family is united again"

Before viewing segment II, ask the class to list the ways a high performing crew would describe itself. After watching segment II, note the similarities (usually dealing with cohesion and confidence). What does the class think of the use of "family" as a description? Why might "family" be an important descriptor for success in a crew? The instructor should note that

winning is not a common outcome from the racing, and people may need other motivators, such as peer support and relations to sustain commitment.

III. Poor Performance

This segment opens with a coach debriefing the crew's performance at the last race. The crew had performed poorly.

Key Words

"trying to do our own thing"

Before viewing the video, ask the class what factors can create poor performance. Then, watch the video. This brief segment focuses on how individual focus on one's own performance can undermine results.

The next three segments deal with performance criteria, the importance of practice, and the effects of role differences in a team. These three brief segments can be viewed together to illustrate how the nature of the task and task structure can shape team performance. The two previous videos in the series highlighted the dynamics of a string quartet and a computer emergency response team (CERT). String quartets take years to master their task while CERT teams have fluid membership, working on an ad hoc, on call basis. In contrast, crews typically train together, with somewhat varying team composition from practice to practice and race to race.

Before viewing the next three segments, ask the class what occupations are similar to crew. What makes these occupations similar to crew? What makes these occupations different from crew? Highlight performance criteria, opportunities for practice versus actual performance (racing), and the kinds of roles members play.

IV. Criteria for Success

Although winning is a clear criterion for crew success, it is not the only indicator of effectiveness. As one member puts its, "If success were just measured in terms of winning, some of us wouldn't be here." Members describe the personal dimensions of success they have experienced, including: developing self-confidence, closeness with team members.

Key Words

"a new day every time you get into the boat" "closeness as a team"

V. Practice and Performance

Crews spend most of their time practicing in preparation for relatively few races. Practice success becomes a necessary condition for winning.

Key Words

"You cannot do anything in a race you haven't done in practice."
"There are so few races, there are so few second changes."

VI. Roles

A cohesive team is built around members, expert in their own individual roles, whose teammates have confidence in them. Role competence and role clarity are critical for high performance where members are not substitutable and need to perform individual tasks extremely well. The two roles described in the crew are cox and stroke. The cox, who leads the boat, needs to be confident, in control, alert and aggressive to convey a commitment to winning, and trust in their ability to give appropriate direction. The stroke, the lead rower who sets the pace for the others, needs to be confident in her own abilities and create confidence in others. Between the two of them, the cox and stroke, decide on the strategy during the race.

Key Words

"Everyone is confident that the stroke is the best person for the job."
"When the cox and stroke work together . . . everyone will go with her."
"I like to hear in their voice that they want it."

Teams often have members performing different roles. Not only do role performers need to be competent, but the team's confidence in the individuals" ability to perform their roles is critical to team success (reinforces segment 2).

After viewing these three segments, ask the class:

1. How can motivation be sustained when opportunities to actually perform are relatively few?
2. Teams spend more time practicing than racing, in contrast to many teams at work (e.g., manufacturing teams perform every day). How might teams that spend more time practicing be managed differently?
3. In many new forms of teams (e.g., political campaigns, virtual teams, etc.), each member has somewhat different duties. How do these role differences influence their ability to communicate, coordinate, and work together?