

the good **COXSWAIN**

U S I N G T H E V O I C E



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*"First,
learn the
meaning
of what you
say and
then speak"*

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

The coxswain's coat-of-arms, if there were to be one, would have a shield decorated with two items that represent their stock in trade – the first would depict the steering element of the job and the second, the speaking element. Perhaps each could be represented on the coat-of-arms with a rudder and megaphone.

These are essentially the foundations upon which a coxswain's role is developed. Once again, in this chapter we will avoid the tedious jargon that usually peppers any description of the coxswain's role. It is important to see the common-sense elements of the coxswain's role before making it overtly technical. Rest assured that what enables others to use their voice well and to be effective communicators is also true **for coxswains whose voice is their singular most important tool.**

3.2 KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

A good coxswain, like a good speaker must command the attention of his audience. To do this well the coxswain must first know his audience. This might be in the literal sense by knowing the name of each crewmember – this will assist in developing a fully responsive crew and make closer communication possible. But the cox can also 'know your audience' by knowing what they need. What do rowers need from coxswains?

Succinctly, those needs can be summed up in one word: "**Direction**". But it is a word that has many far reaching connotations for the rower and coxswain.

Physical Direction

When a **coxswain decides how to negotiate a course for the crew** and answers such questions as: "when are we to row, who is to row, how hard are we to row, are we moving fast enough, where are we to row and are we safe to continue?"

Mental Direction

When a **coxswain decides how to motivate the crew** and answers such questions as: "how good are we, can we do this, what do we want, where are our opposition, are we improving, can we win and what should be our mind set now?"

Technical Direction

When a **coxswain decides how to help improve the way a crew is rowing** and answers such questions as: "are we moving together, are we using our full effort, what is our rate, are we doing everything in the right order, are we adding anything that we shouldn't, what can we do to improve and what is our technical focus, now?"

When I started coxing, I was determined to impress my crew that I was a good cox. I had listened hard to the older girls that were coxing the seniors and I had memorised their calls. I really wanted to try these calls out.

The one I liked the most was "Easy all, let it run." It was usually said with a long 'e' in "easy" with a very sharp, short "all" on the end, something like: "Eeeeeaaaasy all!" I couldn't wait for the crew to start so that I could stop them. Stopping looked like the fun call - it was kind of musical. When the time came I filled my lungs and let fly with a great "Eeeeeaaaasy all". The crew stopped rowing - I was pleased.

The crew wasn't pleased, nor were other crews - I had made the call too late during the stroke, as the oar left the body, it should have been as the oar went in the water. But more importantly, I hadn't noticed that there was a crew immediately behind us. They made some contact at the stern of our stopped boat. I haven't forgotten - the right words, on their own, would not make me a good cox.

Judy Taylor, Coxswain

3.2 KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE cont'd...

Knowing what the rowers (the coxswain's audience) need doesn't necessarily mean that those needs can be met, especially if the coxswain has very little experience and has not been given direction. But then again, the coxswain can ask his own questions of the crew and of his coach.

The cox can ask the crew before starting the training session
“What do you want – what can I say that would help?”

The coxswain of an inexperienced crew may only receive very basic answers from his crew in answer to these questions, but remember, it is your “audience” and it is what they want. They don't need a very technical coxswain – they need someone that understands them and what they want at their level.

Any further direction must come from the coach via the coxswain – so coxswains should make the effort, before heading out with a crew, to know what the coach also needs from his coxswain. The cox should be clear on this and be prepared to ask questions (*refer to page 14*). Most coaches would want these very same “directions” from their coxswain but there will be a certain emphasis placed on some aspects more than others – the good coxswain will know what these are. The good coach should be able to tell him.

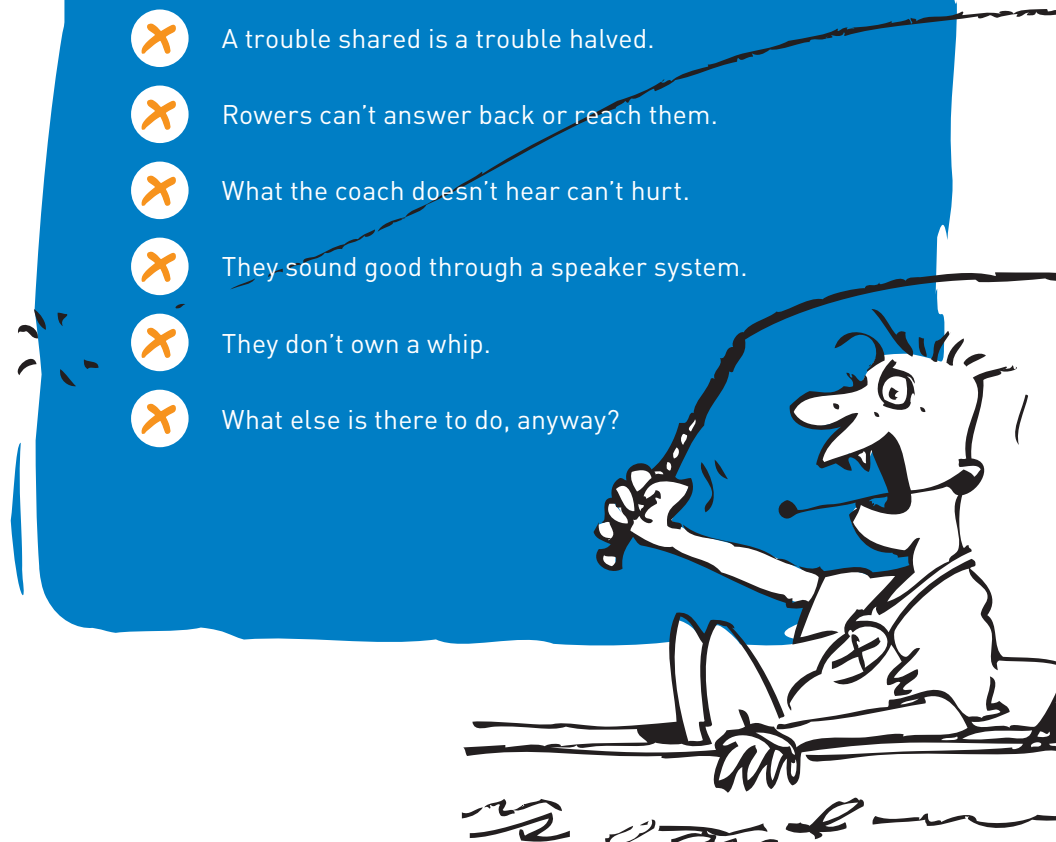
3.3 KNOW YOUR PURPOSE

Let's take the good speaker analogy a little further. The good coxswain, like the good speaker, knows not only to whom he is speaking but why he is speaking (*we have covered some of this already*). **It is a common fault of coxswains to think that they are failing their crew if there is not a continuous flow of words coming from their mouth.** There will always be a fine line between too much said and not enough said – it is best resolved by knowing why you are speaking.

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... SPEAKS BECAUSE

- ✗ They can.
- ✗ It is the only exercise they get.
- ✗ Exclamation marks are an endangered punctuation.
- ✗ The rowers aren't listening anyway.
- ✗ A trouble shared is a trouble halved.
- ✗ Rowers can't answer back or reach them.
- ✗ What the coach doesn't hear can't hurt.
- ✗ They sound good through a speaker system.
- ✗ They don't own a whip.
- ✗ What else is there to do, anyway?



The good coxswain is speaking because he knows that he can make a positive difference and can give direction to the crew. Rowers will quickly become aware of anyone in the boat whose motivation is not for the crew, coxswains included. Words, words and more words are only that if they have no central, positive purpose.

The coxswain should think about what they are going to say and be sure that it will be helpful to the crew.

3.4 KNOW HOW TO DELIVER

So now you are ready to speak – the good coxswain knows his audience (*crew*) and knows his purpose (*what his crew needs*); now the cox must know how he can deliver.

Unfortunately, the greatest intentions can be sadly let down by poor delivery – **it is not just the thought that counts**. No one appreciates the birthday card that was never posted! No one appreciates the coxswain that can't communicate with a crew. Coxswains must be able to deliver 'direction' to their rowers by the best and most reliable means.

For the coxswain there are **five key elements** to guarantee successful delivery of direction to the crew:

Volume - The voice must be loud enough for all to hear



Keep your head up. Speak with confidence. Check the coxbox. Intend to speak to the person who is the greatest distance from the cox. Speak loudly without yelling. More often an increase in voice intensity is better than increased volume.

Clarity - The voice must be clear enough to be understood



Speak slowly. Use pauses for emphasis. Check the coxbox. Vary your delivery i.e. loud/quiet, fast/slow, high/low, more/less. Not every sentence/command should use an exclamation mark. A deep voice is better than a high shrill voice.

Timing - The voice must be used when appropriate



Interrupt the coach only when necessary. Allow rowers to come down from their aggressive/competitive high after racing. Speak only when you have something worthwhile to say. Be prepared to listen. Don't deliver too much all at once. Give the crew time to think. If expecting change, warn the crew in advance with counting. Count the strokes at the exact same moment every time i.e. at the catch. Let the crew listen to the boat.

Authority - The voice must command a response

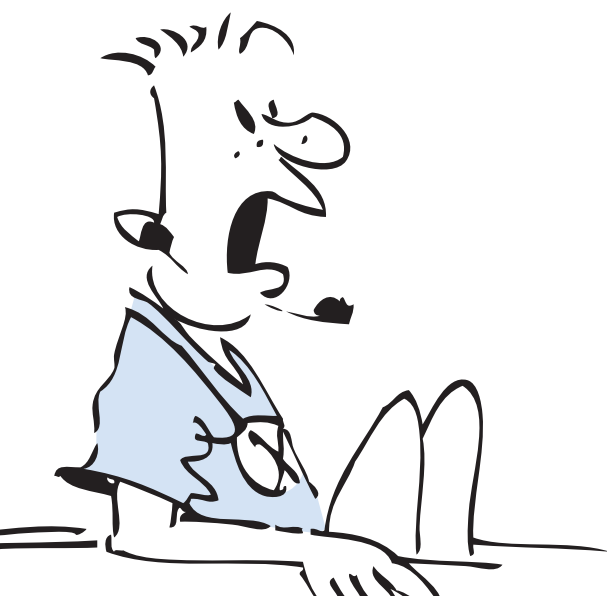


Maintain professionalism on the water. A command should not sound like a question. Use high volume only when necessary. Too much voice lessens authority. Familiarity can breed contempt. Speak to each crewmember by seat name or name. Use a strong and assertive voice. **Remain calm and relaxed – in control.**

Motivation - The voice must be positive and encouraging



Keep your commands crisp. Always follow up a criticism with either a suggestion or a compliment. Always seek an instant response. Let them know how they are going. Spread all comments evenly throughout the crew. Avoid repetitiveness. Do not overload. A panicked voice will encourage panic, a confident voice will encourage confidence – have the voice that reflects the type of rowing you want.



I was one of those coxswains that thought my anger was me being assertive. My crew hated me for it. I thought to be loud I had to be angry. The crew just thought I was psycho. Why would they take notice of a psycho?

Brodie Brown,
Coxswain

When a crew is going really well, you will hear a really good coxswain - confident, controlled, just like her crew.

Tess Hauser, Coxswain

I complained to the coach about the crew not listening to me, "You reap what you sow, boy. If you want respect then you will treat the crew with respect - they are not your personal whipping horse. If you want them to listen then respect them! You hollerin' at them and bitchin' about all the things they're doin' wrong is not respect!"

Xavier Bourke, Coxswain

All of these factors contribute to the overall tone in the boat. **If the coxswain is unable to communicate with precision, strength and confidence then he is risking the quality of the rowing.**

The cox must be the "soundtrack" to which the rowers perform. If that "soundtrack" is positive, methodical and in control then the boat will be the same. If the "soundtrack" is loud, panicked, nervous or stressed (or, alternatively, disinterested), the same characteristics will transmit to the rowers.

Different circumstances will always call for different means of communicating, especially during a race or race practice. It is too easy to get wound up during times of competition or stress. As the intensity increases the coxswain's voice needs to remain calm and relaxed. He should not increase the volume or speed of his voice unless he is looking to achieve a certain affect, such as greater aggression or increased focus.

Sometimes doing something out of the ordinary can jolt a crew just enough to achieve extraordinary results.

These should be thoughtful strategies not out of control outbursts.

But the cox should not deny himself impact by seeking maximum impact all of the time. The cox will become the rowing equivalent of lift music – it is there but nobody ever hears it. **Do not allow your crew to become desensitised.**

The same desensitisation can happen if the coxswain's phrasing and vocab are limited. **Repeating the same words and phrases over and over, like some holy chant, will not lift crew and cox to a 'higher plane of consciousness'.** It will become tedious and boring, therefore limiting the impact. Coxswains need to keep their rowers alert.

There is no more encouraging sounds to a crew than the voice of a confident coxswain. He may not always be right but he will correct and continue, without need for apology.

Confidence is encouraging.

This effect is maximised if the coxswain's voice is the only voice to be heard in the boat. Rowers, in general terms, can respond to questions, alert others to danger and respond in an emergency. As a general rule these are the only times a voice, other than the coxswains, should be heard when in a boat.

The cox must be the "soundtrack" to which the rowers perform

coach communication

Be prepared to communicate with the coach prior to, during and immediately after a session. The relationship with the coach is important because the cox must be able to speak on the coach's behalf with the full and confident endorsement of the coach.
(Refer to Booklet 7 - Coxswain as Coach)



AFTER THE WATER SESSION the coxswain must provide feedback and ideas:

How did it feel in the boat?

Did the session achieve its intentions?

Were there any problems?

Was there any improvement by the end?

How did the crew respond?

How did this session compare to the last?

How can I improve my coxing?

Finally, it is important to realise that a coxswain is not just the sum total of his many parts and functions. His voice is not a robotic, computer generated decoder. **The coxswain's voice is an expression of himself – it is evidence of a personality.** The good coxswain is real; he can be alternatively, loved, feared, hated, appreciated and admired. The coxswain must use his voice as a means of interaction with his crew, but most importantly he must use his own individual personality to give life to that voice. The coxswain must be sure that the voice he is using is his own unique and individual one – his words will carry more weight.



BEFORE GOING ON THE WATER the coxswain must be prepared to ask questions:

What is going to be the technical focus for the session?

Are there any particular drills to be used?

Can you explain the drills to me?

How far do we want the crew to row?

What if... happens again?

What do you want me to report back on?



DURING THE WATER SESSION the coxswain must limit communication with the coach

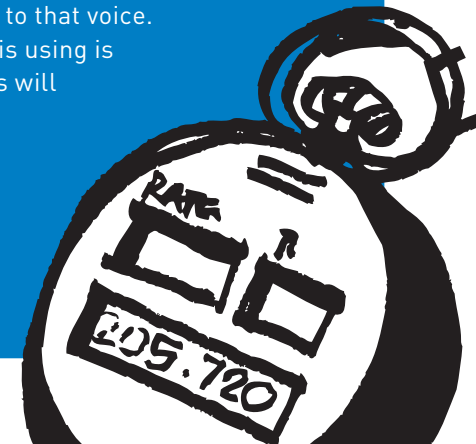
Raise the hand after the coach gives an instruction to confirm understanding.

Keep the hand raised if the instruction has not been understood.

Seek clarification with a brief question.

The coach should initiate most communication.

All necessary conversation should have taken place prior to launching.



quick glossary

‘BACK IT DOWN’ Command given by coxswain directing the rowers to push their oar through the water backwards in order to reverse the direction of the boat.

CATCH Point at which the oar enters the water in the rowing stroke.

‘CHECK IT’ A command given by the coxswain to the rowers to bring the boat to a stop by burying their blades in the water as a resistance against the boat’s movement.

‘CHECK IT HARD’ A call made by the coxswain if the crew is in imminent danger and the urgent and immediate stopping of the boat is required. A faster and deeper burying of the blade beneath the water than the normal ‘check it’ command.

COXBOX Electronic equipment used by the coxswain to amplify the voice and measure stroke rate.

DRILLS Exercises to improve the rowing stroke.

DRIVE The force applied to move the oar through the water between catch and finish of stroke.

‘EASY-ALL’ Command given by the coxswain to stop the rowers taking any further strokes.

‘EYES FORWARD’ An informal call made by the coxswain to gain the full concentration of the crew.

FEATHERING The turning of the oar’s blade to a flat horizontal position parallel with the water’s surface.

FINISH The point at which the oar is extracted from the water to complete the stroke.

‘LEAN AWAY’ A command given by the coxswain if the oars on one side of the boat are required to clear obstacles or objects close to the water’s surface e.g. the landing jetty.

‘PULL IT AROUND’

A command given by the coxswain to the rowers to make large adjustments to the alignment of the boat by moving through a complete stroke in the water (legs, body and arms contributing).

RATE The number of strokes taken in one minute.

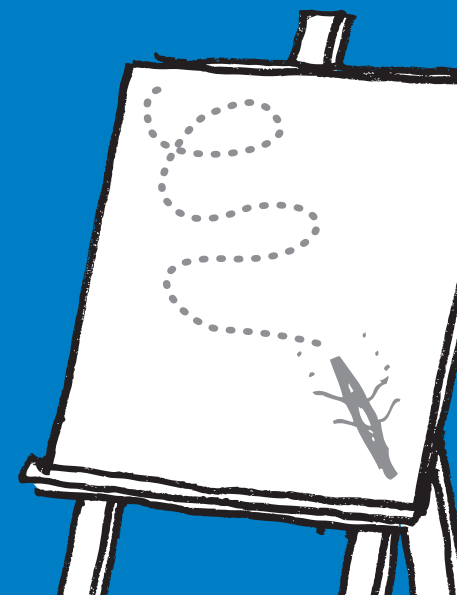
‘SPIN THE BOAT’ An informal command given with the intention of turning the boat around 180°.

‘STEADY’ An informal call made by the coxswain to avoid unnecessary rush up the slide by the crew.

‘TIMING’ An informal call that is commonly made by a coxswain to draw attention to the need for simultaneous placement of the oar into the water.

‘TOUCH IT’ ‘TAP IT’

A command given by the coxswain to the rowers to make small adjustments to the boat’s alignment by moving the blade through the water with the use of short arms only strokes (no legs or body).



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SO WHAT SHOULD THE GOOD COXSWAIN NOW KNOW FROM READING THIS BOOKLET:

- ✓ What his crew requires him to say.
- ✓ The cox should be loud enough to be heard.
- ✓ The cox should make himself understood.
- ✓ There are times when it is more or less appropriate to speak.
- ✓ The cox should expect a response from his commands.
- ✓ To use his words and voice for positive affect.
- ✓ That the cox's voice should reflect the way he wants the crew to row.
- ✓ What the coach wants him to say to the crew.



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