



"When you are going through Hell – Keep going!" Winston Churchill

Coaching for the extreme – Part 2

By Stefan Vilner

During the Atlantic crossing, while the team is far over the horizon, how does the coach support and is there a role at all?

Having worked with **Situational Leadership** and **Situation Awareness** with commercial pilots, extreme athletes and corporate leaders this entry into the conversation about coaching for the extreme will be very Situational as it is set during the global pandemic of 2020/2021 impacting almost every person on this planet.

This, none the less, makes the topic even more painfully relevant as we are now experiencing the consequences of COVID19 related shutdown, isolation, existential threats to our fundamental perception of reality and the **severe stress** and **mental burnout** that follow these challenges. And while you may argue that all the challenges of the extreme athlete are self-inflicted and thereby cannot be compared to the current situation, the coaching remedies are the same.

The Existential foundations of life; Death, Isolation, Freedom and Meaninglessness!

There is a common thread through the experiences of the ocean rowers, soldiers returning from combat and people in general during a pandemic.

All are confronted with **Death** and the realization that this existence will end one day. In our current pandemic situation, most of the responses are based on deep existential fear of death.

According to one of the founders of **Existential Psychotherapy**, the eminent American psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom, it is only at the time that we truly accept the inevitability of Death that we are truly alive and can fully embrace life and living.

When the rowers have been through storms and capsizing and have been facing a very real risk of dying, that is when they – perhaps for the first time in their lives – feel truly and deeply alive!

Risk – when it is getting real!

During the pre-row phase, **mitigating risk through simulations and rigorous preparation** is the norm for participants in extreme endurance sport events (Brymer, 2010) and there is no default acceptance of death as an outcome of the event. The rigorous preparation through training and operational/technical reviews are often core to the feeling of being prepared, but one of the strongest mitigators of risks is knowing yourself and your teammates and how you can expect to react in a crisis!

For the teams I have coached so far, I have made a principle out of taking them through **psychometric team/individual profiling**, to give both me as well as the team members a clear picture of who they are working with.

While I am not going to share individual profiles, it is safe to say that successful corporate executives have result/action oriented, extrovert and trusting profiles, where the veteran soldiers are more introverted, mission-, detail- and Standard Operations oriented.

During the Atlantic crossing, these profile traits come in to play and are exacerbated by hunger, sleep deprivation and physical as well as mental burnout.

If these traits are not shared and understood prior to the crossing, there is significant risk of confrontation and conflict while under pressure during the crossing. On the other hand, if the traits have been part of the training, preparation and situation simulations, the rowers can actively draw on each other's dominating traits when the situation calls for them.

This is obviously also true of other teams, but rarely do you see the personalities or traits being as pronounced and clear as under this type of stress experienced by the Atlantic rowers.

Motivation: Rowers with a corporate background are often attracted to extreme sports by these ventures ability to put them in a situation, where they feel a deep, true and existential meaning, as opposed to their day-to-day jobs, that rarely have a life-or-death decision impact.

The veteran soldiers are attracted by the mission orientation and the S.O.P. approach to execution. These different motivations are reflected in the difference in the profiles and seen in the way challenges are met. Interestingly, the very different profiles of the 2019/2020 Danish team made for strong teamwork and problem solving.



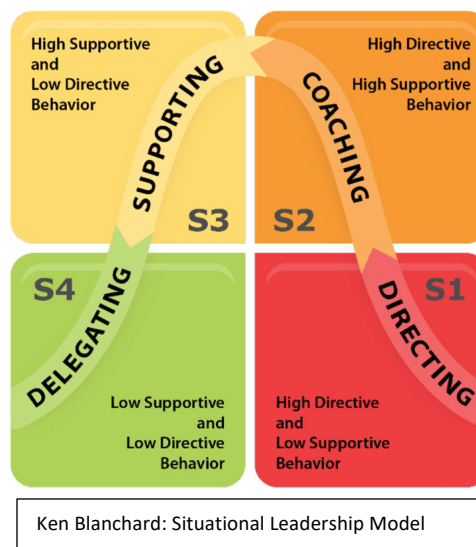
2019/2020 Danish team "Row for Veterans" leave La Gomera port for a 5000 km Atlantic crossing

Dynamic Goalsetting: The teams constantly review goals to see if they are still meaningful. With the rowers there may have been an initial goal of winning the race, the class or setting a new world record. But external factors impact the reality. The weather may be very different from what was planned, the team may encounter technical issues or injuries. Then the team must review the goals and as **What is Important Now** (The W.I.N. acronym discussed in the first installment). The same is true for most companies and organizations these days. We all had our 2020 goals, strategy and budgets. They are all out the window now due to COVID19 and the global measures taken to contain it, and we need to readjust and focus on, **What is Important Now!**

For a strong independent team, this is something that has been drilled into them during the training/preparation phase. It is part of their **Standard Operating Procedures (S.O.P.)** to review and adjust goals and strategies.

The role of the coach in this phase of the crossing is therefore merely to be a sounding board – especially when your team is in the middle of the Atlantic communicating over a poor and expensive satellite uplink.

Involvement of the coach: In Situational Leadership, we work with four dimensions of leadership; Directing, Coaching, Supporting and Delegating. Many of us coaches have leadership backgrounds and it is sometimes difficult to stay in the role as coach. We have all seen sports coaches screaming, shouting and gesticulating from the sidelines while directing their players as Napoleonic military commanders leading their troops to the slaughter.



When coaching the extreme athletes, you have the benefit of sitting on dry land with better intel, being well rested and fed and not in a life or death situation. You see things clearly and the answers are easy to come by. Falling into the trap of being directive is easy. But at all cost try to restrain yourself. Unless your team is about to kill themselves, they need to make their own decisions, even if it costs them victory. Make sure to re-emphasize the agreements made in the preparation phase and supply as much meaningful data/intel for the team to make relevant decisions. And remember that this will be done on a poor satellite communications uplink with people with severely reduced cognitive capacity. Because if not, their entire venture will have been for nothing. Their end result will not be authentic!

What's my point?

When coaching for the extreme you very often participate in all three phases: Planning, Execution and Debrief/Post event.

Coaching people, teams and businesses in the current world pandemic is different as you did not prepare or train for this reality. This means that the coaching effort is very much in the here & now. This makes it very similar to a psychotherapeutic intervention, where the setting with the client is **"You and me, here and now!"**

You still engage with the W.I.N. but you do not have a script, a S.O.P. or a plan and your coaching has to be very much more tuned into the emotional and existential themes being played out in the individual and/or team.

What do I learn from this? Coaching is such a versatile tool and it can make such an important difference in hugely different settings. When coaching in almost any setting, there are opportunities to expand your competence universe and challenge your paradigms.

During the simulations and team coaching events, I try to keep re-focusing the team on W.I.N. as there is a very real risk of **task saturation** and **loss of situation awareness** in a crisis on the boat as the team will be functioning under limited cognitive power. So, this becomes a very strong coaching tool in the process while preparing for the event. This also underlines the opportunity for the coach to pick the right tools from a variety of available toolboxes when working outside one's normal area of expertise.

See more about:

Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenges. <https://www.taliskerwhiskyatlanticchallenge.com/>

Row For Veterans: <https://www.facebook.com/rowforveterans.dk/>

Further reading:

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*, New York: W.H. Freeman.

Blanchard, Ken: *Situational Leadership*

Brymer, Eric (2010) Risk and extreme sports: A phenomenological perspective. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 13(1/2), pp. 218-239.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum

Yalom, Irvin D. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books

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