



"Water, Water everywhere / Nor any drop to drink!" Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Coaching for the extreme – Part 1

By Stefan Vilner

When you send the people, you have coached on to their mission knowing that they are potentially risking their lives, you cannot help feeling utterly helpless!

Since 2016 I have had the privilege of working with the Danish participants of the annual **Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge**, one of the world's toughest recurring endurance events. The challenge is crossing the Atlantic - 5.000 KM/3.000 Miles - in a rowing boat in teams of 5's, 4's, 3's, pairs or solo.

For more than 35 days - up to 70 days for some - the rowers follow a mind and soul destroying routine of two hours of rowing, two hours sleep, two hours of rowing, repeat, repeat, until they reach land on Antigua in the Caribbean.

72 hours after setting off from La Gomera in the Canaries the rowers can no longer see land, seasickness have depleted most of the physical reserves of the typically extremely fit rowers and the abject terror of the environment have taken a massive toll on any mental surplus the rowers may have had. And there is at least a month until they see land again!

That is when the rowers will have to dig deeper than they have ever done before and when any mental training and coaching has to show its value. At the same time the rowers will question the sanity of the endeavor and challenge their own motivation for doing this.

And the coach will remain on dry land hoping and praying to the coach-gods that he has done all he can to prepare the rowers for the mental ordeal of a lifetime!



An immense physical and mental roller-coaster

So, why do I – who am mostly working with Executive Coaching in organizations – throw myself at such an immense project as trying to support these brave – and slightly mad – people?

A Microcosm where emotions gets distilled to their essence: When working with executives and leaders in organizations, they rarely deal in life and death decisions and therefore the coaching of them are usually more focused on personal development, team resilience and result orientation to support overall company or organization goals. If we – in our coaching work – gets it a little bit wrong, we go back re-examine, correct and re-engages. The feedback process is an essential ingredient of the developing coaching relation. But when the ocean rowing crew push passed the pier in La Gomera I have to be as sure as possible that I have coached them the best I possibly can to prepare them and to give them the adequate tools to use once the Atlantic hit them. Because there is no way to call them back for another coaching session. Also, from a purely egotistical point of view, working with the Atlantic rowers is an amazing opportunity to sharpen my skills, stepping out of corporate setting and extending my toolbox in order to be relevant.



The point of no return – passing the pier at La Gomera

The stages of the work: For the teams I have worked with, I have started the engagement 12 to 18 month before the race start. The first year I worked with a pair and none of us had any idea of what we were getting ourselves in to. The second year the boat was a four and the captain was one of the pair from the previous year, so together we had a little more experience. Still, a new team means an entirely new coaching approach.

Together with the team we break the process in to three separate stages:

Before: From a coaching point of view, this is all about getting to know the team and getting the team to know each other.

During: From a coaching point of view, it's most about biting one's nails and hoping for the best!

After: Coming home and re-entering normal society.

The "Before" stage: The team members may think that they know each other, may have been friends for many years or even family, but the reality is that they are going to see sides of each other they would never have imagined and show sides they never knew they had. I therefore make a point out of making an individual and team profile – not so much to dig deep into their individual profiles – but more to show the team how different their profiles are and what that may do to their communication and perception of the other team members motives.

This has to be understood by the team members in the context of *"This is all well and good while we are here, well rested, dry and well fed!"* but they need to know this for when they are cold, tired and hungry and the other team members seem as complete and unreasonable idiots!

Simulation: Having spent most of my career in aviation and having written my psychology master dissertation on *Loss of Situation Awareness* by commercial pilots and having spent many hours doing research in full flight simulators, I am huge believer in simulation!

Therefore, a significant part of the coaching is simulating different situations on dry land knowing each other's profiles. We do this to, already in the preparation phase, work on the "What ifs" so if they happen it is known material and not something the team has to discuss or invent, when their cognitive competencies are dramatically reduced due to sleep deprivation and hunger.

Some of the simulations are pretty morbid but serves a purpose. On one team we were struggling to find out who should be the captain of the boat until we worked on a crisis simulation of what to do in case of capsizing and catastrophic equipment failure! Then it became clear that the team member with the most experience in crisis management should be the captain – and everybody agreed!

Motivation and meaning: Every team member has their own motivation for doing the challenge and it is extremely important to work with the individual motivation as it will be a driving force in bringing the team across. But also, what will help the individual rower finding his way back to normal society after the row. There are, as with all other aspects of human behavior and motivation, both **Extrinsic** motivating factors and **Intrinsic** motivating factors. Not surprisingly the Extrinsic motivating factors center around winning the race, or at least doing well, perhaps setting records and leaving some sort of legacies. These factors are more predominant in the early phases of the coaching work but gets replaced over time by more Intrinsic motivators. One very strong motivator for the teams I have worked with is making sure that the team members gets off the boat in Antigua as good or better friends than they were when they set off in La Gomera. Taking care of each other, being safe and making sure that every member has as good an experience as possible is an extremely strong motivator.



...and moments of intense calm and beauty

What can we 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.

One tool that I have brought into the coaching from the Performance Psychology is the acronym; **W.I.N!** This stands for **What's Important Now!**

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.

Coming Up!

During the Row: Remote coaching – how do you motivate a person over the satellite phone when he is physically exhausted and mentally drained? Two CEO's and two soldiers in the same boat – a recipe for disaster or a match made in heaven?

After the row: Returning to the real world! Finding a new purpose in life. Why some extreme athletes get post stress symptoms?

Now, I am not an experienced blogger, so I need your input!

I have planned this to be a three-part series but please write below what you would like me to include and how I can make it better

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.

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

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