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ANALYSIS

Stick your oar in for some team-building

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Getting to grips: former Olympic rower Bill Barry also had varied business career and now combines his experiences to offer courses in team building with his coaching company 121partners

Messing about on the water in a racing sleek boat can deliver long-lasting lessons on the value of working together, writes Richard Brass

THE idyllic stretch of the Thames around Henley regularly plays host to some of the finest rowers in the world. From the top-level competition of the Royal Regatta every July to the rigorous year-round training regimes of Olympic hopefuls, Henley sees the best rowing has to offer.

It also sees some other things, including the curious sight, every few weeks, of groups of office workers of all shapes and sizes, dressed in a motley collection of sweatshirts and leggings, gingerly making their way to the river bank, clambering into sleek racing boats and wobbling out into the current.

If you've been standing on the bank,

watching expertly drilled athletes skimming the surface of the water in powerful unison, the sight of a boat bobbing about with oars pointed in all directions is slightly troubling, but it's even more troubling if, like me, you're sitting in the boat.

This was not, as you might expect, a laudable but most likely ill-advised attempt to emulate the success of Britain's rowers in Beijing, but instead part of a team-building course aimed at hammering home to the participants the very essence of teamwork.

Very effective it is too. When you're sitting on a busy waterway in a skinny boat about six inches above the water, with a

long oar in your hands and eight relative strangers behind and in front of you, it's no time for selfishness.

The exercise is part of a two-day course run by 121partners, a coaching company that aims to translate the lessons of rowing into practical guidance for business.

The course begins with a day of workshops and classes beside Henley bridge in the salubrious surroundings of the Leander Club, one of the oldest rowing clubs in the world, but it's the morning on the river on the second day that is the highlight.

"We've never had a boat go over yet," says senior executive coach Bill Barry to reassure any of his students who might be nervous about the chance of an impromptu dip in the Thames. "But there's always a first time."

Climbing into a boat for the first time, it's easy to feel that today might be the day when the course includes its first unplanned session on the teamwork needed to ferry a team safely back to the river bank. Which explains why the first lesson from the two experienced rowers in each boat is how to hold the oars in the safety position, resting on the surface and keeping the vessel stable on the water.

When the boat pushes away from the bank and drifts out into the river, the reasons why this sport has been chosen to illustrate the importance of teamwork quickly become apparent. However fit the members of the team, so many oars in the hands of novices can produce no end of directionless chaos, explaining why the more experienced rowers keep their distance as they glide past.

"The purpose of this is to inspire and motivate the individuals to perform to a higher level and to work as a team," says Barry. "I can't find another sport that's as good as rowing for requiring perfect teamwork."

It's no accident that Barry picked rowing to get his message across. He won a silver medal in the coxless fours for Great Britain at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, and since then he has had an illustrious career as a coach.

Alongside his sporting experience, Barry has an impressive record in business. He spent 25 years in advertising, and in the 1980s was chief executive of Foote Cone & Belding, one of the biggest names in the industry at the time.

"Because we worked on behalf of many different types of clients, I got to know a lot about different businesses, and I can combine that business experience very easily with my sports experience," he says.

Stroke of genius Business lessons from rowing

- Keep in time. The overriding secret to rowing in a team is that everybody rows at the same pace. However strong you may be, if you row faster than your team-mates you'll end up with your oars tangling with theirs, the oar handle hitting you hard in the stomach and the boat coming to a juddering, embarrassing stop.

Lesson for business: Teams work at their best if everybody is completely in step at all stages.

- Don't try to do it all by yourself. The speed of the boat is not your personal responsibility, it's the team's and the best way you can contribute to that speed is by making your own strength and ambitions secondary to the needs of the team.

Lesson for business: For a team to be fully effective, the personal strengths and ambitions of each member must be subservient to the team goal.

- Don't dig your oar in too deep. It's tempting to try to gouge out the bottom of the river in the pursuit of more speed, but that will only mean it takes longer to get it out again, breaking the team's timing.

Lesson for business: Stick to the team plan.

- Don't wear shorts that are too tight. Overly tight shorts can produce nasty results as you bend forward for your stroke.

Lesson for business: Be prepared. And dress appropriately.

Clients for the team-building courses have included British Airways, British Gas, Logica, Sun Life and Yell.

Barry's most recent achievement on the water has been coaching Northern Ireland sculler Alan Campbell from the position of novice to winning the Munich World Cup Regatta in the heavyweight single sculls in 2006. Campbell was regarded as a very good medal prospect for the Beijing Olympics before needing an emergency knee operation just eight weeks before the games began. Coached by Barry, he recovered well enough to still make the final and finish fifth.

Despite Barry's coaching skills, that kind of outcome was never looking likely the day I took the oars in one of two boats filled with employees of a multinational doing the course as a prelude to setting up a new operation. But we soon got to grips with the basics and began moving slowly down the river, which was a start.

Rowing certainly gets the teamwork message across. You can do what you like on a bungee jump and you can even express your individuality when building a raft with your colleagues, but in rowing the only thing that counts is keeping in time with everyone else.

Failure to follow this iron rule quickly leads to oars thumping together, muttered apologies and a sudden loss of any speed you might have worked up. But after several such clumsy stops, and regular patient reminders from the expert cox that all that mattered was keeping in time, we began to master our individual urges to pull hard, row quickly or admire the meadows on the bank, and started sticking

to the plan.

"The most obvious thing you learn from this is that if you mess up yourself, you don't only mess up your bit, you mess up the whole group," says Barry. "We've raced teams, and one might be full of people pulling like crazy, and one might be people just doing it together, who have found out that not pulling so hard but just doing it together is much more efficient, and you go faster."

It is a remarkable feeling when your team clicks into time, every oar moving as one and the boat feels like it's gliding over the water. It was an even more remarkable feeling when our boat pulled off the trick at just the right time in two races, winning both.

On the river bank afterwards, the participants reported that the exercise had clearly brought home that teamwork meant thinking entirely about the collective body and not about your own strengths or weaknesses and how it made it more apparent than ever that the best performance was achieved by heeding only the metronomic rhythm of the stroke.

Barry believes delivering that basic message through rowing gets it across more memorably than any other way. "You can read umpteen management books, but what do you remember? After an hour and a half, these guys fully understand what it is to work as a team. It's a vivid experience, and it makes it stick."

No doubt it does, but having more than one boat has its drawbacks for overall team unity. Memorable messages are one thing, but the biggest swaggering afterwards was about how our boat beat theirs. Twice.



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