



Senior Management

Rowing as One: Crewing Offers Executives Lessons in Leadership and Teamwork

On a beautiful fall day, teams of executives from Wharton's *Advanced Management Program* took to the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia in eight-seat crew shells. Ostensibly, the 56 managers from around the world were learning how to navigate the slender boats down the river together. But they were also learning deeper, hands-on lessons about leadership, motivation, and teamwork.

One of the most important lessons was that success depends less upon the brute force of a single star than on the coordinated effort of the entire team. "We learned that balance is more important than power. Our goal was to help everyone make a difference," said Alex Cho, senior vice president of the e-Business Team at Hyundai Securities in Korea, over dinner at Wharton's Steinberg Conference Center after returning from the river. He was part of the team that dubbed itself "East-West United," a reflection of its three American and four Asian members.

In the Zone

Dan Lyons, an Olympic rowing champion and founder of Team Concepts, worked with Wharton to develop the program. The beauty of rowing, according to Lyons, is that it provides immediate feedback on team performance. The boat either moves quickly and effortlessly through the water, or everyone works very hard without much result.

"Rowing puts the participants in an unfamiliar situation where they have to give up their individual egos to survive," said Lyons. "We allow them to see the reward for developing themselves into a greater whole. It is direct, physical feedback."

He compared the feeling when all the rowers are synchronized to a runner who is in "the zone" or a baseball player who finds "the sweet spot" on the bat. The difference is that it is magnified by eight. "All of a sudden, everyone hits it at just the right time."

"In a team, there are very strong people and very weak people," said Tadashi Sakata, general manager of Teijin Fibers in Japan. "If we aren't able to synchronize, we go in the wrong direction. We all need to be harmonized."

"We didn't try to get a gold medal; we tried to work as a team. After that, we started to roll," said Shing-Yuan Tsai, vice president and executive director of the Industrial Technology Research Institute in Taiwan. He said he was struck by how much attention Wharton gives to teamwork and leadership in the program. "I was very impressed with the process."

Trial by Water

The seven *AMP* crew teams spent the day learning to row and then raced against one another. After a motivational talk by Lyons at the riverside boathouse, there was a brief warm-up session on rowing machines. Then the teams, wearing t-shirts and hats with their colors, spilled out onto the dock. They took off their shoes and strapped themselves into position in their wobbly crafts. For many, it was the first time they had picked up the oar of a crew boat.

Coach Susan Seybolt of Team Concepts, sitting in a motorboat that shadowed the teams on the water, shouted instructions and encouragement through a megaphone. "Catch...pull through...finish," she repeated, going through the steps of dipping the oar in the water, pulling evenly, and then returning to the start. "Move quickly through the water and slowly on recovery."

First two rowers worked at a time, then four, making sure the strokes were smoothly coordinated. As an indication of the difficulty of this coordination, Seybolt said it typically takes three weeks for a new crew team to work up to eight rowers pulling in unison. "The biggest thing they work on is trying to look like the same person," she said. "It's not about pulling hard. It's about working together."

Individual Perfection as Part of a Team

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Shing-Yuan Tsai, Vice President and Executive Director, Industrial Technology Research Institute

The crew boat demonstrates the balance between individual strength and team performance. While the strength of a single person is important, it must be realized in the context of the team.

"There is individual perfection involved in leadership," Lyons said. "You must train yourself, as in any other discipline. Ultimately that individual perfection leads to team and group perfection. With every single stroke, you achieve both of those things. You celebrate individual strengths. At the same time, you recognize that for great things to be accomplished, they have to be done as part of a team."

Inspired Leadership – Championship Performance

Pete Pupalaikis, principal technologist of LeCroy Corporation, said he learned about motivating teams from the rowing experience. He had just made the transition from his role as a purely technical engineer and inventor to leading a team of 15 people. "I learned that one of the keys to success is to find out what motivates people," he said. "Engineers are taught to look for problems. Leadership is about engagement. The job of a leader is to deal in hope."

He recalled a story Lyons told about two different rowing coaches. One was a hard-driving taskmaster who pushed his team to achieve. A second coach was an inspirational leader who took a group of underdogs and made them champions. It was a powerful lesson in the importance of motivation and engagement. "Positive coaching and positive leadership are much more effective than negative leadership," Pupalaikis said.

Lyons said a talented leader can achieve extraordinary results. "To me, leadership is all about team building. It is how to create high-performance teams. How do you take a group of people and transform them to achieve something they would never have expected from themselves?"

The Power of Trying Something New

In addition to the lessons in leadership and teamwork, there was value in the experience of trying something new. The group of highly successful managers suddenly found themselves as beginners. It was unsettling, but a great opportunity for learning.

"I had never been in a boat like this before, and I thought it was going to roll over immediately," said Stefan Janny, a business journalist from Austria. "The first thing they ask you in a new job is: Are you experienced? Here, you are exposed to something you had no idea about. It was a great experience."

While most of the participants were beginners, Dave Trop, senior manager at Boeing Commercial Airplanes, rowed in college and still rows. But the program allowed him to take a fresh look at the sport and its leadership lessons.

"We were always trying hard to win races," Trop said. "Rowing is a fair sport. There is almost no interaction among the crews, so there is not much gaming. You don't control what happens in anyone else's boat, just your own."

He also was impressed by the investment spent in defining the purpose of the teams before they started work. Before they picked up an oar, the AMP teams spent a half hour deciding on mottos for their teams. "We spent the first part of the day coming up with a name for our team and deciding what we are here for," he said. "There are times back at the office when I wouldn't stop and take the time to do that exercise before plunging in, but it is very powerful. That is something I can use at work." © 2007 The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

