

Coaching and the Parallels to Running Whitewater Rapids Some thoughts on the Rating of Difficulty

Some people feel that running whitewater rapids in a kayak is a lot like coaching difficult performers. Sometimes the rapid is an easy one that you can just float through without a lot of preparation or even much observation. In other cases, where the water and the “drop” is a bit more difficult, it may make sense to get out of the boat, walk along the shore and take a look at what you are about to encounter so that you can plan a route through with the highest likelihood of success.

In the case of very difficult whitewater, you may want to have a good deal of information about the situation available, have a plan for other observers to share their thoughts on how to succeed and even have a plan for someone to throw you a rope if things get really tight. And sometimes scouting that rapid is in order so that the difficulties can be avoided or responses can be planned:



The **Big Hole** at Crystal Rapid on the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon!

So here is how rapids in a river are rated insofar as difficulty:

Class 1: Easy.

Fast moving water with riffles and small waves. Few general obstructions exist and all obvious and readily missed. Risk to swimmers is slight; self-rescue is easy.

Class 2: Novice.

Straightforward rapids with wide, clear channels which are evident without scouting. Occasional maneuvering may be required, but rocks and medium sized waves are easily avoided, if desired, by trained paddlers. Swimmers are seldom injured and assistance, while possibly helpful, is seldom needed.

Class 3: Intermediate.

Rapids with moderate, irregular waves which may be difficult to avoid and which can swamp an open boat like a canoe or flip a kayak. Complex maneuvers in fast current and good control in tight passages is required; large waves may be present but may be avoided. Strong eddies and powerful current effects can be found, particularly on large-

volume rivers. Scouting is advisable, especially for inexperienced participants. Injuries while swimming are rare; self-rescue is usually easy but group assistance may be required to avoid long swims and water up your nose!

Class 4: Advanced.

Intense, powerful but predictable rapids requiring precise boat handling in turbulent water. Depending on the character of the river, it may feature large, unavoidable waves and holes or constricted passages demanding fast maneuvers under pressure. A fast, reliable eddy turn into quiet waters may be needed to initiate maneuvers, scout rapids, or rest. Rapids may require “must-make” moves above dangerous hazards. Scouting often necessary the first time down. Risk of injury to swimmers is moderate to high, and water conditions may make self-rescue difficult. Group assistance for rescue is often essential but requires practiced skills. A strong roll is highly recommended.

Class 5: Expert.

Extremely long, obstructed, or very violent rapids with drops that may contain large, unavoidable waves and holes or steep, congested chutes with complex, demanding routes. Rapids may continue for long distances between pools, demanding a high level of fitness. What eddies exist may be small, turbulent, or difficult to reach. At the high end of the scale, several of these factors may be combined. Scouting is recommended but even this may be difficult. Swims are dangerous, and rescue is often difficult even for experts. A very reliable roll, proper equipment, extensive experience, and practiced rescue skills are essential.

Class 6: Extreme and Exploratory.

These runs have almost never been attempted and often exemplify the extremes of difficulty, unpredictability and danger. The consequences of errors are very severe and rescue may be impossible. For teams of experts only, at favorable water levels, after close personal inspection and taking all precautions. After a Class 6 rapid has been successfully navigated many times and routes and strategies become known, its rating may be downgraded to Class 5 and the difficulty is actually lessened and the required “moves” become known.

The Whitewater of Coaching Improved Performance

Okay, so let’s talk about these as they relate to improving competence and results in the workplace as these ratings relate to coaching. Obviously, some situations are much easier and less risky than others, with the more difficult ones requiring more thought.

Class 1 situations are pretty simple and have a high likelihood of a positive outcome. You do not need much preparation and planning and you can get this done relatively easily – you can float through these types with little emotion or adrenaline. An example might be a new employee who you are coaching on how to use the software or a database they need for doing their job. Or, a new process is introduced and you are spot-checking quality or completeness of the work and have a few comments to one of your people about specific improvement. You will seldom find yourself “swimming.”

A Class 2 situation might be one where the person has been doing the job for a while and thinks that they understand all sides of the situation and how fast they need to work, but the reality is a little different from your perspective. They might be at the old work standard rate while you need them to perform more efficiently. You may not need to collect any information other than an example or two and there is not a lot of emotion or reaction predicted. This is the kind of discussion that you might want to have away from the workplace but not one of those held in a closed-door office.

But you definitely want to think things out first and not go in unprepared. You might want to check the information against other data or another person just to be sure. It is possible that you will have to move a bit out of your planned channel to get to the end of the situation.

A Class 3 situation should not be your first coaching experience, since some degree of planning and preparation is generally helpful and you may want to rehearse your moves prior to floating into the river. You should have some skills in changing the direction of the conversation, since the rock (an excuse) might necessitate some maneuvering. You may find yourself out of the current (in an eddy) where making progress is not possible until you re-enter the main flow.

In these situations, you will want to scout the rapid first, maybe discover the kinds of previous discussions and difficulties management may have had with the individual as well as look at performance data, training histories and other materials. Once you've run these kinds of rapids a few times, your skill level increase generally is very helpful for keeping discussions on track, keeping emotions at a manageable level, and being prepared to "roll" back up should you find yourself upside down.

One can generally self-rescue from a Class 3 rapid but it may require a bit of swimming and life preservers and helmets are required! Just thinking about a Class 3 situation is enough to generate some level of adrenaline, but good planning and some solid skills are generally all that you need.

Class 4 coaching situations are best done when you have solid Class 3 skills. Redirecting in the heavy current of sideways distractions and some up and down boat movement, even a waterfall or two, is important to navigating successfully. You most definitely want to check out the rapid before paddling in – and it is often good to watch others run these kinds of situations in order to develop a set of strategies and tactics that will allow you to be upright at the bottom.

With a strong roll, you will be able to move from being upside down and back into a controlling mode when things go wrong but you will need to precisely handle yourself so that you do not flip over again right away. Self-rescue is most difficult and you should be able to stop the conversation, take a time out for getting your breath, before you reenter the fray. This takes both knowledge of when and how to pull out of the mainstream and into an eddy (slow moving calm place) as well as when to reenter the flow – skills not easily learned but that come with practice.

Liken a Class 4 Coaching Event to a performance improvement discussion with the workplace's Union Rep or someone of similar perceived stature in your workplace. The situation is one that is manageable, but you do not do this as your first try after your

training class. And you want to be sure that the risk and the reward are comparable in nature before venturing in. Getting water up your nose and bouncing your limbs off the rocks while cascading downstream is not the most pleasant situation. At the same time, looking back upstream after successfully negotiating a Class 4 Coaching Event is a for-sure confidence builder and proof that you have developed some fine skills.

Cautionary Note: Running the rapids is a workplace endeavor; do not try running these rapids with your spouse or children! They have a tendency to be able to move the rocks around while you are in the current, creating unexpected hazards that are difficult to manage.



Classes 5 and 6 – Realize that these situations *will* exist in the workplace. An example might include coaching your boss' boss about what they need to do differently or trying to initiate a major new process improvement amongst a group of long-term workers that may reduce their numbers. Generally, one can hear a Class 5 or Class 6 rapid from a long distance away by the roar it makes as water cascades in major falls, pouring over large rocks and creating large unpredictable waves.

Lava Falls or Crystal Rapid on the Colorado (pictured on page 1) are runnable rapids that you can actually hear echoing through the canyon a mile away; they sound like a freight train without the whistle and you get goose bumps on your arms and the hair on the back of your neck starts to stand up *long* before you are close enough to even get out of your boat to go scout them. It is impossible for someone not to realize that they are there and that they represent a very special situation.

Like the big water surfers at the North Shore of Oahu during Pacific storms, there are people who LIKE to play in these monsters and deal with the ensuing chaos. But they are near-professional in their skill levels, real experts with many years of practice and often with great personal coaches in their own histories.

Being in superb physical condition with good reflexes is also a great help in boating, and probably relates to how you need to be prepared for some of the more serious coaching situations. Consider training and planning for your improvement opportunities based on the difficulty of the predicted waves you will encounter.

Lastly, recognize that people do have fun running rivers!

For some fun whitewater videos, check these out videos on YouTube:

See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy40uAgG7Ho>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naGHqvhITtU&NR=1>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38fzPEq2W1U&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USea4vM10V0&NR=1>

Some real experts, professionally done short movie:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEiPBsGfwLE&feature=related>

Some nutzoid, over the topstuff you really do not even want to think about! –

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkTESoagox8&feature=related>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb9_cJMV1x4&feature=related

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xE5N52V3IRk&feature=related>

These people make it look easy:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_JJZY9ACBc

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For the **FUN** of It!

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Note: Scott began rafting on the Chattooga River in 1975, shortly after the movie, **Deliverance**, (Burt Reynolds and Jon Voight) was filmed there. Progressing from rafts to canoes to kayaks over the next 20 years, he spent about 5 years in serious pursuit of big water and high adrenaline, running most of the big waters in California and elsewhere and having run the Grand Canyon's Colorado River on 3 occasions. Scott fully understands the implications of, "*The older we get, the faster we were*" and therefore limits his whitewater to much more manageable levels these days. He is a skilled coach and occasionally teaches an effective course on *confronting* poor performance, a skill level past one of coaching – the real Class 5 and 6 stuff,