

Coaching Corner

Doug Cooper says it's all about the decisions we make ...

MANY WOULD agree that coaching is essentially a decision making process; what do we coach, how do we coach and when do we coach perhaps making up a constant careful balance of decisions we need to make. The same could be said about when we are out leading groups or just paddling a river for ourselves – the dynamic world of paddlesports is reliant on constant good decisions.

Luckily for us we practise decision making every day, take perhaps when driving to visit someone. Decisions may start with planning how to get there, checking a map, what time to leave, how best to avoid the traffic or do we need to fill up with fuel. Once in the car and driving more decisions will be made, when to slow down, what to avoid, when to change gear, when to indicate, to think of a few. In essence life is about constant decision-making – so when coaching, leading or performing surely the decision-making should be easy?

As we all know, often with a story attached, decision-making isn't easy and often it is to our cost or those we are coaching/leading. To help us understand how to make better decisions then getting to grips with the two main ways our brains make the decisions will help:

Classic Decision Making (CDM)

The 'Mr Spock' Way

This is thinking in slow time, when we have time to process all the options and come out with what we believe to be the best decision. Taking our earlier driving analogy it is the planning the route, deciding when to leave or if we need fuel bit.

Naturalistic Decision Making (NDM)

The 'Dr McKoy (Bones)' Way

This is thinking in fast time, when the brain doesn't have time to process all the options and it just relies on previous experiences to make super fast decisions. The more experience we have the more we are able to make these fast decisions. You'll recognize this in the driving analogy as the bit when you are actually driving, for many

of us the decisions made here become almost sub-conscious.

Reflecting on your coaching, leading or personal paddling I am sure you can relate to CDM when you put time and effort into decisions as well as NDM when you are thinking fast in the moment, perhaps going on 'gut instinct'. I dare say we will all agree in the dynamic world we coach and paddle in there is often very little time to spend time thinking and the fast thinking process of NDM becomes dominant. No doubt you are now starting to see where some of our poor decisions result from:

Thinking fast: decision-making considerations

It's all about experience

For fast decision-making to work it is reliant on a wealth of prior experience for the sub-conscious to draw the correct decision from. Without depth of experience then we could well end up 'jumping to the wrong conclusion'. Decision-making is all about thinking backwards to plan forwards.

Using 'Rules of Thumb'

In all walks of decision-making life we will use rules of thumb; built up from prior experience they allow us to make decision-making short cuts and this process is known as heuristic decision-making. Developing these heuristics is a great tool to help us, however we need to take care of 'biases' that will occur within these and lead us to poor decisions. These have become known as 'heuristic traps'.

Experience is our friend and enemy

Experience is essential for 'thinking fast' NDM decision-making, however it has also been established that experienced practitioners are also most at risk to heuristic bias or an over reliance on a more 'intuitive' fast thinking style that can miss key decision-making clues.

Satisficing

An element of compromise is inevitable in most decisions, the question is how early are we allowing this – are we just 'taking the first' option to satisfy a desire? This is known as satisficing and when 'thinking fast' it is an easy route to take.

Ensuring the optimum decisions

It's about 'thinking fast' AND 'thinking slow'

No matter what our level of experience there is strong evidence to support the need for us to use our 'slow thinking' (CDM) to check and

challenge our 'fast thinking' (NDM). So for the experienced practitioner who is thinking fast, using their intuition, got a bucketful of 'rules of thumb' to use heuristically and is seamlessly making fast decisions – they need to make the time to 'slow think'. In doing this it will check and challenge the process to avoid biases or things being missed. For our less experienced practitioner they need to develop the skills to effectively 'fast think' as their overall experience grows, and with this again use their slow thinking to check their fast thinking.

Some strategies to help us develop decision-making

- In the environment become aware of the decisions that will need to be made.
- Start to 'notice' the cues, triggers and markers that support the decisions and build on these.
- Ensure you mentally check the numerous decision-making 'options' that will be available - there will never be 'only one' option.
- From the above choose 'the' decision.
- To develop the above ensure the process is practiced in varied environments and situations.
- Finally – take time to reflect on the decisions made, were they optimum?

Summary

The decisions made by a coach, leader or performer are critical for success, sometimes they will have time and make these by 'thinking slow' and at other times have no time and be 'thinking fast'. To ensure these decisions are optimum we need to make sure we get the balance right in the speed of our thinking, the key being to create time to use our 'slow thinking' to check and challenge our 'fast thinking'. Decision-making is essentially a skill, and therefore one we have to develop, nurture and evolve. Along with the strategies already outlined to do this we could try simply taking the 'if and then' approach to our future decisions. Before jumping in to the decision just consider every now and again asking 'IF I do that THEN what will happen' and give our 'slow thinking' a chance to work whilst developing our 'fast thinking'. As Captain Kirk always new, it is about listening to Mr Spock and Dr McKoy (Bones).

Further Reading

- Daniel Kahneman: Thinking, Fast and Slow.
 - Gary Klein: Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions.
 - Collins, L. & Collins, D (2014). 'Integration of professional judgement and decision-making in high-level adventure sports coaching practice', Journal of Sports Sciences, DOI: 10.1080/02640414.2014.953980
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