

High voltage teamwork

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"Attention please"... bang! At the sound of the starter's gun, the 160 paddlers in eight dragon boats begin paddling feverishly towards the finish line, 500 metres away. The sounds of the drummers in the front of each boat, beating their drums and screaming commands, increase the intensity of excitement felt amongst the teams. Approximately two minutes and 35 seconds later, the first boat will cross the finish line, a test of true teamwork. By the end of the day, 180 different teams will have taken to the water to test their ability to work together towards a common goal.

The Ottawa Dragon Boat Race Festival is part of a larger Chinese cultural tradition that goes back 2,400 years. It began as a fertility rite performed in southern China to ensure bountiful crops. The race was held to avert misfortune and encourage the rains needed for prosperity. The object of their worship was the dragon. Also known as Poet's Day, it commemorates the death of Qu Yuan, a poet and Minister of State during the Chou Dynasty. Qu sacrificed himself by drowning in a tributary of the Yangtze River to protest against a corrupt government. When local fishermen realized Qu had disappeared into the river, they raced out in their boats to save him, beating drums to scare off fish which they thought would eat his body. The scene of the fishermen racing out to save Qu Yuan is re-enacted every year in the form of dragon boat races (www.dragonboat.net).

Our "CHEO Defibrillator Paddles" team participates in the annual Ottawa Dragon Boat Race Festival. Our team is comprised of all disciplines from the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Emergency Patient Service Unit: nurses, patient service assistants, patient service clerks, child life specialists, physicians, poison information specialists, and nurse practitioners. Our multidisciplinary team comes together with a shared vision.

Senge (1990) describes a shared vision as more than an idea. "It is, rather, a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive

power. It may be inspired by an idea, but once it goes further – if it is compelling enough to acquire the support of more than one person – then it is no longer an abstraction... Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as a shared vision" (Senge, 1990, p. 206).

It is this shared vision that pulls our team together, and the excitement is the glue that brings us back year after year to compete together towards this vision. It is vital for an organization to create this excitement and commitment amongst team members in order for teams to work together to experience something larger than themselves (Hemsath & Yerkes, 1997). Dragon boating fosters this team development, allowing our team to grow together towards a shared vision which serves to raise our team functioning to a higher level, both at work and at play.

Paddling a dragon boat is much like developing a team; it is more than just collecting 20 paddlers, one steers person and one drummer together in a boat and encouraging them to all paddle towards the finish line. There is strategy and synchronous technique involved. There is commitment and challenge. There is belief that together great things can be accomplished. In teamwork, all members surge forward together and the outcome depends on the synchronous force of the group. The same is true with dragon boating. All paddlers must paddle at *precisely* the same time and with the same technique to maximize their outcome. One paddler out of sync can cause the whole boat to stall out during the middle of the race. In unison, the sheer power enables the boat to actually be raised in the water and propelled forward with less resistance. Each paddler must be acutely aware of his or her teammates and must focus exclusively on what is happening within his or her own team, ignoring the furore of the other teams only metres away. It is this focus and commitment that forms the teamwork that enables teams to cross the finish line together.

Although our team is not known for its particular athletic prowess, we have managed to attain higher heights every year and actually took the bronze medal last year in the Heath Care Challenge Cup. The slogan for the Ottawa Dragon Boat Race Festival is fitting – *22 hearts, one soul on fire*. Our secret for success on and off the water: high-performance teamwork! 

References

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