

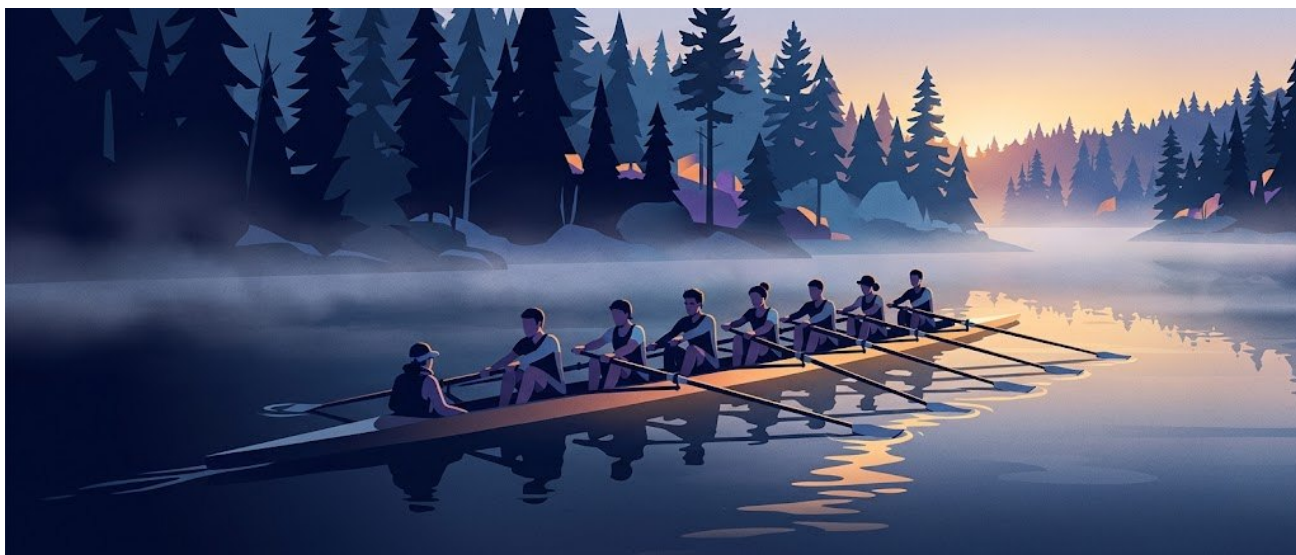
Eight Oars, One Boat

The fastest rower in the crew was the reason the boat kept losing.

5 min read

Before you read

- **coxswain** — the person who steers a rowing boat and directs the crew
- **regatta** — a series of boat races
- **synchrony** — the state of several things happening at exactly the same moment
- **cohesion** — the quality of a group holding together and working as one
- **concede** — to admit that something is true, often reluctantly



The junior eight at dawn, all eight blades entering the water on the same beat

¹ The junior eight from a club in Nova Scotia had, on paper, the strongest crew in the province. Their individual times on the rowing machines were the best in their age group. They had lost four races in a row.

² The problem had a name, and everyone except the problem knew it.

³ Devon was seventeen, powerfully built and genuinely the best athlete in the boat. He pulled harder than anyone. He was also, by a fraction of a second, consistently early — his blade entered the water slightly before the rower in front of him, every single stroke, because he was strong enough to get there first and could not see why he should wait.

⁴ In a rowing eight, that fraction is everything. A boat moves fastest when all eight blades enter and leave the water as one. A rower who is early does not add their power to the boat; they lift the bow, unsettle the balance and force the seven behind them to correct. Devon was adding the most force in the crew and subtracting speed from it at the same time.

⁵ Their coach, a retired fisherman named Arsenault who had coached the club for nineteen years, did not tell Devon any of this. He had learned that telling rarely works on seventeen-year-olds who are right about their own strength.

⁶ Instead, on a grey Tuesday morning, he had the crew row a full piece with their eyes closed. No watching the rower in front. Nothing to go on but the sound of eight blades entering the water and the voice of the coxswain, a small, extremely loud Form 4 student named Priya who had steered the boat since she was thirteen.

⁷ They rowed badly for four hundred metres. Then something settled. With nothing to look at, the crew began listening, and the eight separate splashes gradually collapsed into one sound. Devon heard, for the first time, that his own blade made its own noise, slightly ahead of everyone else's — a small, distinct slap arriving before the single heavier sound the other seven made together.

⁸ He did not say anything about it that morning. But on the next piece he came off the front of the stroke a fraction later, and the boat lifted — not because he was pulling harder, but because for the first time all his effort was going in the same direction as everyone else's.

⁹ Arsenault said nothing about that either. He understood that a correction a person reaches on their own is held much more firmly than one handed to them.

¹⁰ The crew won their next regatta, and two more after it, which is the ending the story wants. The more useful part is what Devon said about it later, at eighteen, when he was asked to speak to the new juniors and plainly did not enjoy the task.

¹¹ He told them that he had spent two seasons believing the boat was slow because the others were weak, and that he had been wrong in a specific way worth understanding: he had been measuring his contribution by his own effort rather than by what the boat actually did. Those are not the same measurement. He conceded, to some laughter, that having it pointed out to him would not have worked.

¹² Priya, who still coxes, puts it more briefly. Eight people pulling their hardest is not a crew. It is eight people in a boat.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. What was Devon doing wrong?

- A He was not pulling hard enough
- B His blade entered the water slightly before everyone else's
- C He was steering the boat off course
- D He was missing training sessions

2. Why does being early slow the boat down?

- A It wastes the rower's energy before the race begins
- B It makes the coxswain lose count of the strokes
- C It lifts the bow, unsettles the balance and forces the others to correct
- D It breaks the rules of the regatta

3. Why did Arsenault choose not to tell Devon directly?

- A He had not yet worked out what the problem was
- B He thought Priya should be the one to say it
- C He was worried Devon would leave the club
- D He had learned that telling rarely works on someone sure of their own strength

4. What did the eyes-closed exercise allow Devon to notice?

- A That his blade made its own sound, slightly ahead of the others
- B That the boat was unbalanced from side to side
- C That Priya was calling the rhythm too quickly
- D That he was more tired than he had admitted

5. What does Devon say he had measured wrongly?

- A His times on the rowing machine
- B The strength of the other crews in the province
- C His contribution, by his own effort rather than by what the boat did
- D The number of strokes in each race

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences, using evidence from the passage.

6. Explain the sentence: ‘Devon was adding the most force in the crew and subtracting speed from it at the same time.’

7. Why did removing sight make the crew row better, once they had settled?

8. What does paragraph 9 suggest about how people change their behaviour?

9. Priya says eight people pulling their hardest is ‘eight people in a boat’, not a crew. Explain what she means, and why it is a fitting final line.

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. Arseneault chose silence over instruction, twice. Was that good coaching or an avoidance of a difficult conversation? Argue your case.

11. Describe a situation you have been in where the strongest individual made the group worse. What would have fixed it, and why?

12. Predict whether Devon's talk changed anything for the new juniors. What in the passage makes you think so?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. **B** — His blade entered the water slightly before everyone else's | 2. **C** — It lifts the bow, unsettles the balance and forces the others to correct | 3. **D** — He had learned that telling rarely works on someone sure of their own strength | 4. **A** — That his blade made its own sound, slightly ahead of the others | 5. **C** — His contribution, by his own effort rather than by what the boat did

Part B

6. He was physically the strongest rower, so his power should have helped, but because his timing was early that power disrupted the balance and made the other seven correct. Strength applied out of time makes the boat slower, not faster.
7. With nothing to watch, they had to listen, and the eight separate splashes gradually became one sound. The sound gave them feedback on timing that watching had not.
8. A correction someone works out for themselves is held far more firmly than one they are given. Arsenault stayed silent deliberately so the discovery would belong to Devon.
9. Maximum individual effort without synchrony produces no crew at all — cohesion, not combined strength, is what makes the boat fast. It restates the whole passage in one sentence from the person whose job is holding the crew together.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

10. Strong answers use the text — that it worked, that it took two lost seasons, that Devon himself conceded being told would not have worked — rather than stating a general view about honesty. Prompt with: what did the silence cost, and was it worth it?
11. Any honest personal answer counts if it gives a reason. The skill being practised is diagnosis — identifying what specifically caused the harm, not just that someone was annoying. Prompt rather than correct.
12. A strong answer uses Devon's own admission that being told would not have worked on him, and reasons from it — perhaps that the talk alone changes little, or that hearing it from someone who made the mistake lands differently. A weaker answer predicts with no link to the text.

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