

The Boys in the Boat Shows the Triumph of Effective Teamwork

As a recovering workaholic, about a year ago I gave myself permission to **join a men's book club. Before that, either I didn't have the time or didn't make the time.**

A couple of benefits have been that I am reading books I never heard of or would have read. I would have never, for example, read a book about rowing. But I feel fortunate that someone in our club put *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown on the list and I got the opportunity.

The Boys in the Boat tells the true story of nine young men who attended the University of Washington during the 1930s. They were all poor to lower middle-class kids, the sons of farmers, fishermen and loggers.

Making the crew team and getting up in the middle of the night to practice was a way for them to pay for school during the Great Depression. But it was more than that - these working-class boys took on their upper-echelon competitors, then went on to win the gold medal in the eight-man boat event at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. It was the **setting, Hitler believed, for showing off his belief in Aryan supremacy but the "boys in the boat" rowed for gold right in front of Hitler. For all Hitler's efforts to promote his Nazi agenda, the U.S.A. stole the spotlight. Hitler was beaten by track and field athlete Jesse Owens, an African American, and he was beaten by the rowing team from the University of Washington.**

What made this team so special? I have read that coaches and hiring managers give special consideration to athletes and job candidates raised on the farm because the work ethic created in those formative years carries over to their professional life.

As I began to think about this column, I remembered my partner had just reviewed the book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. You would think these would not be things you would find on an Olympic-winning team. [Click here to read that article.](#) I can save you some time - the Washington crew team showed no dysfunctions.

Daniel James Brown does not compare the UW team to other high-performing teams but I felt a need to make such a comparison. If you do a Google search, the lists regarding effective teams range from four to six characteristics to one that described 20 items. People can keep track of four to six capabilities, but what are those critical qualities?

Here is my take on it:

- Work ethic - As described earlier in this column.
- Common goals - A shared understanding of what they are and a commitment to achieving them.
- Good communication - Most things involving more than one person require communication. Excellent communication requires a shared vocabulary about the **“what” and a laser focus to identify and remedy issues quickly. Good communication** includes a rationale or **“why” you are being told something. There is usually a** connection made to the overarching goals.
- Selflessness - The ability to subordinate your own needs and desires for the good of the team. In *The Boys in the Boat*, the rowing coach, Al Ulbrickson, changed the **lineup and people’s positions on the boat constantly to get to the perfect combination** of people and roles. Anyone with an ego would have had a problem.
- Emotional Intelligence - Anita Woolley described this in a study conducted at Carnegie Mellon. In *The Boys in the Boat*, **there was a period of time when the team’s** performance went down, and they struggled to determine the cause. To maximize performance, the team needed total alignment, and the nine members needed to understand the thoughts and needs of one another. This was not spoken; it was felt.
- Great leadership- Al Ulbrickson was a strong leader. He had a good eye for raw talent, and he would put that raw talent to the test to let the cream rise to the top.

In his role as leader, he got the team the equipment it needed. The best boat builder in the world at that time was George Pocock. He made boats for all the major teams across the globe, but the fact that he was located at UW created a special connection.

Drawn to his experience and wisdom, the young men on the team enjoyed watching him execute his craft. He provided a bit of philosophical inspiration to the team, notably telling them: *Good thoughts have much to do with good rowing. **It isn’t enough for the muscles of the crew to work in unison; their hearts and minds must also work as one.***

The Coxswain, Robert Moch, was the first line leader and a critical piece to the leadership. It was he who controlled the stroke rate and determined when to raise it on the racing shell, the Husky Clipper.

The Boys in the Boat is a story about hard work, desire, opportunity, dedication and overcoming all odds to attain a goal. A great read for an executive struggling with who to keep or who to replace on her team. It is also a great read for a new leader trying to determine how he can get the most from a group of individuals he has been put in charge of, or for someone wanting to be inspired.

About the Author

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