

“Getting to Whoosh”

A thirteen-foot oar hangs in the main meeting room in my offices on Lake Union in Seattle. It was used for years in the racing shells that row past, through the Montlake Cut and into Lake Washington. For ten years I rowed the “eights” competitively and practiced the lessons of the beautiful sport. The old oar in my office reminds me of how those lessons apply today as I coach the men and women and teams who meet under it. These are a few I’ll never forget.

1. My rowing coaches helped me to value consistent, disciplined, inspired effort even more than breakthroughs or epiphanies. That meant three or four mornings a week at 5:00 am with my friends, usually in the cold and dark. The lesson: Determine what you long for and commit to it. Having allies that are equally committed and who over time become your friends makes it more fun.
2. Racing shells that are powered by balanced rowers are designed to go fast. New rowers are strong and enthusiastic, but they are tempted to wrestle the oar and those sliding seats. They will soon join the rhythm of the other rowers, but for now they check the momentum of the boat that just wants to go fast. When teams are just forming they tend to get tired and wet and not go fast. But as they learn to cooperate—with the boat and the water, with their own bodies and with each other—they learn the simple, strong rhythm of push and glide. Even when they’re pulling hard, veteran rowers make it look elegant. The lesson: Look and listen for the rhythm and “the run.” Learn to find it and repeat it.
3. Resistance is part of what makes a boat go fast. When rowers drop their blades into the water at just the right moment, and then quickly engage their strength to move against the resistance of the water, the boat surges. And with every stroke, the momentum is more in their favor. The lesson: Resistance doesn’t have to be the enemy if you can get the ratio right between the challenge and the glide.
4. As the momentum turns in a race, the temptation is to start looking around. Rowers may face backwards, but they can clearly see their place in the race. Like all competitors, they watch, *Where’s the competition? How are they doing? Who’s ahead? Am I strong enough? Can I keep this up? Starting to get tired, and here comes the sprint.* The lesson: Focus on your own race. Love the competition. You are consistent, disciplined, trusting yourself, your boat and the other rowers.
5. And maybe you hear it. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. And then maybe you feel it. Veteran rowers call it “swing.” From a dead stop, your strokes have brought up the speed and lifted your boat through the water. As you come forward for each new stroke, the wheels on your seats roll evenly, not breaking the momentum, but cooperating with it. Push and glide. Crisp. Clean. Elusive. The lesson: Momentum will take on a life of its own.

Parts of the race are steady and not very glamorous. And then you burst into a sprint to the finish line. Which strokes win the race? None of the rowers could say for sure. What they will tell you is that in the final 500 meters, if they are rowing well, it’s a combination of skill, trust, challenge, strength, conditioning, cooperation, rhythm, balance, effort and magic as the boat runs beneath them. Like competitive rowers, people who are working hard to refocus their lives, work and teams engage all of those things too, usually with very little fanfare. But when the magic of “whoosh” begins to take hold, they know it. And the magic is compelling.