

## Examining naturalistic decision making of expert and novice coaches

**Dave Rossetter**

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### Abstract

#### Background and Purpose

“A defining element of coaching expertise is characterised by the coach’s ability to make decisions” (Harvey et al, 2015). The Moderate Water environment is a challenging one for coaches to work in and there are always decisions to be made, whether these decisions relate to the physical environment conditions, psychological needs of participants, or coaching interventions to enhance performance. The training for moderate water endorsements, however, is only two days which doesn’t leave much scope for training on how to make decisions and what decisions might need to be made. Therefore, the purpose of this study was examine the decision-making processes of expert and novice coaches and identify any training that aided them in their decision-making. Findings could be used to inform adaptations to training on Moderate Water Endorsement courses.

#### What was done?

Participants: Four coaches (two expert and two novice) participated in the study. The novice coaches were 28 and 23 years of age and had their MWE award for 2.5 years and 6 months respectively. One coaches in a school and club setting while the other doesn’t do a lot of coaching at the moment. Both were regular white water kayakers, paddling in a wide range of environments. The expert coaches were 51 and 41 years of age, they had their Level 5 awards for 16 and 14 years, respectively, both were active coaches with paddles at all levels, and both were regular white water kayakers.

Process: Each coach was observed during a coaching session. The focus of the observation was to identify decision ‘moments’ and record these via notes and video. Following the observation, coaches were interviewed and asked to recall the decisions they made and how they came to make those decisions. Using a process called stimulated recall the coaches were also prompted to discuss observed decisions. Approximately a week later, each coach participated in a semi-structured interview to discuss their training and development as a coach. The information gathered was analysed using the Naturalistic Decision Making framework.

#### Key findings

There were differences between the expert and novice coaches with regards to their decision making processes. The expert coaches both indicated that they are very conscious of making decisions. They regularly cited that past experience and reading the situation (pattern recognition) was the basis of why they need to make a decision. One of the novice coaches also reported reading of the environment and the situation as to when to make a decision. However, he was basing this on the goal of the session. In contrast the expert coaches were much more in tune with changing their plan and reading the needs of the paddler as opposed to staying with the original plan. Another

difference between the experts and novices was the use of technical models. The experts were more in tune with these and cited long term development as why they looked to change intensity or the task. All the coaches reflected on their experiences to help to develop, however, both expert coaches were much clearer on how the reflection prompted action. The novice coaches had received little training in how to make decisions other than 'if' and 'then' training. The expert coaches had a wider range of experiences, largely informal, including working with peers, mentoring and attending conferences that had assisted in their decision making processes.

### **Points of interest for coaches:**

Three areas that will enable the novice (MWE) coach to add to their data (knowledge base) to inform decisions in the future are:

- Recognition of when something needs to be changed / adapted
- Reflection on previous coaching episodes and bring the patterns / key attractors to light
- Understanding when we made a decision and why?

Prompting discussions on situations experienced and exploring the decisions made, and in particular how they were made (e.g., what were the catalysts, thresholds, action prompts), will assist coaches to develop their situational assessment, triggering of decisions, and management of the decision process.

### **Conclusion**

What is evident is that by reflecting on previous coaching decisions and in particular the catalysts to why we need to make a decision then we can make better decisions in the future to aid the paddlers that we work with. The study shows that expert coaches do this, they also 'scan' decision options to choose the appropriate option to aid their paddlers. The novice coaches had been encouraged (and had started) to reflect on their coaching but perhaps not the key attractors / catalysts as to why. These key attractors and understanding our threshold for them will aid us as coaches make better decisions.

If you would like further information on the research or to receive a copy of the full project please contact Dave on: [dave.rossetter@glenmorelodge.org.uk](mailto:dave.rossetter@glenmorelodge.org.uk)