

Lee Pooley 00:23

Hi and welcome to British Canoeing Awarding Body Coaching Podcast. My name's Lee Pooley and I'm the Director of Coaching and Qualifications. This podcast is all around decision making, but it's part two. Part two, because we did a decision making podcast earlier on [...] I was going to say earlier on in the year. It wasn't. It was in 2022 and both Georgina Maxwell and Dan Wilkinson talked around the theoretical aspects, although they gave some practical applications of it.

By popular demand, both Georgina and Dan were asked back to talk around, providing some examples around that. So delighted to be joined by both Georgina, who's working from Glenmore Lodge at the moment in the office and Dan is up in the lakes or around that particular area and so welcome.

01:12

Georgina Maxwell

Hi.

Lee Pooley - 01:13

Cool. So what we want to do is over the next 30 minutes, we want to start to explore. And one of the things that we were speaking about before we before we started pressing record on the podcast is that within your career or time in life that you've become quite okay about saying about some of the decisions that we have made in the past that may have not always been the best decisions or what may have influenced that.

And then we were talking about how liberating it can be. And I'm really pleased that both Georgina and Dan are able to share these experiences and hopefully what we can do and the listeners can do is learn from these particular areas. So Georgina, we're going to start with yourself if that's okay. And you're going to give us a bit of a case study or a story of what you've experienced in the past.

Georgina Maxwell - 02:16

Okay. Hi, everyone. So yeah, I'm going to, I don't know, the original script was to talk about an epic. And I suppose I'd like to think about it as a learning opportunity. So I don't remember how many years ago it is now, but I'd just recently passed my Advanced Leader qualification and I was working at a school and we had some students which were actually becoming really quite good kayakers.

And so we'd made a plan and I was working with an individual who had had that award for quite a while. And, you know, I looked up to him and everything and I think actually probably what was going on was the other way round as well. I'd just recently passed and he thought, well, you know, she knows what she's doing.

And we arrive at the river that we had chosen to do with the students and we got they were like, 'Ooh, that looks a bit high'. So we had a quick conversation like, 'Oh, where should we go?' You know, 'where should we take them instead?' And that was quite a tricky conversation to have



because, you know, this particular person's thinking well, I know everything because I've just passed my award and I'm thinking the same to him.

He knows everything. He's from this area more than me and he knows more than me. And we ended up going down to the lower section of the river because it was a lower grade. And I think you probably know what's coming next. That meant that there was a lot higher than expected. And I remember this moment of sitting on the river with the students thinking, 'Wow, that looks brown.'

But there was these really big snowflakes falling out of the sky and everything went really slow motion and I'm scanning around and went the students are happy, but I'm not happy. I feel like we're going into this really fast-moving water and it's only grade one/two and if you're familiar with the area, it's the lower Findhorn that we had chosen to go on.

And it was the middle Findhorn that we'd chosen to skip that day. And before you know it, a little rapid turned up and all the students capsized and it was carnage. And I had this [...] I suppose I had quite a scare from it, you know. I'm thinking 'I've just passed this award.' I've made a decision and I got really scared that I'd potentially put these students in danger.

We cleared up the whole situation. We lost a few boats. We got out in the middle of nowhere on the left river left. I had no mapping with us, and we were dragging these students out and remaining boats along the side and waiting for the school to come and pick us up. And well, that's the scenario when it actually happened to me.

And then we came away from that and both had a really long conversation. And, you know, I just put an expert halo on him and he put the same on me. So the decisions were actually quite hard to communicate together because we just both had different expectations from one another. Everyone was safe. Everything was fine, but it was a very much an opportunity to learn from.

Lee Pooley - 05:14

And Georgina, if you could. I mean, if we had the powers to be able to be transported back in time, what would you do differently now?

Georgina Maxwell - 05:26

Well, I suppose moving forward with time comes wisdom. So I suppose I didn't have the wisdom and the knowledge of the lower section of river being as big as it as it became and what I went for was [...] or what we went for together was the fact that it was a lower grade and would have been easier to manage.

But it wasn't. It was [...] became high water and that's harder to manage. And even though the students had rolls, they could roll their kayaks, they were [...] some of them were doing cartwheels in the pool at school. You know, they're very handy boaters, but the environment was just so fast that it just changed so quick. In that situation, if I knew that was going to be the outcome, then we'd just go back to school and do something another [...] the next weekend. We'd just can it.



And to help for listeners that may not have accessed part one yet. And I would really recommend that people [...] that listeners do. You mentioned the expert halo. Could you just give us a bit of an explanation of what you mean by that?

Georgina Maxwell - 06:30

Yeah. Well, to me an expert halo is [...] it could be a member within your group. So you could be a club paddler and you're new to the club and you have some handy skills and you know, you know a thing or two or not. You're a complete beginner. And somebody within that group is more experienced or [...] or you perceive them to be more experienced. You look up to them in a way to go 'Ah, actually they do know more, they've done more, their decisions are going to be more, you know, informed and they're going to make some good decisions and good calls there.

Some people may not even be aware that they've become the expert within the group or have that expert halo on them. So people might just look to you for decisions and you might be naturally making them anyway because nobody else is. So, yeah, that would be my description of an expert halo.

Lee Pooley - 07:29

Yeah. Okay. Georgina, that's great. Don't go away because we are going to come back to you, yeah. So. Okay. So I'm going to go across to Dan now. Dan, what have you got in store for us for your first example?

Dan Wilkinson - 07:41

Hi Lee. I'd like to take you back about a decade or so, if that's okay, to a little country called Kenya in the middle of Africa. So just to set the scene, I had just finished doing my apprentice instructor here at Plas y Brenin and right at the end of that year, I'd been invited on a trip to Kenya with a few fairly well known coaches and paddlers from North Wales.

And for me, as I was trying to work my way into working in that environment, you know, working at a higher level - I'd previously worked at university and stuff. I was trying to kind of break into that, as I perceived at the time, you know, the higher echelons of coaching practices and stuff. And being invited on this trip I was like [...] 'This is a really good opportunity to kind of show my skills and have a really good time at the same time.' And yeah. I was only invited on the trip really because somebody else had dropped out.

They were trying to make numbers up to four. Yeah [...] It's alright, we're all friends now. So we went to Kenya for three weeks in November of 2012. And we had a brilliant trip, you know. we completed several first descents. We've done a load of work with a rafting company out there. I was having the time in my life.

This was the sort of thing I'd dreamt about. A teenage me had dreamt about reading magazines and things like doing this exploratory kayaking. And then we were just scouting rivers by Jeep and driving around and looking at the headwaters and things. And one day we'd come across this waterfall, called Kamwati Falls, and we were kayaking, looking to kayak with a view to doing the first ascent of it.



And so we scouted it a bit that day and then about a week later, no, three or four days later we came back to have another look at it with a much more formal idea of actually running it: assessing safety, checking the pool depth and stuff. So Pete went across [...] Pete got into his boat to the bottom, paddled out, checked the pool depth.

A couple of us walked up to check the lip of the drop. This is about 60 foot waterfall. So, yeah [...] And we'd decided that [...] Pete paddled his boat out, prodded the depths, trying to work it out. We kind of [...] And he said that he felt like it was deep enough, you know. And I was like, okay, that's good. I went [...] So I then went to scout the lip of the drop, and the lip looked really sketchy.

It kind of kicked you really hard left. So it was a sloping, twisting entrance. And I was like 'I don't really fancy that.' but [...] And then I was stood at the lip with somebody else, and we talked about what you could do to overcome that. And I was like, well, all these all these people I perceive are better than me. And I'm looking at this drop and thinking it's a realistic thing to run.

And I was like, I can kind of see a line. I kind of can't see a line, but I can kind of see a line as well. So [...] stop thinking about it at that point and just went and ran the waterfall. I completely nosedived from 60 feet, smashed the entire front end of my boat, straightened out the aluminum footbars completely. Fortunate I didn't break myself up.

They had a very, very swollen right ankle for about a week afterwards, to the point where I had to go home in a set of flip flops because I couldn't actually put my trainers on still, but I hadn't done any permanent damage. And now as I sit here looking back at that, I'm like, well, there's a lot of things that have gone a little bit awry in that decision making process as I look at it from my slightly older, wiser head on. You know, firstly, I was like trying to prove myself to a group of people I didn't really need to prove myself to. You know, I [...] I was already, you know, in their eyes, I was seeing this as this like massively elite club. And actually they're like 'We're all paddlers together. It doesn't matter what work you do.

We're all partners and coaches together.' But from my outside [...] my outside perspective, it felt like that. And then I was on this trip and I was like 'Wow, I'm trying to like, really prove myself not only to these people, but, you know, we're making a little video about our trip and all that sort of stuff. And this'll really good on the footage and it'll look really good on our little blog post that we're doing.

If anyone remembers blogs from a decade ago, you know. I was like 'It'll help get my name out there and then people know who I am and all this really cool stuff.' And then the sponsorship deals will open up and the heavens will rain with money because that's what happened in kayaking. So [...] And then I'd also kind of let myself be lulled into a sense of security where other people also looking at doing the same thing.

And I think looking back at it now, I was like 'There's no way that's actually a realistic line bacause you just get shot away from where the water lands. So I'd probably landed four or five feet to the left of where the majority of the water lands. And that was a realistic thing to have perceived had I had a little bit more experience in the environment because everyone else is looking at realistically, I was going, it must be all right.

Yeah. So that's my unpack of that. And there is a bit of footage available on the internet if people want to watch me really mess this up somewhere, if you have a little dig around.



Lee Pooley - 13:02

Well, that certainly is to be able to sort of signpost to your video of shooting the waterfall, you must be in a really strong place to not mind people seeing that. Dan, you said what you were describing the sort of, you know, the sort of the build up to running that waterfall, you did say 'and then I just stopped thinking and just did it.'

Dan Wilkinson - 13:33

Well.

Lee Pooley - 13:34

What do you think happened? Yeah. What made you just go what just made you want at that point in time just to go 'Do you know what, I'm just going to get on with it.'?

Dan Wilkinson - 13:44

I think my emotional part of the brain in wanting all those things that I just chatted about to cloud my rational parts of the brain but in a vague flight or fight sort of reflection reaction, but obviously not fight or flight. It was just a 'I've seen what I'm going to try and do. I'm just going to go and do it.'

And I didn't really have a second reflection on that. I just put my spray deck on, slid off 60 foot into nothing.

Lee Pooley - 14:16

I think everyone [...] Well, I'd imagine people listening are going 'So did anyone else run it that day?'

Dan Wilkinson -14:23

Not after that they didn't [laughter]

Lee Pooley - 14:28

[laughter] Dan, thanks very much. We will come back to you. Don't worry. So, Georgina, you've got [...] hopefully you've got another instalment for us.

Georgina Maxwell - 14:36

Yeah, I do. But actually, I'm just thinking about what Dan was saying and what you're just saying about that moment where there's a quick. Okay, well, we're going with this then. And my previous example for me felt more like I was floating or drifting towards the thing that was happening, Where Dan was like, 'Right, this is happening'.



And it's as if there is a definite moment where it goes from 'I had an opportunity to change something' to 'now we're into it'. Anyway, that was a quick reflection on that conversation. My second example - I don't know if this ticks the mark and I don't know how many people will relate to this one - but it didn't end in any sort of physical carnage or badness or anything like that.

It was more of [...] 'I was disappointed in myself' type thing and heavy on my own reflections. I was employed by somebody. It was actually only last summer. And when I deal with my clients, I'm I really like to have these pre conversations about what they really want from their time in the mountains or a time on the river and what we want to work on.

And I try and make quite a close connection with people before we do that. And this particular employer said, 'Don't worry, I've had the conversation with them. They want this and they want it on these two rivers'. And really those two rivers were the only ones available to us at the time because of the river levels.

So you're thinking, Oh, is that really going to tick the mark? You know, these these are grade three paddlers. And then I've been sent to the river Spey, which is a grade two. And, you know, sometimes you can make an easy venue harder, and more challenges. Or you can give them more theory and information about how to how to reflect and how to develop in the future.

And so I set off and met these people at the river. A beautiful day. And, you know, and I proceeded to do what I was told to do, I suppose. And, you know, you went to this track of 'Okay. Well, this is this is what I've been told what they want, but I'm getting signals. Maybe they want a little bit more, but I can't offer them any more now because the river levels aren't there.

And after the second day, you know, they leave dead pleasant, dead nice, dead happy. And then they send the feedback to the person who employed me and they were like, 'Oh, it was way too tame. There was too much theory. You know, we wanted more water than that. We wanted more, you know, a pushier-type trip'. And I was gutted, absolutely gutted.

You know, And when you think about the decisions that I had on the plate, for me, there wasn't many to choose from. You know, I'd been told the venue I had to go to, and I'd been told a certain way to coach and what to deliver. So it wasn't really me, you know, and I couldn't really change that.

You're going to ask me what I would do in hindsight in that, you know, but.

Lee Pooley - 17:43

No, I'm not. But I've got some questions. I've definitely got some questions.

I don't believe there will be many people out there that actually have worked in industry that haven't been in that situation that, you know, you're employed and this is what I want you to do. But what was interesting is, you know, it was almost that, you know [...] What you do as a highly skilled professional in the outdoors is information gathering is the key element of everything you do to be able to make appropriate decisions.

And this was obviously bypassed. But what I'd be interested in is to, you know, how did that actually feel? Because that must have been really quite almost a pull on your values, your ethos, your beliefs, your behaviors. All of those things are, in essence, who we are. It's just interesting because, that's bypassed a whole manner of things that you do on a daily basis.



Georgina Maxwell - 18:59

Yeah. So it didn't feel very easy for me and I made a decision not to work for them again. But, you know, it was so far from how I operate that it wasn't easy for me to be delivering something that I didn't strongly believe in, you know, I didn't feel like the water was right for them anyway. And I felt like I was taking their money and not giving them something that they wanted.

I'll give you a slightly different example on this. You know, you might work for an establishment and you might be new. Say, for instance, where I am right now. You might come in as a new freelancer and in your head you're thinking, what do they expect me to be doing?

And you go and do your thing and it's fine and you think, okay, well, but maybe I should let them just change my character a little bit to fit in, to be like what I expect them that they want me to be. Now, in my view, they've employed you because of the person you are and the skills and qualifications that you've got.

So there's no reason to try and fit in to a system, you know, to fit into a certain way that you think it should be. And I strongly believe that you should be that individual when you coach and when you when you're doing your job, because that's what your clients, you know, they like about you, or return and book you again.

Lee Pooley - 20:21

It's a humanistic behavior, though, isn't it? Is to try to fit in. And you know, for the majority, I should say. But it's quite a human humanistic trait, isn't it? - is to be accepted to fit in, you know, and I think that's a [..], I think that story that you've just told, no matter whether you're highly experienced or you're new to the industry or new to organization, I think there is this almost, you know, signals there is to not bypass information gathering. To be yourself, to be the person that you are and engage with the clients.

And, you know, it's always very difficult to push back, isn't it? But there are ways of presenting different alternatives of what you could do with that client base. Yeah, it must have been a very tricky situation. But obviously you made that decision. It goes right against your values that you've chosen not to return to work for that particular organization.

Georgina Maxwell - 21:25

Yeah. I mean, I mean there could be the option of having that conversation going, 'You know, you're going to employ me. I'll, I'll do the, the contacts, I'll do the pre-course and information gathering'. And that is always an option for people if they ask for it, I think. Yeah, there we go.

Lee Pooley - 21:44

Okay. Well Georgina, thank you very much. And we're going to go back to Dan now for his final episode. Of decision making.



I was going to give you a choice two, actually. Do you want a paddling one, which is whitewater kayaking again? Or would you want a mountaineering one from the Alps?

Lee Pooley - 22:03

I'm going to ask Georgina to pick.

Georgina Maxwell - 22:05

Oh, well, we've had quite a few water-based ones, haven't we? So let's go to the Alps.

Dan Wilkinson - 22:11

Great. So this is going back about six years now. My wife was changing her career from being an outdoor instructor to training as a teacher. So we took a summer off and went round the Alps in a camper van. I'd done a bit of alpine mountaineering to this point. Kate had done very little. We'd done many rocky base things, but I'd always fancied doing the North Face of the Gran Paradiso, Georgina, which I know that you've done as well.

And so we, we were just like searching around social media sort of things. Quite early. And we'd seen that some friends had done it the day before. Some people we follow on social media at least - I'm not going to go with 'friends'. So we very quickly like jumped in the van, drove round to the base, booked ourselves into the hut, walked up to the hut. Got into the hut, and the thermometer at the hut height was reading ten degrees, which isn't great for snow ice climbing, because it's a very big long for people that aren't familiar with this sort of mountaineering. It is a glacial approach to a walk over a glacier. It's probably a 400-metre high sort of vertical height gain in a big, long, snowy couloir of about 65 to 70 degrees. So not vertical, but not far off vertical sort of thing. Sort of Scottish winter – grade one/two sort of terrain.

And I was [unclear] approach this. So I was thinking that we'd kind of like climbing up here, picking some runners in. We were going to be together but we were going to move in together. We were going to have the rope out. We were just going to have 50 minutes of work between Kate and I. We were going to find some nice little belays and things to use and stuff. So we're in the hut. It was really ten degrees and I was, 'It's a bit warm for snow and ice climbing [unclear]. Do you think it'll be alright?' And she was like, 'It's going to be absolutely fine.'

It sits in a little north facing bowl, so it'll feel still really cold. And what we were aiming to do was climb on the snow rather than on the water ice. If you're on the water ice, you need to actually pitch everything really slowly, and it takes a long time to move.

So the day before we got there, it had been really warm, and a lot of the snow had stripped away. So that morning as we were walking up towards it, there was just a runnel of snow left on the left-hand side, and the right-hand side was pure water ice. And I was like, 'Well, at the very least, if we can't get any gearing on the rock, we can at least place some ice screws and use those as protection as we move up through this kind of terrain.

So we did really safe glacier travel. Got to the bottom of the route. We were the first team there up, which is quite important I think from the safety point of view. So I thought we were doing really,



really well. I was 'Okay, great, just drop your [unclear] claws and we're just going to go straight into moving together up this. So we ended up 50 metres apart and I was just started climbing and started looking for some gear so I could put a runner in, place a piece of protection so that if one of us slipped, it wouldn't pull the other one of us off. And so if you've clipped your rope to something that's not going to happen.

At about [...] I was going and I was looking. I was having a little dig around in the rocks at the side and I hadn't found anything. So I just kept going and I just kept going. And then the rope came tight and I was 50 meters away from Kate, and we didn't have a single runner in. And I was like, 'Oh, this is a suboptimal situation'. I was like, 'Don't really know what to do now'. 'Just start climbing. Kate', I shouted down and Kate started dutifully following me up. And 400 metres later we got to the top, and I hadn't replaced a single runner, which [laughs]. Yeah, I suspect there's a few things going on there.

Georgina Maxwell - 26:02

You got away with it! [laughs]

Dan Wilkinson - 26:04

Got away with it, certainly. Yeah. As I reflect back now the route wasn't in condition. You know we're being driven by this scarcity of this. I'd seen somebody had done it I had bothered taking any further than that. The couloir itself should have been filled with snow, really, to have been in good condition. And there was like a tiny little ribbon that we were able to be half on half off, and some glacial ice and stuff. The glacial ice was all like slush, so you couldn't really place a screw because you'd have been digging around for about 300 hours to get it in.

And we got to the top and Kate like had to stand there for about 10 minutes in the cold. She had basically hot aches in her calves, poor thing, because we just kept going on that sort of degree, terrain.

Yeah. So definitely I think there was a bit of [...] I'd seen someone had done it and been led down the [unclear] path. The cousin part of thinking it was in condition. Then we'd walked up to hut, stayed in the hut overnight. The hut guardian had said, 'Oh yeah, it'll be alright'. So then we'd taken somebody else's word on it. Got there. Didn't really listen to the old Spidey senses, you know. We were committed. Like we just walked for 2 hours over a glacier to start climbing this climb this thing. I'm going to climb it. And then it all went into a sketch patch from there really. But we're still here.

Lee Pooley - 27:30

Yeah. I mean. There's probably a lot of people out there. Well, it's probably, you know, definitely the three of us on the call that have been in similar situations. Maybe not just mountaineering, but, you know, and but it's good that you can amplify it and still smile about it.

It made me think about paddling, really. And almost, you know, the story that you were telling is about, you know, the people that travel a long distance, you know, to get to somewhere. You know, I'm very fortunate to live down in the Southwest. I think I'm fortunate because we got the Dart, we got the Axe and we got the Plym and the Meavy – and they're great rivers.



But there are people that will drive from London and all over the place to come to these rivers. And they book a date in the diary the year before and they drive there. And it's almost, 'Well, we've driven now for 4 hours. We've got accommodation, we've got to go and run some rivers.' And it's almost that story that you were telling is, 'Well, I've walked in for 2 hours. I've been at the hut and it's all of that things that almost pushes you into doing it. And we see that on a regular basis throughout the winter is that people will travel a certain distance and they've got it in their heads that they all going to run the up a dart or they're going to run that. I don't know if you have the similar in Scotland and in the lakes or you've come across that.

Georgina Maxwell - 28:57

I'm coming across it at the moment with people coming winter climbing. They come, you know [...] They have the weekend off and they climb. You know, they go to plan that and then the conditions aren't optimal, but they go anyway. And then the avalanches happen. Say, yeah, it happens in the mountains here as well.

Dan Wilkinson - 29:21

It also happens to me as a provider. I feel like if I put a safety and rescue course on, for example, and then we either have literally no water or we have absolute tons of water and you like neither of these ends of the spectrum are optimum. Now I'm going to [...] And then having that moral courage to say [...] Even though they might be coming to me for the weekend from London for a safety and rescue course, I'm going to say to them some, Right, team, this is not what you've signed up for. Tthis is not going to be the course that I want to deliver to you'. And having that courage to let people down in that way. It can be quite challenging, actually. You know, people have committed a lot of things to it, and obviously I've committed my time to that is a part of my work I do.

Lee Pooley - 30:08

It is it is a difficult place, you know, and it is a long time since I provided a course. But you know, that people talk about professional integrity. And that's a classic given, isn't it? That people jump to that professional integrity. But what goes with that professional integrity is the other things about letting people down. And we're in [...] We work with people because we value relationships. And the last thing we ever want to do is let people down. So you always have this constant wrestle, don't you? And it is difficult. I absolutely agree with you, Dan. After doing it for 20-odd, 25 years of providing courses, you go through that almost [...] I mean, a good friend of mine, I speak to them on a regular basis and I'm now, you know, it's quite nice that I don't every day have to wake up and check the weather forecast and think about the course I'm running in the weekend and think about am I going to have enough water or am I going to have the right conditions. And I would imagine you're still there, aren't you? Always look at the weather forecast, knowing what courses are coming up and whether they're going to work or not. So yeah, I can absolutely sympathize with you, Dan.

I didn't tell you about this, and I did it on purpose, really. Before we close the podcast, what I'd like you to do is give some words of wisdom on decision making. So what words of wisdom would you encourage listeners to consider, or traps or pitfalls to avoid when making decisions?

And Georgina's got her hand up. No one else can see that. [laughter] Georgina can go first.



Georgina Maxwell - 32:00

I'll go first. Just instantly that comes to mind is - don't be scared to ask.

Don't be worried about your employer, if you work for someone or even if you're working for yourself, don't be worried about asking of other professionals about the decisions that you're making. I'm maybe coming from more of a [...] You're looking after people and you're taking people out somewhere and you're unsure about the conditions.

You know, I'm never afraid now. I was because you think, 'If I ask, it's a sign of weakness'. But now it's like, that's me gaining all the information, backing up my reasoning, backing up all of my decisions. I'm not afraid to ask. And I'd hope nobody's afraid to ask anyone. Yeah.

Dan Wilkinson - 32:50

Can I follow that up before giving my last words of wisdom? So anecdotally, you're most likely to be avalanched backcountry skiing if you're backcountry skiing with a group of backcountry ski guides because they're all assuming that everybody else has seen the warning signs, has ignored the danger signs. And then they're going, 'Well, I don't want to be on to speak up'. So I just really want to reinforce what Georgina's just said about speaking up and just asking the question. Because it might be that you've noticed something that no one else in your team's noticed that might then change the decision process.

And my word of wisdom – if you want a framework to work with, is just ask yourself 'why'. Why are we doing this? And if you can't give a very good reason for why you're about to do what you're about to do, then have a think about what else you could do.

Lee Pooley - 33:44

Brilliant. Okay. So yeah, two quite predominant words of wisdom. Both Georgina and Dan, thank you very much for your time and being able to record the two podcasts. Anyone that's listening to this and this is the first one, please go onto the part one. You can find it on the British Canoeing Awarding Body Coaching Podcast.

Dan, Georgina. Thanks very much and take care.

Dan Wilkinson - 34:15

Thanks for having us, Lee.

Georgina Maxwell - 34:17

Thank you.