

# Leading Mixed Craft Journeys

It is now commonplace within clubs, activity centres and groups of friends to see paddlers heading out onto a variety of water in a range of craft. For a leader, this can certainly change the dynamic of their group and the craft that individuals choose to paddle can influence their decision making on the journey.

One of the most exciting things about paddling in a mixed craft group is how inclusive it feels. The journey becomes more important than the technical differences between each craft and the end result is each paddler has an individualised, but shared, paddling experience.

This approach for a leader facilitating mixed craft adventures can, however, present some challenges. To lead successfully in a range of environments they will require an understanding of the handling of each craft, the impact of the environment on the craft and its differences when being rescued. All of these elements form a critical part of the leader's knowledge base and skills, all of which are underpinned by a range of current and diverse experience.





## Where does trip planning start?

A leader's job begins before we get to the water, considering the needs of the group, the level of challenge, the demands of the environment and the predicted weather conditions.

We can aim to avoid issues happening by making safe decisions right from the very start and aiming to engage the group in these decisions so that they develop their skills as independent paddlers too.

When we plan a trip we might want to ask the following questions:

- Where do we want to go?
- Who is going?
- What do we want to do?
- What is the level of challenge of this journey?
- When are we going and how long will it take?
- What experience do I/we have?
- What is the weather/tide/river height?
- What information do I have about the trip?
- Do we have the right craft and equipment?

It can also be a good idea to consider some of the following, which will help to minimise issues if problems arise:

- What will we do if there are problems along the way?
- What will we do if the trip does not appear suitable on the day?
- Can we stop our trip and get out early?
- Have we left details of our trip with someone else not on the water?





## Balancing Safety and Challenge

Throughout any journey on the water, the leader can experience a range of influential factors and may use this information to inform their decisions. The different influences may include:

- The situation and the environment
- Their skills/knowledge/experience
- The skills/knowledge/experience of the group



[ref. Leadership in the Challenging World of Paddlesport - Doug Cooper April 2017 Leadership eLearning](#)

Recognising the connection between influencing factors and working with the group to make informed decisions is a key skill of the leader. However, if the leader attempts to mitigate all risks and ensure that the group never experiences any difficulties, the paddlers may find the journey difficult to engage with and it may not meet their expectations. This can lead to a position where the paddlers do not develop their own decision making skills and do not move towards independence. Of course, if the group experiences too much challenge, then this may also be detrimental for their development. A skill that a leader may wish to develop as they gain experience, is understanding how to individualise the level of challenge for their paddlers, all whilst facilitating a shared experience of the journey.

*"The river was running higher than usual, and the main rapid of the day had some waves and more focused water. The group I was with were of varied ability, with a couple of paddlers who were relatively new to kayaking, and a couple of experienced white water boaters. After inspecting the line, we all launched. We discussed that the more experienced members could go ahead, giving them the opportunity to be first paddling through the waves that form. I decided to paddle the more straightforward line with the rest of the team staying close to me. At the end of this section everyone had been challenged at their level, with the lesser experienced paddlers being amazed at the speed of the short section of water, and the more experienced ones recounting how they had loved paddling through the waves. Making the decision to help some paddlers experience entering the rapid before me and giving them the freedom to choose their own line and make decisions had really paid off."*





## Leader Craft Choice

The craft that the leader chooses to paddle is a result of assessing the key influencing factors: the environment, the group and their own skills and experience. The leader may choose to paddle the craft that they hold the strongest skills and experience in and feel most comfortable paddling in the environment. They may also choose to paddle something different, which could be based more around the ease of rescues, or the practicalities of carrying leader equipment. It is also important that the leader matches their craft with the experience and aspirations of the group, as the goal for some teams might be to undertake a longer journey and, if the leader chooses a slower craft to paddle or one that they find physically demanding to paddle, they may struggle to keep up with the group and complete the trip themselves. Whichever craft the leader chooses, they need to ensure that they are completely able to fulfil their leadership responsibilities from the craft which, of course, may include rescues of the participants they are leading.

## Group Craft Choice

As a leader we can empower our group members to select craft that appropriately matches their skills and experience, taking into account the level of challenge expected and demands of the trip. The leader can discuss with the group members to ensure that the craft they are paddling is also appropriately matched to the expected environment conditions of their intended journey.

If the conditions are challenging for a group, it may be most appropriate for them to paddle craft that they are familiar in and hold the strongest personal skills in. However, if the conditions are more straightforward for a group, this could be a great opportunity for a leader to encourage paddlers to explore craft they are less familiar with and to enhance their experience by developing new skills. A key consideration could also be whether it would be more appropriate for some, or all of the team, to paddle tandem, which will reduce the numbers of craft in the water to manage and may make it easier to make progress on a journey or into more challenging conditions. It might also be a good idea to pair an inexperienced paddler with someone with more developed skills or putting those who fatigue quickly with someone who will be able to offer additional support.





*"I was working with a group of college students to help them complete a trip on SUPs as they hadn't really used them before. As the day of the trip approached, it was clear to see the wind was going to be a little too much for their SUP skills, so we decided to move to double sit on top kayaks and canoes. We had a great day and the students were still able to meet their planned outcome and got to see first-hand how important it is to have an adaptable plan. The accompanying teacher still wanted to use a SUP....he was smiling but exhausted at the end of the day!"*

## Characteristics and Considerations of Paddlesport Craft

Having experience of the different characteristics of paddlesport craft is really useful for a leader when they are making decisions. Every type of craft is affected differently by the environmental conditions and this affects the experience that paddlers may have on the water when moving in a mixed group.



### Canoe

- Canoes can be affected quite a lot by the wind, which can make them a challenge to handle for inexperienced paddlers.
- They can move quickly downwind which may make it difficult for a group to stay close together.
- There is a possibility that they can become swamped by small waves which come over the side of the boat.
- Typically slower to turn and correct for less experienced paddlers.
- May be more challenging to move quickly into smaller eddies on the river for less experienced paddlers.
- Inexperienced paddlers may find that they drift downwind when crossing open water.
- Present a large side profile towards obstructions on the river if drifting sideways.
- May require individualised route options on the river in comparison to other craft.
- Can often be paddled tandem, which means you could always pair people up to work together.
- Can be a very versatile craft to perform rescues from on both open water and the river.
- Careful eddy selection is required on the river to ensure the leader is always in the most useful position.





## General Purpose or White Water Kayaks



- Affected less by the wind.
- Can cope easily with small waves if a spray deck is worn.
- Typically slower to paddle due to shorter length.
- Usually faster to turn and corrections can be straightforward.
- Very capable craft for use on the river.
- Creates a low and manoeuvrable platform to rescue from.
- Requires consideration when packing leadership equipment into a smaller space.

## Stand Up Paddleboard



- Self-rescue is typically straightforward.
- SUPs can be paddled kneeling or prone if the environment proves too challenging.
- Crosswinds and waves can prove challenging for less experienced paddlers.
- Fins can catch in shallow water on the river.
- May require individualised route options on the river in comparison to other craft.
- Leashes must be on a suitable quick release system (or not used if appropriate) on moving water.
- Requires consideration on the securing of leadership equipment to the board.
- SUPs make a great, unsinkable platform to perform rescues from and being able to move around on the board allows easy access to the craft being rescued.

## Touring and Sea Kayaks



- Can cope easily with small waves if a spray deck is worn.
- Are fast on open water due to their longer length.
- Can still be paddled effectively into the wind and in more challenging conditions.
- Can be slower to turn or manoeuvre in tight spaces or on the river for less experienced paddlers.
- May require individualised route options on the river in comparison to other craft.
- Present a large side profile towards obstructions on the river if drifting sideways.
- The sealed bulkheads make rescues straightforward.

## Race Craft (e.g. K1)



- Usually the fastest craft on the water.
- Very good for covering longer distances.
- Less experienced paddlers may find them unstable.
- Without a cover for the cockpit, small waves can come over the side of the boat.
- Often made of more fragile materials, so take care if rescuing.
- Can be slower to turn or manoeuvre in tight spaces for less experienced paddlers.
- May require individualised route options on the river in comparison to other craft.
- May be more challenging to paddle if the group regularly break out into eddys.
- May not be suitable for the river environment if the water is shallow or larger hazards will be experienced.
- The less experienced leader may find them challenging to rescue from.



## Are we ready to go?

As we get on the water it is inevitable that the group will want to get moving and to start the journey. It can, however, be very useful to check that the group's skills are suitable for the trip and that a plan has been discussed if any small issues arise.

The leader may want to discuss the following with their team:

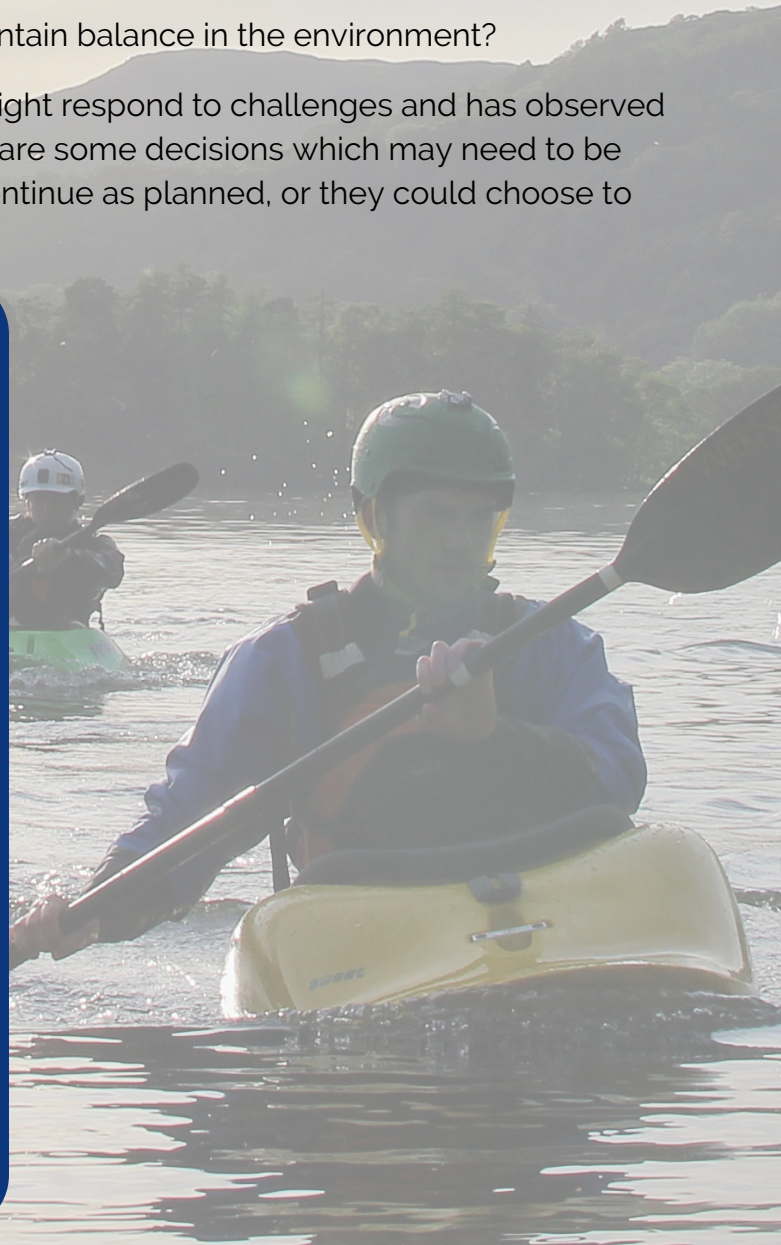
- What are the leader's actions if someone capsizes?
- What are the group's actions if someone capsizes?
- What can the group do if there are any hazards during our journey?
- Can we identify useful aspects of the environment which we can use to our advantage (such as eddies on the river and bays that we can shelter in from the wind on open water).

The leader may also want to encourage the group to practice some simple skills:

- Can we change direction and manoeuvre our craft in the wind?
- Can we hold our position on open water?
- Can we change direction on the river and keep our craft pointing downstream and/or away from obstacles?
- Can our group speed up, slow down and maintain balance in the environment?

Once the leader has discussed how the group might respond to challenges and has observed some foundation skills in the environment, there are some decisions which may need to be made with the group. The team may agree to continue as planned, or they could choose to change their plan and adapt accordingly.

*“Having had our lunch at the side of the loch, as we started to get ready to move on, it was obvious that the conditions were changing and starting to get worse. With a large, exposed crossing to reach our end point and the wind picking up, we knew the final stretch would be a challenge. As a group we decided to push on and stay closer together as we moved across the open water. In the most exposed part of the crossing, one of the team lost their balance and capsized. Fortunately we had discussed what we might do if this happened and the group held their position in the wind and we avoided drifting apart whilst I performed the rescue. I was so pleased we had discussed this beforehand and that I had checked that the group could actually perform this technique before we needed it for real.”*





## The Independent Leader Working Alone

It is often the case that a leader is in a situation where they are solely responsible for a group of paddlers. The leader will, of course, be doing all that they can to ensure that they are capable of managing the group and dealing with the typical rescues and situations that may occur. However, it is important to remember that, as a leader, you are also in a potentially challenging environment and you may want to consider the steps you can take to ensure your own safety and welfare.

When leading a group, you may wish to consider:

- What steps have you taken to ensure your own safety during this journey?
- Have you spoken to your group about how best to look after you should you become ill/injured?
- Does your group know what to do in the event of an emergency if you are incapacitated?
- Does the group have a suitable communications method to call for help (or can they use yours)?
- What emergency kit is available for the group to use, should they need to manage a situation without you?
- Has the group prepared in a way so that they can be self-sufficient should they need to be (e.g. food, layers, drink)?
- Have you shared your emergency contact information with them?

Depending on the situation and whether the leader is working independently or through another organisation, how they manage lone working will be very different.





## Moving and working together on the journey

Many experienced leaders would agree that you do not always need to lead from the front. If we are empowering our paddlers to develop their independent paddling skills, it can be useful to encourage them to take the lead at some point and to be involved with leadership decisions. However, their safety is our responsibility and, as a leader, our position within the group is very important as there may be moments when group members taking the lead may not be suitable. In situations like this, the leader may choose to change their behaviours in response to this situation to ensure the safety of the group.

The leader may consider the conditions and the ability of the group and decide to travel upwind or downwind on open water. On the river, they may choose to position themselves next to a hazard or at a location where capsize is more likely to ensure that they are ready for a rescue. As the environment that we paddle in is ever changing, the leader can work with the group to react and adapt to any situations and challenges they are faced with.

The leader may wish to consider:

- Have I been clear with any instructions given?
- Does everyone understand what is happening at the moment?
- Have I engaged the group in decisions and are they actively engaged in the journey?
- Am I listening and responding to the information I am receiving from the group?
- Have I considered my position in the group?
- What is the most appropriate way for us to move as a group in this environment?
- Are we avoiding any unnecessary risks?
- Does the group have the right level of challenge and safety?





## Challenges and Opportunities

Whether our journey is on open water, the river or a canal, along the way we will be presented with challenges of varying difficulty which gives the group and the leader opportunities for learning. As a leader, we might choose to use these opportunities to develop the paddlesport skills of the group, all whilst adding to the holistic experience of the journey for the team.

On open water we could be dealing with windy conditions, waves that might swamp our craft or we could become separated as we move in the environment. These challenging conditions present the opportunity to the group to change their approach and they may choose to raft canoes together, surf downwind on their SUPs or to group together and paddle in a tighter formation. The group can work together to develop strategies that suit the environmental needs and their experience of the craft. However they may, of course, look to the leader for suggestions.

On the river we may come across features like rapids, weirs and bridges and we can use some of the characteristics of the different craft to help us with these challenges. We may ask a stand up paddle boarder to go ahead to be able to get a better viewpoint, or ask the canoeist to stand up (or hop onto the bank) to look at a longer rapid. The kayaker may also be able to position themselves into a smaller eddy to maintain line of sight or to be ready for a rescue if required. We might also need to consider that some craft may require different techniques to help them navigate some of these features, for example, a canoe may wish to use rope to line down a rapid or an SUP paddler may want to portage if the water is too low and their fins may catch.

*“As we started to come away from the shelter of our bay, it became apparent that the wind was creating larger waves and that the chance of us drifting apart as we moved across the wind would be a real risk. Stopping just before we became exposed to the full power of the environment, I asked the group how we could manage moving through this part of our journey safely. They came up with the idea of using a 'buddy system' to maintain close contact in pairs and suggested breaking the route up into shorter legs with group gathering points. I used this as an opportunity to discuss safely managing group communication challenges in an open water environment.”*





## Rescuing Different Craft

It is inevitable that at some point whilst you are leading, someone will end up in the water. If we have been making effective leadership decisions and we are in the right place to affect a rescue quickly, then this should be no problem and we can continue the trip promptly.

Being able to rescue a range of craft when paddling in a mixed group does require a diverse set of skills and experience from the leader. It is essential that we have practiced these skills, (and continue to practice them), so that they are effective when we come to use them in a real situation.

Things to consider when performing mixed craft rescue:

- Checking and/or fitting airbags at the start of a journey can be time well spent.
- It may be easier to swap into/onto another craft briefly to perform the rescue (e.g. a canoe/SUP/tandem craft).
- Can you get the swimmer in the water to help with their own rescue?
- Can other members of the group help with the rescue?
- Some craft require different techniques to perform the rescue. Have you considered how you would do this from your craft?

We may also be in a position where we need to offer assistance to another paddler who may not be able to paddle effectively due to fatigue or injury. Ensuring you are prepared for this before you set off, and have considered how you might offer assistance to other paddlers, is really important.

- You may need options for short, medium and longer tows. Some of the methods that work really well for a short distance may not be appropriate over a longer distance.
- Have you considered if your method is the most appropriate for the conditions? Towing upwind/crosswind is different to towing downwind.
- You may want to consider bringing a purpose made towline and/or ensuring that you have a short tape and karabiner to hand.
- Canoes can be set up with painters (a rope about the length of the boat attached at either end) which can be used to tow from another craft.
- SUP paddlers should keep their leash attached at all times, but another paddler could hold it (near to the board) to use as a tow.
- The person being towed may also be able to steer (or lower a skeg/rudder if fitted) and this can really help when the boat is moving.

Regardless of the technique we may choose to use to offer assistance to another paddler, it is important that our method is quick to set up, effective and releasable.

If you are regularly having to rescue lots of craft on your journeys (or tow lots of tired paddlers) you may want to consider whether you are appropriately balancing the skills of the group with the environment and if they are paddling the most appropriate craft.



## Reflecting and Concluding

As a leader we have the opportunity to learn from our experiences and to reflect on the things that were successful, but also to consider what we might change next time. Having a structure to reflect with can be really helpful, so you may wish to use the following:

### What happened?

- The factual information outlining the trip, e.g. how long did it take? Did anyone capsize? Was the weather as predicted? Did it feel easy/hard?

### So what does that mean?

- Did we make the right decisions? Were we appropriately prepared? Did we make any mistakes?

### Now what?

- What have we learnt from this experience? What would we keep the same? What would we change next time?

Taking time to reflect with our group is a really empowering experience for those that we are leading and, as leaders, we are constantly developing and gaining experience from our time on the water. Through this reflection process, we can maximise this opportunity for learning and use what we learn to influence our decisions in the future.

