



Coxswain Calls: What Your Engine Room Wants to Hear

5 · December 5, 2006

Many coxswains have emailed questions about making effective calls. Of those, a fair number have commented that they're not always sure what to say at particular times, or that their boats don't always respond the way they expected. [Oh yes, I know the feeling.] In an effort to help answer those questions, this column is a compilation of quotes by rowers on the subject of what types of calls they respond well to.

A brief caveat: although there is a common thread to much of what rowers have responded, some of the quotes diverge, and some are even flatly contradictory. Rowers and boats vary, which is why it is crucial that coxswains tune themselves to their boats, and connect with their rowers one-to-one.

Sometimes the boat's speakers can depersonalize a coxswain's voice, which in turn can impose a tendency for the calls to become impersonal too. To ward this off, always visualize yourself as speaking to the rowers in your boat in the same way you would speak to them if you were in a room, face to face. This helps in making your tone more natural and confident sounding. You're not talking to an impersonal boat; you're talking to individual persons.

Hopefully, the quotes in this column will also help you in soliciting feedback from your own rowers, which in turn will augment what you read here. Experiment during practices with tone changes, calls, and techniques to see which make your particular boat move best. There are no absolute guides for calls -- it's part of each coxswain's 'boatfeel' which develops over time.

Acknowledgements and deep thanks go out to all who provided advice and insight for this column, particularly to coach Rebecca Ivory, who compiled many of them, and to the West Point crew who supplied the lion's share of the quotes. Without their generous help of many rowers, this column could not have been written.

- "When we go to full pressure, the coxswain becomes the voice in our heads. The words, and more importantly, the tone of the words, are what fire us up. It doesn't matter so much what the coxswain says, but it matters HOW the coxswain says it to us."
- "Inflection, tonal changes, and motivational speaking style really does fire me up a TON when we're pulling. The coxswain can drown out that voice in my head which starts to say, "stop, this hurts, it's not worth it, etc." at about 500 meters to go."
- (For a dissenting opinion) "I don't expect my coxswain to motivate me. If the motivation isn't in me to begin with, the coxswain won't be able to. I need the cox to tell us where we are and where the other boats are. If I hear we're at the thousand and need to take a seat, that will get me moving."
- "...the change from calm to intense was clear, direct, and it was such a jarring and interesting change of tone, that it kept us from daydreaming and losing our focus. It

kept us all on the same page."

- "Let your voice change. A lot of coxswains think they need to sound gruff all the time, or yell all the time. Change your voice as the cadence or the excitement of the race builds. Reel yourself in sometimes and harshly whisper into the mic. It's not what you say; it's how you say it."
- "I want a coxswain who will push us beyond our comfort zone in a race, into that place we don't always want to go. Each time we reach a new level, that threshold changes."
- "...a positively-framed statement, especially when we're tired, can get us to react properly to correct our form smoothly instead of people getting angry and just throwing and flopping the boat around."
- "Telling us exactly how to fix a mistake helped a lot... I appreciated when the coxswain told me when I had finally fixed it. That way I knew where to keep my hands, balance, etc. once it was fixed."
- "Positive reinforcement would be awesome...just saying, "let's get this boat set up; you can do it" is so much better than "we're off to port/starboard." NO SHIT. I can usually feel when a boat is off."
- "The coxswain can't be fake with false positivism. We can see through the, 'you guys are almost there' comments."
- "Some rowers take pride that they're the fastest erg... when you call out to [rower's name] to take a ten, and then call out to the boat to 'go with him,' you know they will."
- "Don't try to fix technique during a race. It's too late. Just give us a quick reminder like, 'Hand levels' or 'length.' Either we'll know enough to fix it or we won't, but an explanation of technique at that point won't do any good."
- "My belief is that -- if a person is quiet and well-focused -- a coxswain should leave them alone. However, if a person is either visibly tired or exposing an over-emotion [e.g. too tense or over- or under-confident] a coxswain should stick with them. " [this quote referred to coxing erg pieces]
- "...your phrase 'respecting and understanding the rowers' is so key. If only all coxswains would do that instead of feeling the need to impose their will on the boat..."

[close this window](#)