

TOP BUSINESS TEAMS

Ready All, Row. The Cambridge crew offers an unexpected lesson in getting diverse corporate oars to pull together

BY THOMAS K. GROSE/CAMBRIDGE

IT'S CALLED, SIMPLY, THE BOAT RACE. BUT the grueling, annual 178-year-old meet, which pits two eight-man rowing teams from the universities of Cambridge and Oxford against each other along a four-mile stretch of London's River Thames, is the most famous, most watched rowing race in the world. In April, when Cambridge staged an amazing come-from-behind win, one of the victorious rowers was Dan O'Shaughnessy, a brash Canadian who initially didn't make the coaches' cut. O'Shaughnessy's a strong rower, but in this sport, synchronization is key, and his technique didn't quite mesh with the Cambridge rowing style. Still, his clowning good nature made him popular with the team, and the squad's five top rowers—including an Olympic gold medalist and two world champions—felt they rowed better with O'Shaughnessy aboard.

Their instincts proved correct, and

Mark de Rond, an expert on teamwork at Cambridge's Judge Business School, knows why. He writes about the rowers and their lessons for business in a book, *The Subjectivity of Performance*, to be published next year. In building the best teams, de Rond argues, it's sometimes necessary to jettison a bit of skill for sociability. "Talent is not just an individual trait but a social one," he says. That's true for high-performance business teams, too: affable B players often bring out the best in the superstars. "They are lubricants; they can act as a buffer between the others."

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To immerse himself in the culture of the Cambridge crew, de Rond embedded with them for seven months last year, training full-time with the 39 hopefuls vying for an oar in the boat. That meant very early mornings and punishing physical exertion, often in filthy weather. He came away with more than the usual platitudes about teamwork and persistence. Like high-level executive teams, Oxbridge rowing crews operate in stressful, pressure-cooker environments. Both comprise ambitious players from diverse backgrounds whose personalities often have edges as sharp as their talents.

His observations form the basis of an executive-education program he designed for Judge, and they likewise infuse the consulting work de Rond does for companies, including British Telecommunications and KPMG. De Rond's insights have helped KPMG, for example, as it constantly assembles teams of consultants from around the world. "They're all talented individuals, and getting them to pull the oars in the same direction sounds simple, but it's tough to do because they have to rewire their DNA," says Steve Hollis, head of markets for KPMG Europe. De Rond's advice to factor a social element into the teams is "absolutely spot-on," Hollis says. "People want to deal with people they like."

But sociability doesn't mean that tensions won't exist. In fact, de Rond argues that tension is a given in any successful collaborative effort. "In rowing, the only way to go fast is to cooperate fully" with the others, he says. That's hard when fellow rowers are also rivals for a handful of seats on the boat. The same dilemma occurs in business. Co-workers have to cooperate to succeed while competing with one another for promotions, resources and the attention of superiors. To ease the tension, the Cambridge rowers relied on humor, typically crude and black. When that failed, de Rond acted as a mediator. "Part of the trick," he relates, "is simply getting people to talk."

There are, of course, differences between rowing and business. Rowers only have one obvious goal to focus on: the race. Business teams often have several, simultaneous and even conflicting goals. Coaches have the luxury of selecting from the best talent on campus, while managers in business usually have to make do with a more limited pool. In both cases, "it is a combinatorial game," de Rond says, and managers need to rely on their instincts as well as objective assessments to find the right mix of players. And that means every top-flight, tightly wound crew might want to save a seat for at least one O'Shaughnessy.



On board De Rond trained for months with the Cambridge rowers to learn their teamwork secrets