Concepts of Trip Leadership—

 --**C.L.A.P**. – The master formula and the mothership concept for trip safety. C.L.A.P. stands for: **Communication**-- both within the group, and to 'outside' (call for help), **Line of Sight**--keeping everyone in line of sight at all times, **Awareness**, or **Avoidance over Cure**—avoiding problems in the first place is a lot easier than trying to fix them later, and **Position of Maximum Usefulness**—as the leader, striving at all times to try and locate yourself in the most effective position within or around the pod-- for example, keeping yourself between the group and a hazard, being where you can see everyone in the group, or downwind or down current of someone where if they capsize, they will drift toward you—the position of maximum utility is always changing with the situation and the conditions.

-- **S.T.V.E. --** an order of care:  **Self, Team, Victim, Equipment**-- take care of yourself first, then your group, then deal with the victim, then the equipment—(although in come cases, saving the boat first and bringing it back to the victim is necessary for instance, you are far from land, victim is wearing exposure suit, and a strong wind is blowing the boat away—but if you do this, be very careful to not loose sight of victim, which can easily happen if there are big waves and whitecaps—have them hold their paddle over their head).

 -- **Simple to Complex** -- if someone is in trouble, do the simple fast thing first, such as shout "SWIM TO SHORE!" to a victim in the water before going after them. A corollary is the classic lifeguard mantra:  "Shout, Reach, Throw, Row, Go", which limits your own personal exposure to danger. Remember, the first person you need to keep safe is yourself.

 -- **Where will you drift?** -- if someone capsizes, and comes out of their boat, where will they end up? We need to account for wind and current at all times, and leaving plenty of distance away from hazards such as wing dams, strainers, eddy lines, and crashing waves on rocky points.

  -- ‘**Keep Some Gas in the Tank’**-- in more technical language: “preserving the limit of adequate reserve’, or, always keep a little extra energy "in the tank' of the group, in case something comes up like, say, an unexpected headwind as you are returning to the launch point.

 -- **Learn to Dance w/o Looking at your Feet**-- a good leader will continually work on his or her own paddling skills so that their own boat control can eventually become easy and unconscious, allowing the leaders' attention to be fully "360", focused outward onto the group.  Also-- developing an 'extra gear' of paddle speed allows one to move freely in and around the group, allowing the leader to more quickly transition through the ever-changing "Positions of Maximum Usefulness" with ease.

-- **Situational Awareness**--This is the capability of a leader to 'see ahead' and anticipate what might be coming up before it happens-- such as an approaching thunderstorm, a large set of waves, "cats paws" on the water, tidal currents around a point, commercial shipping lanes, etc.

-**- Avoid Decision Making Traps**:  These are the little rationalizations—also known as ‘heuristics’-- that we all tell ourselves that can get us into trouble.  Examples:  "I've driven 2 hours to get to the coast, I'm going to launch no matter what the conditions are! "(scarcity trap), or :"I've been down this river before, I know it well" (false familiarity trap), or, "Sean is a very experienced paddler, he would never take us to a hazardous place" (expert trap-- which my coach Leon Somme wryly translates as *"Don't let your leader lead you to your death!"*), or "Well, if Sam made it through that rapid, then certainly I can make it through too" (ego trap), or, “I guess I’ll go ahead and launch into that big surf-- I don’t want to look like a wimp” (social pressure trap), or, “But we’ve already taken the boats off of the cars, let’s go ahead and launch anyway” (momentum, or laziness trap).

-- ‘**Keep a Light Hand on the Tiller’:**  -- there are different styles of group leadership, some leaders are more bossy and controlling, while others are verry relaxed—each of us needs to find a compromise between these extremes, so that trips remain fun for the paddlers, while safety concerns are respected.

Communication is key—when folks know WHY the leader is asking them to do something, they are usually much more amenable.

-**- A Good Trip Leader always has**:  a plan, a chart, and a bail out option, a ‘plan B’, a tow belt, spare paddle, snacks, extra warm clothes, weather forecast, a way to call for help-- cell phone, VHF radio-- , first aid kit, good judgment, big smile, positive attitude, etc.

-- ‘**Safe Haven to Safe Haven’**:  concept of a trip being a series of links between "safe havens"-- protected places where folks can rest and sort things out-- for instance, if it is windy, it would be a in the lee of a point, a nice beach to rest on, etc.

-- **Becoming Adept at Reading Non-Verbal Cues:** many of us are rather stoic, and have developed a habit of "never let them see you sweat".  As a trip leader it helps to be attuned to "reading" your paddlers for evidence of fatigue, sea sickness, or difficulty with the sea conditions.  Slumping posture, or a sudden lack of interest in exploring might indicate a tired paddler.  Inability to keep with the group is another clue, or maintain direction-- it might be time to land at a nearby beach and take a break, offer a Cliff Bar, towing 'practice', etc.

-- **What to do when you have both a Jackrabbit and a Turtle in your Pod?**

-- invite the Jackrabbit to tow the turtle, of course, and burn off excess energy.  Or-- challenge two jack rabbits to have a race 'around the group' while the group is paddling.  Put the 'turtle' in the lead spot.  Try "drafting"--  same as what is done in road biking -- where the slow paddler is put in the middle of a 'pace line', and have everyone keep their bow as close as possible to the stern of the boat in front of them-- the closer the more 'pull' one gets from the boat in front.  It is amazing how this can speed up a group and create a motivated 'team' that is working together--  plus be an excellent boat handling exercise.

**-- Pre-Trip Warm Up and Paddler Assessment:** always have some form of a warm-up-- stretching on the beach-- then after launching do an in-boat warm-up, which could be something like having everyone come together and touch bows together, then back paddle 10 strokes, then do a 360 turn, then come back together, or whatever little paddling exercise you dream up-- it could be a game-- tossing tennis balls into open hatches, trying to snatch a piece of duct tape off of each others stern, or the ever popular "dead fish polo".  During this time a good trip leader will observe the paddlers and ascertain their skill level, which is good information for who to keep one's eye on during the trip.

**-- Delegate, Delegate, Delegate** -- It is good to enlist paddlers to help out with the trip by appointing assistants, point paddlers, folks to watch for boats coming from the right, folks watching for boats from the left, and sweeps.  Another excellent job is to appoint someone to watch the point paddler and let him or her know if they are getting too far in front of the group.

**-- Beware the deceptive ‘ease’ of level 1 trips--**  because, even though the day is beautiful and calm, you have paddlers who you might not know, and are often very limited in their skills and awareness. Remedy: try and have capable assistants on whom you can rely, and two: after launching, do a series of paddle drills to help assess paddlers abilities. One thing I like to do is have everyone close their eyes and hold the paddle up and wiggle their boats back and forth, then ask them to pop their spray skirt with out using their grab loop. After that, you can play follow the leader, the game Aliens and Shields, kayak square dancing, or Dead Fish Polo, to both warm up, and be able to better see the skill level of each paddler.

--**Risk Assessment**:  before leaving the beach always do a risk assessment. Having a brief risk assessment before launching is a very good habit to develop because it gets everyone thinking about 'what can go wrong' (a "pre-mortem"), and helps everyone be invested in and aware of the safety issues of that particular day and conditions. I like the one used by BodyBoatBlade—the ‘bulls eye’-- which if you send me an email, I can attach the file and return it to you.

**-- “That Beach Looks Really Nice To Me!” --** this statement was a uttered by fellow OOPS member Dennis Pennell one April afternoon in the Columbia Gorge. I was with a group of fairly experienced paddlers who had launched from Viento (Spanish for ‘wind’) State Park. We had crossed over the river and paddled past ‘Wind’ Mountain and the ‘Wind’ River—and can you see the pattern? It was damn windy! The east wind was funneling through that part of the gorge probably around 25 knots, with gusts to 35, and all of us were on the verge of not being able to control our boats, nor would we be able to necessarily help someone who capsized. When Dennis pointed to shore and said to the group: “I think that beach looks really nice!”, he was speaking for every one of us, and we all inwardly breathed a sigh of relief, for someone had spoken up and voiced the fear and uncertainty that we all were feeling. This actually took a lot of courage on Dennis’ part—to push back against the macho code that insists that we never show signs of fear of weakness. Thank you Dennis! We instantly agreed that yes, in fact, that beach did look really good, landed on the beach, carried our boats up to Hwy. 14, and hitchhiked back to Viento to retrieve our cars. The takeaway here is that most of us fear being the one to speak up and voice one’s fear—particularly among a group of guys. So a good leader is cognizant of this fact of human psychology—that folks are reluctant to appear as the ‘wimpy’ one in front of the group—and finds other means to truly gauge a paddler’s true level of confidence. Body language is one way— perhaps they are slumping, and not looking  eager-- another, more direct method is to have everyone face the water with their hands behind their back, and indicate by a show of fingers how they feel about launching into the observed conditions—5 fingers if they are fully confident, and down to1 finger if they are uncertain and do not want to go. The bottom line is that if someone is fearful, they will not be “having fun”, which is the goal of all trips—and in that case the plan should be altered so that that person is not put in a position where they are in over their heads. A corollary is a quote by coach Paul Kuthe: ***“Some of my best days kayaking have been sitting on the beach”***—which speaks to the absolute permission that each of us needs to give ourselves to always reserve the right to say ‘no,’ to feel free to decline to launch if our gut tells us that the conditions are too much for us. This has special resonance for me, thinking of one time I went against my gut instinct (social pressure decision trap) and launched into 7-10 foot dumping surf, telling myself “what have I got to lose?”— to which afterwards coach Jon Walpole soberly answered: “your life”. Happily, I did live to tell about it, but only after a very scary and exhausting self-rescue.

-- Carl Davis, c 2016

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