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Clear Calls, Clear Tactics

Good on board communications require using the right words at the right time

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Clear and direct communication between the tactician and the helm also helps others on the team have better understanding of the next move and be better prepared to make a sail trim or weight adjustment.
Paul Todd/Outside Images

Imagine this scenario: You get a nice start, tack to port and are executing your strategy to go right. Congratulations. Suddenly your Bowman shouts: "Starboard tacker!" Your tactician failed to account for the possibility that the boat to leeward might tack.

"Should I tack?" you ask urgently, hoping for some help.

"No, don't tack!" your tactician responds. He wants to stick to the go-right plan. But now it is definitely too late.

You shout, "Tacking!" and then shove the helm over hard. It is the only option that does not end with a repair bill. The lousy lee-bow leaves you pinned and going the wrong way.

Changing tacks or jibes, and continuing or staying on the same tack, are the two major tactical moves in every race, with each modified by qualifiers. When changing tacks, a timing or placement qualifier modifies the execution. For example, "lee-bow tack" hands control to the driver to tack in a specific spot, whereas "tack in 3, 2, 1" plants the tack where your tactician specifies. When "continuing," the qualifiers are modes. It might be a sustained

“height mode,” for example, which allows you to stay above a leeward boat, or it might be a temporary mode change through a manoeuvre, such as calling for a “duck.”

Consistent phraseology is important. Suppose you are in the same situation going right, but this time the other boat is identified as a potential -problem. The “if-then” statement language should be as simple as possible while still describing the situation, making the call, and reinforcing the call with a short explanation.

Let us revisit the situation: The tactician says: “There’s a blue boat below. When they tack they will be a starboard problem.”

The right call should be: “If they tack, then duck.”

Leave a short pause to let it sink in, and then provide the explanation: “Our plan is to go right, so stay on port whatever happens.” There is no doubt what the next move will be, and everyone is ready. Your bow person knows to keep an eye on that boat, and can say, “Blue boat is tacking” as soon as he or she sees any hint of a tack.

At which point your tactician says, “Duck.” Almost simultaneously, your driver reinforces the plan while starting the turn and easing the main by saying, “Ducking.” Besides -reinforcing the call, the explanation defines the desired outcome, and thus, it leaves wiggle room for your driver to make an audible. Suppose the blue boat has a bad tack.

As before, your bowman says, “Blue boat is tacking,” followed by “duck” from your tactician, but this time, the driver sees a fumbled tack and says, “We can cross.” By doing so, he overrides the duck and everyone goes back to their jobs.

If-then statements are not only for traffic-management situations; some days wind shifts come quickly, and you will want to handle them proactively. For example, “If you get a big header, auto-tack,” your tactician says on one of those blustery and shifty days.

“Copy. I’m rolling into a tack when the jib backs,” the driver replies. He or she is confirming the call while also alerting the rest of the team. The trimmer keeps the jib uncleated, ready to release.

The bowman calls, “Big puff -coming in 3, 2, 1—puff on!” Your driver says, “Tacking!” without having to bear off trying to re-fill the jib while waiting for a call. Moments later, you are up to speed on the new tack.

Wind and traffic are in -constant change, so our -if-then statements must be adaptable. Let us look at our first scenario again: This time, the blue boat does not tack early, and now you are both almost to lay line. “If the blue boat tacks, then we lee-bow,” your tactician declares. “We are already right, and we don’t want to get stuck overstood.”

The crazier the wind and the closer the traffic, the more urgent it is to give a clear -if-then scenario, but even without urgency, it is comforting to hear. “We are playing oscillations,” the tactician says, restating his -pre-race strategy. “We are at 305 degrees, up 5. If we get to 300 or below, then we tack.” Stating the next move allows your team to focus on speed with confidence, knowing the tactician is in full control.

Whether forgetting to make the call, or not stating it, the lack of an if-then warrants a reminder from the helmsman to spur the tactician into action by asking, “What are we going to do if the blue boat tacks?” Some calls might be the start of a conversation. “If the blue boat tacks, we are going to lead her back,” the tactician might say.

“I thought we really wanted to go right?” someone asks.

“Oh, yeah...right,” the tactician says before correcting himself: “If the blue boat tacks, we are going to duck.”

Similarly, a tone of uncertainty should spark a strategic re-evaluation discussion: "If the blue boat tacks, then we duck," your tactician says, but this time, he appears anxious.

"You don't sound so sure," the skipper replies, which should start a deeper conversation.

"Yeah, I'm not so sure. It looks kind of glassy ahead," the tactician says, confirming they could use some help. Fortunately, if your tactician forgets, makes a suspect call or things are getting tricky, it is never too late to ask questions to make sure there is a plan and a path to execute it.

Some tactical calls have more than one "if" variable. For example, "If the blue boat tacks, or if we get a header, then tack," gives several reasons the team should expect to tack. Some calls combine a few "then" moves. "If the blue boat tacks, then duck and go into height mode" keeps you from falling into the backwind of a boat that is just ahead of the blue boat.

Plan B is your predefined if-then after a start. It is mostly a statement about how much you want to execute your first move. When it is imperative to go right, for example, Plan B might be: "If we are second row, then still expect to tack promptly, even if we are tacking into bad air." Alternately, if the right is not worth fighting for, Plan B softens: "If we are second row, then we will hang in there until things thin out."

To close any communication loop, a simple "copy" works fine. Even better is something along the lines of: "Copy. Ducking when the blue boat tacks," which confirms that you really know what the plan is. At times, as the helmsman, I am so focused on going fast that I inadvertently tune out everything else. Having heard no confirmation, a loud: "Hey, Mike. You got that?" leads to me sheepishly ask for a repeat. Never assume a call is heard and confirmed.

If-then statements put you in charge of the part of the race that is in your control. You cannot control your competitors; expect the unexpected because their move will often make no sense. Mother Nature is going to throw her curveballs despite what your wind app says. As you progress around the racecourse through traffic and shifts, if-then statements manage both anticipated and surprise changes perfectly.