Risk Management in Paddle Sports

Introduction
A certain element of risk is involved when teaching paddle sports, leading trips, or providing gear to clients. As ACA instructors, we take a number of precautions to reduce this risk to acceptable levels. One example is purchasing insurance to protect our livelihood. Risk management isn't unique to paddle sports. It doesn't hurt to look at risk management techniques used in other fields like finance, medicine, information technology, defense, etc. Concepts like insurance, vulnerability analysis (screening participants), cost-benefit analysis (determination of acceptable risk), planning, etc. are well developed in other business disciplines and can easily be applied to paddle sports as well. Most of these concepts apply to paddling in general although some practices like proper paperwork are mostly applicable to formal instruction.

Basic Concepts
Although risk management concepts have been integral to paddle sports for quite some time, it doesn't hurt to explain some vocabulary. Three important risk management concepts are:

- Vulnerability: A potential weakness of some sort.
- Threat: A potential danger that someone of something can discover and use a vulnerability (weakness) to your disadvantage. The someone or something is called a threat agent.
- Risk: Basic probability. What is the probability of a threat agent taking advantage of a vulnerability and the overall impact?

It may be beneficial to examine these concepts in terms of potential education/trip scenarios.

ABC Outfitters has been in business for several decades. It has been a tough year for them financially so they decided to pare back on equipment upgrades and maintenance (vulnerability). Recently, some big storms dumped lots of water in feeder tributaries causing the water levels to rise on their favorite run: Hot Dog Canyon. A group of college students contacted ABC Outfitters to run the canyon this weekend. It's Saturday and Hot Dog Canyon is well above safe boating levels per sources like guide books. ABC Outfitters has never published a formal cut-off level for the canyon, they wing it (vulnerability). Although there is an easier section of the river above, the clients really have their heart set on a canyon run and ABC Outfitters aims to please (threat - improper venue may lead to serious injuries). Unfortunately, several rafts capsized in Psycho Rapid leading to a flush drowning (risk). ABC Outfitters was successfully sued and is no longer in business.

Kidz Are Great Paddling School specializes in training children near a metropolitan area. They normally staff each class with two qualified instructors but Tom called in sick today leaving Sally by herself with 10 children (several vulnerabilities). They have a nice safe venue and the weather is picture perfect. The class was going great until after lunch when Jon developed an upset stomach and asked to leave the class. Sally contacted Jon's parents and instructed Jon to walk down the trail to the parking lot and wait (threat - unattended children may be harmed and you will be held accountable). On the way to the car, Jon was beaten up by a teenager whom also stole his boating gear (risk - the teenager was the threat agent that caused harm to Jon).
Dealing With Risk

Risk is part of our everyday lives. It is important to understand the potential risks, carefully evaluate them, and reduce overall risk to acceptable levels. A very common pitfall in risk management is ignoring risk. Ignoring risk eventually leads to bad outcomes and gross negligence claims. There are only a limited number of ways to reduce risk to acceptable levels, the list below covers these solutions and provides numerous examples relevant to paddle sports.

- **Risk Mitigation/Reduction:**
  - Inspect equipment periodically for signs of wear and needed maintenance.
  - Replace outdated gear like that old Mirage kayak with the small cockpit. The boating industry has made huge strides in safety in the past decade or two.
  - Do a mental "Lessons Learned" for trips and classes. Ask your co-instructors for feedback. Use this feedback to improve procedures going forward.
  - Learn from others mistakes or near misses. American Whitewater publishes an annual report of whitewater boating accidents with some analysis. This report is a great way to learn from others.
  - Always have a Plan B venue and let your class know what that is. I also recommend pre-setting river gauge levels. This is very similar to going to an auction and jotting down a price you will not exceed when bidding.
  - Look for useful redundancies. We often teach our students to check other's drain plugs and spray skirts after each break. Recruiting a competent assistant is another example of a useful redundancy.
  - Plan, Plan, Plan. The more effort you spend up front, the easier it is to deal with unexpected complications. We often check weather, look at upstream gauges, identify exit routes and hospitals. It isn't a bad practice completing your paper course report before the class. The course report provides a great contact list should the need arise like the Park Service closing down the parkway to my class location with no prior notification - grrr!
  - Get and maintain training. The ACA ensures this via Instructor updates. They also require CPR and First Aid certification to request that great ACA insurance.
  - Follow accepted standards. American Whitewater's River Database is a good guide for commonly accepted class ratings. The ACA is the nation's leading paddle sports standards body. Our discipline committees publish and maintain some great suggested class curriculums.
  - Make checklists - They work wonders in the space and medical industries.
  - Ensure you have the right gear - Do you carry a cell phone in a water-tight enclosure? Do you have a spare breakdown paddle? Do you have a suitable First Aid Kit?
  - Verify whether your clients have suitable gear BEFORE beginning the shuttle - Pay extra attention to proper helmet and PFD fit. I also check to see if they have adequate thermal protection. I pack an extra skull cap (and full hood) - both have been used many times. I also bring extra gear like helmets on my novice trips since many novices have exceptionally poor fitting helmets. If mine offers far better protection, I offer to
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loan it to them but that is their decision. Check to see if they have suitable footwear - bare feet is a non-starter for me.

- **Medical Disclosure** - In more recent years, having clients complete a short medical disclosure form has become the norm in the sports industry. Let's face it, we are not medical doctors and need some clues on probable causes of medical issues and preferred remedies. I have experienced diabetics, persons with previous heart disease, previous broken backs, severe allergies, bi-polar issues, etc. I was still able to handle trips/classes with all of the above issues due to prior knowledge and guidance from the afflicted. Treat this information with great care - it is very sensitive. Ask where they keep their medications and how best to potentially assist (or not) if called upon.

- **Proper Paperwork** - When completing your course report form, ask yourself if the class venue could be misconstrued. Some runs are drop a river class (or more) at lower levels. It doesn't hurt to document the river level as an extra precaution or the specific stretch. We already discussed completing your course report ahead of time so you have that all important contact list. Do you carry ACA accident report forms and SOAP notes (two copies) in your First Aid Kit along with a writing implement? Get accident witnesses observations down in writing immediately as they may become difficult to find/remember later on.

- **Qualify Participants** - When running more advanced classes, you will need to qualify participants to help ensure a smooth and safe class. It doesn't make much sense to run a solid class III river with some students that have just begun boating.

  - **Risk Transfer** (AKA: Insurance) - As ACA certified instructors, we all have access to great liability insurance at very affordable prices. Your sponsoring organization may carry even better insurance - certainly worth checking out.

  - **Risk Acceptance** - There is almost always some left over risk (AKA: Residual Risk). We do our best to reduce risk to acceptable levels and remind our clients via the ACA Waiver they play a key role in their safety as well. Stress "Challenge By Choice" and fully support individuals that choose to sit out certain exercises.

  - **Risk Avoidance** - There's a reason few firms run classes on Class V venues, for most firms the potential risks far exceed the benefits.

**Summary**

Risk management might not be one of the more exciting topics but it is really essential to safe paddling events/activities. In most serious accidents there often isn't one root cause, it is a collection of numerous small issues that eventually lead to a really bad outcome. Developing a habit of risk management allows you to deal with small issues before the ruin a great event. Litigation in our field is exceptionally rare but not unheard of. Practicing Due Diligence (AKA: Do Detect) is a great first step in protecting yourself and your business. When you see potential unsafe practices, ask why and how can I address? This leads us to Due Care (AKA: Do Correct). Identifying issues like outdated medications in your First Aid Kit is only half the battle, you need to correct this vulnerability by restocking.