“Alpha team, you must learn to cooperate as one!” Mr Mohammad, our P5 Level Custodian bellowed at the top of his voice. He sounded desperate. We tried to row ourselves back to shore but the tidal waves were too strong for us. If only I knew this was going to happen…

The ten of us were assigned to Alpha team, led by Mr Mohammad, for our annual dragon boat race. My team of five girls and five boys was feeling ecstatic. We had vowed before boarding the dragon boat that we would be the champions of this inter-class race. Wearing our life jackets and carrying the oars into the boat was a breeze as this was our second time rowing a dragon boat as a class. We could not wait for the race to commence.

The horn sounded and all the various teams started to row vigorously forward. There were many exchanges of water splashes across the teams, much to the delight of those on board. The coolness of the water was a stark contrast to the earlier heat wave experienced at mid-day. After a while, we felt bored doing the same routine. Our arms started to feel sore with all the forward rowing. Gary, one of the mischievous boys within our team, gave a naughty grin and winked at us playfully. He had decided to row in the opposite direction and wanted the rest of the boys to follow his movements. We nodded and gleefully joined in the fun. The initial goal for the team to become champions was quickly forgotten.

However, our moment of folly soon turned against us. The tidal waves became stronger, and our dragon boat ride got more turbulent. The sky had become overcast, with large grey cumulus clouds forming above us. Mr Mohammad had noticed our folly and scolded us for not working as a team. All the other classes have already arrived ashore and were waiting anxiously
for us to return. As our reversed rowing have caused the girls to exert more energy to propel forward, our combined team efforts to row the dragon boat towards the shore have weakened considerably. Feeling fearful and frantic at being stuck in the forthcoming storm, some female classmates started to cry, while others started to scold us. Gary also turned pale as he realised his playfulness had caused us to be stuck in the turbulent waters.

Soon, I had an idea. I started chanting, “Left! Right! Left! … Left! Right! Left! …” while rowing on the left side with a strong swipe of the oars. The team understood my signal: row in rhythm to propel the boat forward. They recalled it was one of the basic lessons learnt during the first dragon boating course. Those classmates seated on the right quickly chanted ‘Right’ loudly when it was their turn to paddle their oars on the right side. Gradually, the whole team regained their morale and rowed in rhythm amidst the rhythmic chanting. Many hands made light work as we propelled toward the shore. Soon, we were in absolute sync and eventually made it back to the shore safely.

Relieved that the whole Alpha team was finally ashore, we quickly disembarked and assembled at the holding area. Mr Mohammad again emphasized the importance of teamwork and the need to work together to realise the team goal. He also chided the five of us for getting distracted and causing unnecessary trouble to the whole team. We were told to clean up our classroom during recess for the following two weeks as our punishment.

After his admonishment, we felt ashamed of our misconduct. We apologized to the team and to the teachers for causing them unnecessary anxiety. I realized that I should not have joined Gary in his mischief out of boredom. I could not bear to think of the consequences if our misconduct had caused us to remain stuck in the middle of the stormy waves. The five of us had forgotten the essence of teamwork and caused our team to lose the race. It was indeed a painful experience, an experience that made us finally realised the importance of working as a team to achieve our goals.