

Can shipping people communicate?

A human factor aspect on multicultural communication and ethnic stereotyping in shipping

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The human factor is often point out in the explanation of many of today's accidents at sea. The definition of the *human factor* certainly contains many aspects. One of major importance is crew fatigue. Although, there could be other aspects; a conceivable one is the approach of communication and stereotyping because of cultural differences. The two aspects are closely connected.

In the past, researches on multicultural/multilingual work situations at sea have revealed quite different results. In general terms, the 2001 SIRC report summarises, "... multinational crews ... when supported effectively, can operate extremely successfully", and therefore is something good for the industry. In 1999/2000 an ethnologist from the Swedish National Maritime Museum did a roundtrip with the PCC MS Isolde and concludes, "... the crews display servility that Swedish senior officers are neither happy nor comfortable with ...". My own study, from 2000 to 2002, observing students at WMU concludes the situation is "... not problem free".

Shipowners reading contradicted research results ought to be all at sea. Of course, they have drawn their own conclusions from trial and error with crew mixtures. The industry cannot neither tolerate nor afford this anymore. There is no room for experimenting onboard and it is neither allowed. Onboard communication and the ship/shore interface have to be spot on from the very beginning, otherwise both safety and security is at stake and owners would reluctantly bear eventual additional costs.

The number of international cooperation's appears to be increasing. The challenges to the partners would be that they are notoriously unstable and difficult to govern. What we see today is, therefore, an inter-firm transaction through acquisitions. The reason according to Osborne (1990) is that "... differences between home and host cultures in multinational joint ventures may amplify the effort and time required to build a common hierarchy that bridges the gaps in partners' cultural, linguistic and organizational traditions". He also states, "...shared decision-making arrangements can be cumbersome to manage and may reduce the speed with which many actions in pursuit of global strategies can be taken". Therefore, certain pooling constellations have to be broken because of the adverse impact of not being able to make quick

decisions and the psychological fact that many people have problems in accepting company protocols. Misunderstandings could be a serious risk in achieving a quality operation/management. This also plays a vital role in achieving what is defined as *quality shipping*. We cannot have quality shipping without a quality crew that is able to work together and that can communicate without difficulty. In the past the alternatives for such shipping companies have been either to close their sheer shipping activities or, if financially strong, purchase (take-over) another shipping company and keep the hegemony by building a new corporate culture. An example of a broken pooling arrangement is the famous take over, in 200, when the Danish container giant *Maersk Line* bought another major shipping company *Sea-Land*.

One important factor for incidents and accidents certainly is difficulties arising from mixed crews. What might be the reasons for such problems? How much does the communication between team-workers on the ship's bridge, in the ship's engine room, in the MET classroom in the owner's boardrooms etc contribute to wrong decisions causing accidents and offensiveness? Is there a reason for this behaviour that could be of interest to learn more about? Is it a consistent phenomenon? Is teamwork on the bridge/engine room processed according to the genuine meaning of the idiom? It certainly e.g. does not mean that the Master thinks loud.

Managers in shipping companies, ship's masters as well as teachers in MET institutions should be interested in studies on mixed cultural constellations in shipping. In the future, teachers too will meet students from a variety of countries because of work force mobility beyond national borders, in particular in EU, and politicians' concern to have a national merchant fleet.

Are there any constrains in the education of a mixed student body making it unnecessary difficult to pass on proper information to becoming team-workers? How do we assess a student body in a cultural mixture? Because being different a student should not be "downgraded"; neither because the teacher don't understand that his students have a different cultural background to him/her. Students should be assessed from their knowledge and skill.

If we don't take this issue seriously the industry might face a problem difficult to tackle. Better face the problem before a very serious calamity will happen.

Additional papers related to above subject have been written by the author and can be found according to the references below:

Horck, J. (2004). An analysis of decision-making processes in multicultural maritime scenarios *Maritime Policy & Management*, 31, (1), 15-29.

Horck, J. (2003). *International maritime legislation and model courses*. Paper presented at the Fourth General Assembly of the International Association of Maritime Universities (IAMU). Alexandria, Egypt. This paper will shortly be published in the IAMU journal.

Reference

Osborne, R. N. (1990). Forms of Interorganizational governance for multinational alliances. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33 (3), 503-519.

If the reader of this contribution has any remarks on the subject I very much look forward to receive your feedback and remarks. Please use jh@wmu.se.