

Communication and Human Element in Shipping Commerce

– notes from a shipbroker

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The purpose of existence of a commercial ship is to transport goods, people or animals. This purpose is accomplished by a series of commercial negotiations, paper work in terms of contracts and agreements, the physical movement of goods, recording of each event concerning the movement and the smooth coordination among all parties concerned. Failure in any of these activities can result in commercial damages and loss of reputation and goodwill.

The shore office, be it the owner's or the ship manager's, usually adopts the role of a 'boss' while practically coordinating the commercial activities. Although the ship, under the command of the Master, is at the mercy of the vagaries of the sea and is subjected to a host of other influences and considerations, often has to submit to the demands of the shore managers, some of them ridiculous, whether the ship likes it or not.

Hardly two decades back, telex was the primary mode of communication between the ship and the shore based office. Though quite reliable, telex had the disadvantage of being expensive and inflexible when compared to the more recent email systems. In telex communication, charges were applied for every character, thereby forcing the users to be thrifty and efficient. Modern communication methods allow access to almost unlimited flexibilities and capabilities, be it in the form of voice or data, at negligible cost at any time of the day or night, be it ashore or in the middle of the ocean. This is undoubtedly a great advantage but there are occasions when this advantage is 'abused' by the practitioners than 'used'!

It is not certain whether any scientific study has been conducted on ascertaining the effectiveness and efficacy of the communication between the ship and the shore office. The exponentially growing speed of communication coupled with computers with large memory capacities gives us the illusionary belief that all is well. Is it not time to study the effect of the barrage of emails on the already overworked Master and his crew; how these are affecting their stress levels?

There are ship owners and ship managers who have established efficient communication systems well synchronized with the requirements of the business taking into consideration the human element of ship-board personnel. But there are also ship-owners and ship-managers who have not paid adequate attention in optimizing their communication and data management. They have all been overwhelmed by the ever expanding efficiency of modern communication modes and the advantages it offers. It is not uncommon to see ship managers who depend on the Master to give them even basic commercial

information like the specifications of the ship (hatch or hold dimensions, outreach of cranes, constants of the ship, etc) before finalizing a contract of carriage. These days, many contracts of carriage require the copies of the ships' certificates to be sent to the charterers before finalization of the contract. It is observed that even large ISO certified ship owners ask the Master to send the copies of the certificates – not as a one-off case but on a regular basis! This may be due to the fact that although the required information reaches the ship manager regularly but such information may not be stored in an easily retrievable way or it may be due to the fact that the information flow within the ship manager's office is inefficient. We may find it easy to blame the ship manager for such inefficiencies but the cause of the problem lies elsewhere.

The crux of the problem, if one delves deeper, lies in the lack of awareness and adequate training at all levels. Communication is the 'life blood' of shipping commerce and email systems are, these days, an integral part of ship-board and shore based communication systems. In the last decade or so, the email systems have undergone generational changes but how often has the users been trained in using these systems efficiently? It is often expected that the user will learn it 'by practice'. How many ship owners train their shore based managers in data and message management? The ship manager may be given periodical training sessions in insurance, risk management, financial management, accounting techniques and myriad of other topics; but rarely is training given in the efficient use of email and messaging systems, in storing and retrieving data and in using the available software tools. Even when such training sessions are held, they are one-off events with little or no emphasis given to continuous improvement. This often leads to the shore based personnel falling back on the Master for every little piece of information which otherwise is available in the office.

To make our day to day working systems more versatile and efficient, scientific studies on the efficacy of ship-shore communication have to be initiated. Meanwhile, awareness has to spread among practitioners of shipping commerce on the need for enhancement of their data and message management skills. The shore based ship manager has to be aware that he has to be an efficient facilitator and support to the Master and the crew in completing every voyage efficiently.
