

Where do WE go From Here!

Captain S.W. Bowles FNI, MRIN
President & Principal Surveyor BowTech Maritime
CDI Accredited Inspector Chemical / Gas / Bulk Ships – mpc Auditor
ISM / ISPS Lead Auditor

After a recent Nautical Institute Branch meeting I sat down to try and put words to a general feeling that our industry is on a dangerous course. It's a bit like the recurring dream where the ship is headed down a narrow channel only to meet a dead end and can't turn around.

During the meeting we discussed the 'state of the nation' which always ends without any real outcomes. We say our goodbyes with a feeling of hopelessness! As we get older the issues seem to become insurmountable - a little like the finger in the dyke scenario. Is this because as we get older, experience kicks in?

The latest issue of **Alert!** targets many manning problems under a heading of Rogue Behaviour currently facing most operators. The articles are symptomatic responses to ineffectual shipping management - chasing the buck, and passing the buck. WE are at, or near, the crossroads due to the lack of vision, not in commercial drive (by that I mean ship building) but in relation to those that man the vessels.

In my work, mostly conducting ship inspections, I also assist companies solving problems with charterers and/or P&I claims. It has become very obvious that WE are now approaching a serious shortfall in manning numbers and with that, competency levels.

All operators are not the same and as such should not be 'tarred with the same brush' - BUT! - I see a broad spectrum of the industry mainly in the chemical and gas trade which should be operating at the highest level of awareness. I see competency levels sliding and fundamental safety issues becoming a common occurrence - MARS incident reporting will attest to that.

Recently, I have been approached by a number of companies – and I'm certain that I am not alone - with a distress call. They recognise a problem on the horizon that will impact the ability of the venture to stay afloat. It is mainly centred around their ability to cover foreseeable risks. They do not have the backfill to man both ship and shore based requirements.

History has taught us that, to act in haste, without proper acknowledgement of all the facts, is foolhardy and one usually ends up meeting a dead end. So why has it taken so long for the industry to recognise this pending car crash??!! The knowledge and warnings have been broadcast for years – The NI and other organisations couldn't have been more unequivocal in their approach but no one has been listening. The proof is at ground level – a case of "they don't know what they don't know"!

So - we know how we got here! - BUT do we know how to get out of it! IT!! will take a mammoth effort to change course.

I'm particularly interested in the article written by Captain McAllister in **Alert!**. He is perceptive in his acknowledgement of the problems facing competency levels and provides a way out. My concern is that it takes a strong leader and with the added workload to already busy operational requirements, we will return full circle to the necessity to increase manning levels. He may not have 'THE ANSWER' but I fully agree that checklists, dumbing down (ISM) do go a long way to Rouge Behaviour. His alignment with the air industry is valid – we can learn a lot from them and he offers a start, and a signal, that should be recognised by owners / operators and the marine colleges.

On another track, I recently read an article in LNG World challenging the effectiveness of MARPOL. I firmly believe that ship builders, under the guidance of Class, can and do build ships to the appropriate administrative rules, so why are we filling the ship's book shelves with information that they have no control over. It is the operation of the equipment that is paramount. Whether the ship has a double hull, constructed of so many metres as an application of the likes of the IBC Code, is something the crew can not do anything about, nor, really care about. The most effective learning tools are those that provide information on operations and not the legalities of the standards. The standard is met on delivery and checked by those dedicated to that area of expertise.

The shipping industry is lost at sea. Is it the bottom line, bureaucracy, inexperience, or an industry caught up in legalities that is at the root of the problem - or - all of the above? A failing where business is determined to cut corners to save a buck, risking lives and the environment. WE will continue to hold our breath until the next major incident.

A course alteration is needed in a hurry and it should start now within the marine education system and manning agencies. There is a sense of urgency mounting and it won't be long before the manifold pressures reach dangerous levels. The risk assessment has been carried out (it's been 20 years +) - we need to rethink what it is we are teaching mariners AND do it now!