



To : Seafarers Our Ref : Mentoring Letter 3 - Modern Masters
From : Marine Mentor Date : 17th January 2020

Dear Colleague,

When I first put it out there a couple of years ago that I was considering a return to sea, friends (mostly still at sea or in shore management) told me that I was nuts, that things were very different today, and not what they used to be. It is obvious that many things have changed at sea since I “swallowed the anchor.” Gone is the Chief Steward or Radio Officer, who did most of the admin for you, leaving you to be a keyboard warrior. There are also some obvious lifestyle changes – gone is the afternoon snooze, and the Steward to bring you coffee and biscuits several times a day. In their place are a gym to help you watch your BMI, and a coffee machine in your cabin (if you are a member of the SMT!) to keep the caffeine rolling when you’re busy and trying to avoid violating your work/rest hours.

Technology advances have been rapid, and we have moved from manual systems which required a hands-on approach to automation, requiring ships’ staff to read the manuals or email the Ship Manager for advice when breakdowns occur. We didn’t have that luxury way back then. Replies to telexes took hours if not days. Communications are almost instant, with this so have Charterers’ and Owner’s demands and instead of reading a telex or three a day, Senior Officers spend much of their days behind computers studying emails or submitting reports, and when they’re not, they’re getting ready for SIRE or PSI, or batting the curved balls being bowled by the Ship Manager, Commercial, or the DPA. Add to this that we’re dealing with the millennials who communicate differently, and are way more adept at dealing with the digital evolution (revolution?) than we older folk are. Crews have also halved in numbers but now they are multi-national, and thus also multi-cultural with the result that different management styles need to be employed on board. Clearly, the scenery has changed dramatically. **But, have you and I?**

Yesterday’s autocratic Masters and Chief Engineers styled themselves on naval discipline and expected Junior Officers to follow orders readily, but today’s younger generation are technologically-minded, value participation such as is taught in Bridge Team Management and Engine Room Team Management and have high expectations of being involved at all levels. They just don’t buy the “Command and Conquer” style, and any attempt at applying it will only end badly for all. Multi-national crews mean that we need to communicate in a common language at all times, for safety reason as well as because it’s simply the decent and respectful thing to do. Not doing so, comes with consequences. Older officers schooled in yesterday’s style need to adapt quickly to this changed environment. Are YOU one of them, or are you heading in that direction? If so, I respectfully suggest that it’s time for a “reboot.”

Of course we should never generalise, and not all masters of old were autocratic. I recall some who were affectionately referred to as “The Old Man,” and even, “Father.” Yet even today, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule despite the fact that we should have learnt by now that old-fashioned autocratic styles are very outdated and simply don’t work in a modern environment. This does seem to me to suggest a respect which may be lacking. Unfortunately, it’s not only respect for seniors, it sometimes seems that it’s also a respect for one’s position aboard, or even self-respect that’s not much in evidence.

Looking back to when I first came ashore, I was in for a rude shock. There certainly wasn’t much respect shown by shore-side wallahs for my “ticket” initially – at least not until I became involved with more

challenging P&I work. I must be honest, and admit that I too forgot the terms “Old Man” and “Father” when starting my business, and was more of a Boss, expecting my staff to understand that they were privileged to receive salaries at the end of the month, in return for fulfilling my rather high expectations. Early staff turnover was fairly high as a result, although I didn’t make the connection then. Looking back now, it’s no surprise that my home life suffered as a result also, and it took a relationship earthquake to shake me from my reverie. I emerged from the upheaval around 18 months later with a very different (subdued) attitude and business strategy. This one was built more on partnerships, where staff could expect me to provide them with the resources necessary (skills and support included) to help them build the business for the common good. Of course, my expectations were realised, but now without the stress of the past. Sadly, it had taken years for me to learn the soft skills which I needed to navigate my way through life’s stormy seas. Coincidentally, this change of mind-set is also the origin of BRM which was born in the airline industry after too many accidents happened despite prior warnings from instruments to mostly ex-military captains with a “I can do this” attitude. This is MY story, what’s YOUR’s?

Despite the differences in the “old days” at sea versus today and the introduction of BRM, the emphasis of our training is STILL solely “hard” skills (technical knowledge and skills,) rather than the “soft” skills. Yet it is the combination of the two which differentiate a good leader from a good manager. Little has changed in this respect. It’s no surprise that many of the Masters I have known through my career - both aboard and ashore - are good managers, but sorely lack the polish they need to help them become good leaders. In my own investigative experience, there is a direct correlation between this, and the number of accidents. It’s easy to say that accidents will always be a feature of shipboard life, but accidents can be significantly reduced if the Leadership group – both ashore as well as aboard – invest in the human capital which makes up their shipboard teams. It starts with you and I – we need to develop these skills, then we need to share them with our subordinates. Every Master needs to remember that the people aboard are now HIS or HER people, and that he is responsible for them and their professional development. If he looks after them - and as a Master or Chief Engineer, he is in an ideal position to do so - then they will look after him, and his (or her) ship.

Let’s give a thought to the difference between bosses and leaders.

Bosses (i.e. weak managers,) and Managers give orders, controls, and sets procedures, whereas the leader persuades by gaining trust and confidence, using his personal power and vision. Are our Masters and Chief Engineers aware of this difference? A recent analysis of responses to a survey asking them to rate various non-technical skills showed that engineers rated teamwork above leadership and decision-making, whereas deck officers rated leadership as their highest priority. Neither rated communication as being of any particular importance, so just how good are they as leaders? What do they understand of the term “leadership?”

Most of have read recently – say over the last couple of months even - of groundings, collisions, allisions, heavy contact with berth appliances, etc. Many of these have occurred whilst vessels were under pilotage. In almost ALL cases, Bridge Team Management was non-existent, and leadership was found wanting. Junior officers have either not been on the bridge (in gross violation of the bridge manning matrix) or have been too afraid of speaking up – or perhaps even not had the situational awareness required of them. Yet, these same officers have all attended Bridge Resource Management courses, they all know (or should know!) the Colregs, and the root cause can only be a leadership failure. (Yes, I know that the Enquiry usually puts it down to something that sounds smarter, more technical, but one of these days, they too will wake up to this.)

If that’s the case, then we need to ask WHY it failed – was it incompetence, or a system failure? Based on the accidents I have investigated, I believe that it is more the latter than former. It is disconcerting to

conclude that training has not kept pace with the changing environment, and that a great deal more needs to be done in order to train more effective leaders.

Ships STILL sail from A to B, the oceans still pose the same old challenges, Charterers still try to influence us to take the most economical route, and yet things still go bump in the night. Where does this leave us?

You have already joined - or will soon join - the ranks of several centuries of illustrious forebears to confront the challenges of the seas and oceans in command of your ship. As Rear Admiral Nick Lambert AFNI said:

1. Be in no doubt that the ship is yours' to all intents and purposes. You set the style...
2. The operation of the ship reflects your personal professionalism and that of your people.
3. When the chips are down, it's your sense of purpose and your commitment to your mission, your company and your people that will ensure that you deliver your objectives, and
4. You set the tone for the quality of your peoples' quality of life aboard, you set the standards of behaviour and welcome...you have a unique opportunity to influence the lives and careers of your juniors.

More than ever before, I believe that a new breed of Master or Chief Engineer is called for, one who is more focussed on leadership than before, who builds a tight shipboard team which he can trust to do the right thing whether undertaking their routine tasks or in emergencies. A Master or Chief Engineer who helps the officers under his (or her) command to develop to their fullest potential, and who, when they are promoted, are ready for the next step in their career in all respects. Such men and women will follow this true leader through all that their environment can throw at them.

Kind regards,

Mike Melly

NEXT: BECOMING A LEADER