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To : Seafarers                      Our Ref : Mentoring Letter 6 – What IS Mentoring?  
From : Marine Mentor              Date : 7<sup>th</sup> February 2020

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It is said that the world merchant fleet has grown by approximately 16% in the last 10 years. Difficult as it may be to believe, the International Association of Maritime Universities also reports that the global fleet is predicted to increase by 70% between 2015 and 2030. Whatever the growth is, one thing is certain, the building of newer ships which are increasingly sophisticated technologically, is demanding more than ever before, better trained and educated personnel aboard. If the Maritime Industry is in desperate need of attracting new, bright, young mariners, and preparing them to become great leaders tomorrow, it also needs to take a good hard look at whether simply providing the standard training plus ancillary courses such as Bridge Team Management for Navigating Officers is sufficient, or whether it needs to be complemented by ensuring whether it is practised or not.

In Grindrod Shipping we endeavour to monitor and enhance standards by re-assessing the skills level of existing seafarers periodically, and addressing any shortcomings. We do this through Competency Assessment Programs in the dry fleet (“CAP,”) Bridge Watchkeeper Assessments, Navigational Audits, Navigation Assessments in the case of navigation for example, improved seafarer appraisals, and now, through incorporating and embedding mentoring into our unique shipboard culture.

Mentoring is particularly applicable to the maritime industry where practices and traditions are deep and varied, after all, this is where its’ roots lie. It is one of the most effective ways of transferring this experiential knowledge from one generation of mariner to the next. Captain Le Goubin<sup>1</sup> defines it as *“the act of sharing knowledge without a designated reward.”* I’m not so sure that I agree with him. When I think back, I have gained a great deal of satisfaction when I know that I have contributed to the personal growth and competency development of employees or subordinates. I mentor on an almost daily basis, and go home at night re-energised by the knowledge that I have made a difference, no matter how small, in somebody’s life and career.

Reflective Learning was introduced to the wet fleet a couple of years ago. This was very well-received by our seafarers, and whilst it in no ways replaces safety drills, it has certainly proven to be a valuable means of raising awareness of safety matters and of motivating each member of ship’s staff to become personally responsible for creating a safer workplace. Reflective learning works best in small group discussions, when ship’s staff are ALL engaged in the process. Similarly, Mentoring works on a one-on-one basis, where both parties are invested into the process. It is not a substitute for training, but complements a formal training program. It is intended not only to enhance the safety culture yet further, but also to motivate both the Mentor as well as the Mentee to become the best at who they are and what they do.

This is where some of us become confused between mentoring and training/coaching<sup>2</sup>. They are quite different. Mentoring is a confidential, trust-based, voluntary **relationship** between someone with significant experience in some area, and a protégé who is working his or her way up through the ranks. Mentoring is NOT training which is formal, structured and standardised. Training outcomes are reliably and validly assessed. Mentoring is usually informal, and rarely assessed. The Mentor does not just show the Mentee what to do, but how to do it, and shares his/her experiential knowledge while doing so.

Coaching is short-term, task-oriented, and performance driven. For example, a subordinate (or group of subordinates) may need to learn a new skill such as operating certain equipment aboard. The coaching stops as soon as the Coach assesses when the student has acquired the skill.

Mentoring on the other hand is long-term, say for the duration of an officer's contract aboard with you. It requires time so that a climate of **trust** can be built up between the Mentor and the Mentee. Note that this works both ways – the Mentee must be able to *feel* secure in sharing the real issues which he is experiencing, and which may impact on the success of the mentoring. It also goes beyond a specific task, and may include human issues such as work/life balance, self-confidence, relationships, and so on. Obviously, this relationship then extends to subsequent contracts shared aboard the same or even different ships. In short, the big distinction between mentoring and coaching is that where coaching is about teaching tasks, **mentoring is about developing the human being who is doing the tasks.**

Mentors are Role Models, Advisors, Supporters, Leaders, Motivators, Network enablers, and sources of wisdom, experience and inspiration. In short, **Mentors are leaders of the highest calibre.** They possess the necessary self-confidence not to feel threatened by sharing their knowledge and experience, including their mistakes. They need not have the highest IQ, but to be armed with an EQ continually shaped by self-reflection and self-improvement. Mentors are the type of people who leave a significant and lasting impression on those whose paths they cross during their life-cycle. They strive to bring out the best in others. Life is short, but mentors leave a legacy behind them which lasts for generations.

One of my closest friends in recent years for example was Joe. Joe spent many years as an alcoholic, but rehabilitated and re-booted his life. He recovered sufficiently to spend his last few years working as a lowly Janitor in a high school in Florida in the USA. However, aside from his menial job-description, he quietly took on an unofficial role as Mentor to the troubled kids in the school who were drawn to his natural but unassuming charisma. Of course, it wasn't long before the school recognised his efforts, and appointed him as an auxiliary teacher. Needless to say, those kids all turned their lives around, thanks to his influence. His role in their lives was immense, as became clear in the eulogies they gave the day he passed of cancer just 6 years ago. Those kids didn't see him as the school janitor, they saw him as a father-figure, teacher, role-model. Joe had fallen once, but didn't only pick himself up again, he picked others up once he returned to his feet. I knew him in a different field to school obviously, (no, it wasn't on the streets where he had lived for some time) but was privileged to witness him mentoring adults, some older than himself, including an internationally renowned surgeons, and prominent lawyers and accountants. Joe changed their lives too. How? Simply by sharing his experience and his incredible wisdom in an quiet, unassuming, humble, yet most authoritative way. I strive to be a bit like Joe every day of my life. I don't always get it right, but like Joe taught us, I dust myself off, put my mistakes behind me, and try again the next day.

My New Year's challenge (never mind that it's February already!) to you is again to think back on your own life, and the people who made the biggest and most positive impacts. What can you pay forward of what you learnt from them?

Here's the rub. Although the mentoring aboard our ships will be informal, the program we are introducing is a more structured one, in that we will certainly set goals, measure outcomes, encourage all to become involved, and offer training and support to both mentors and protégé. However, there is NO intent to enforce or regulate the program. This would be contradictory to the spirit in which I hope you will all connect with Mentoring, and it will dampen enthusiasm. After all, we want everyone to own this, and to benefit from it. Both the company as well as seafarers have everything to gain by promoting this program. By creating a safe learning environment, bringing out the best in all of us, we are also building a highly effective and happy team, together. This program has the potential to be a game-changer for us all.

I will share some concrete, practical ideas on how to actually go about mentoring in another letter.

Kind regards,

*Mike Melly*

Notes 1. *Mentoring at Sea - Capt Andre Le Gaubin*  
2. See [www.management-mentors.com](http://www.management-mentors.com) for additional information

NEXT: The Need for mentoring