



To : Seafarers Our Ref : Mentoring Letter 7 – The Need for Mentoring
From : Marine Mentor Date : 14th February 2020

It has been said that about 75% of our skill base is learnt from experience. This experience must be learnt under the supervision of another experienced person initially. In other words, it must be actively passed on by a Mentor.

This is not always happening today, and in the junior ranks especially, progression can sometimes depend on how quickly officers obtain their CoC's, how many recommendations they receive for promotion, and on how they project themselves, rather than on their competencies and abilities. This means that they are sometimes promoted before they have had the opportunity to *experience* their Knowledge. This in turn can lead to skill-gaps for the Company, and contribute to the chain of events which leads to an accident later. Ironically, it could also lead to a lack of confidence for the officer who may later find his progression into the senior ranks stunted, and subsequently leave the employment of the company through despondency. The value of a cadet progressing through to Master in the same company cannot be understated, a fact supported by the officers' matrix¹ for tankers, where time in company is regarded as a desirable by the OCIMF, the lack of which represents a loss to the company's skill-pool. It is thus very important to identify good officers early in their careers, and then to mentor them to help them develop from being good students and workers, into professional seafarers.

Think back for a moment, what do you regard as being one of your most useful talents? For me, it's my gut-feeling, or instinct. Although a decision may come to me quickly, the instinct which tells me that it's the right or wrong decision often takes a while to follow. Since I don't necessarily like confirming a decision before my instinct confirms it, I need to consider a situation quite carefully, and weigh up the various angles, before making my final decision. There was a time years ago when as a young-ish Marine Surveyor investigating the fall of a derrick on a cargo ship with subsequent ship and cargo damage and a near-miss fatality, that I recommended to my clients, the P&I Club, that all derrick heels be lifted and x-rayed. Of course this would result in delays and the very suggestion raised the ire of both Owners and Charterers, as well as the ill-concealed scorn of my opposing Surveyor, especially bearing in mind that I was known more for tanker investigations than dry cargo! Awkward! It would have been easy to go with the flow, but something inside of me was screaming and I needed to trust it. But, of course I care about my reputation, was I about to blow it along with any credibility I had? I was seriously conflicted but decided to trust my instincts, and stuck to them. My advice was followed. A couple of days later all five derrick king-pins were found to be cracked, one sheered right across, an accident waiting to happen. The logic in this was difficult for others to see, and I felt pretty lonely and sweated profusely until being vindicated.

The type of instinct which drove me to make this call was not a batty, ill-considered brain-fart. I am also not psychic, nor do I possess a crystal ball. In addition to the accident which had already happened, I had taken in the general condition of the ship, the manner in which the ship's staff presented themselves (they didn't strike me as guys who did much more than was necessary.) Were the Owners a responsible outfit which did everything possible within reason to prevent accidents?) Probably not.

I don't recall ever actually experiencing a similar incident at sea, but certainly learnt to value a sixth-sense honed in other various ways.

Of course we can't always afford the luxury of making all decisions this way, but it's a funny old thing how that gut-feeling can come to the party when you really need it to. However, despite this, you must agree that all things considered, it's good to have someone you can bounce your decision off. In the old days, the "loneliness of command" was a phrase often used. Fortunately, with modern communications, we're not as lonely as before and it's easy to pick up the phone to chat through a situation. But what about your Third Mate when he's concerned about a give-way

vessel which just isn't doing what it's supposed to be doing? Will he call you? What about the 2NO preparing his passage plan, or the 2EO who is assembling a unit but has spare parts left over? Do they feel comfortable and safe enough to call you for guidance, or will they take chances for fear of upsetting you or embarrassing themselves? Clearly, trust is a very important factor, and I for one would want to know that my juniors trust me enough to be able to call me without fear of derision or of criticism. Wouldn't you? After all, these are YOUR people, you are fully responsible for them. Look after them, and they will look after you, and your ship. Train them, and you will be able to sleep well at night.

You may have heard of the 10 minute challenge, as promoted by Captain André Le Gaubin FNI. André asks that we sit quietly (he mentions using those moments on the bridge wing in good weather when you can enjoy the luxury of watching the sun go down, and reflect on all the day's events.) I'm asking YOU to try it now please – take just a few minutes, think back to a difficult decision you had to make, and what experience you had to draw on in making that decision. Then, take a full 10 minutes and reflect on your greatest concerns such as a lack of knowledge on your vessel, and draw up a list. Perhaps you're concerned about the guys not watching out of the windows, maybe it's a lack of knowledge on ECDIS settings, perhaps a disgruntled senior officer whingeing in the evenings, and effecting morale. Perhaps a 3NO who is not showing any interest in his job.

Next, and very importantly, what are you going to do about it? There is only one answer – you need to mentor, and to do so, you need to hone your leadership and mentoring skills.

These may be difficult subjects for you to deal with directly. However, there are CHIRP² and MARS reports, as well as other sources, out there to draw on for purposes of a focussed conversation. If it's ECDIS familiarity you're concerned about, a quiz on the Nautical Manual may well encourage the Navigating Officers to study this and familiarise themselves with this. (You'd also probably learn in the process! Now THAT is reverse-mentoring...) The unfairly maligned SEAGULL CBT has much to offer – set assignments for your officers, using the BITS, then discuss them a few days later. Ask them which modules they have done, and get a conversation going about it. This creates excellent opportunities for mentoring (assuming of course that you have watched those modules yourself!)

If it's a morale issue, a quiet word may well be called for, explaining the Domino/Multiplier effect, and how there are constructive ways of resolving gripes and there are toxic ways of doing so. In the process, you will most likely find that opportunities open up for you to share some of the experience you have earned over the years, and help these officers to grow whilst serving with you. I hope that these opportunities will bring you great rewards.

Kind regards,

Mike Melly

1. The officers' matrix is a tabulated record of the time (years) each officer has held that particular CoC, served in the Company, served in that rank, on that type of vessel, etc.
2. <https://www.chirpmaritime.org/> <https://www.nautinst.org/resource-library/mars/mars-reports.html>

PS – these letters were originally written for Masters, then adapted for Chief Engineers. They are however applicable to all. Please use our own initiative in discerning how you can apply these principles.

NEXT: Barriers to mentoring