
To : Seafarers Our Ref : Mentoring Letter 15 – Effective Communication
From : Marine Mentor Date : 20 April 2020

Dear Colleagues,

I am deeply sensitised to the situation which those of you at sea find yourselves, during this international crisis. Of course many will feel stress, some more than others, but we'll all experience it. Rest assured, it's not very different ashore, although we're locked down with our loved ones, (who are probably looking forward to a return to some form of normality where we travel to the office each day and get out of their hair!) but we're also exposed to a confusing barrage of information, from every direction. Much of this is fake of course, and I for one am very cynical of much of what is said on tv, not knowing what hidden interests the source has.

Your Company has sought to provide you with accurate information, and to keep you as safe as possible. All information is tested before being released. I only wish that the news channels did the same. But isn't this true of society today? We are in the middle of a communication revolution, not only are the news channels, tv series and the like feeding us information which may suit their nefarious agendas, but new methods (eg Whatsapp/WeChat, Zoom etc) are coming out regularly. Has this benefitted us, or is technology undermining our set of values, and destroying our social skills? This has gotten me thinking, and I'd like to share my thoughts with you, as this is a critical area which affects us both aboard and ashore in our homes.

What IS communication? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as *"a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior."* Of course communication is important to us at sea – how can we use terms such as "Bridge **Team** Management" if we don't communicate effectively? How are we going to safely navigate a voyage if we don't start off by discussing the Passage Plan as a Bridge Team? How are we going to do a tricky job without having a Toolbox talk beforehand to make sure that we're all on the same page? How are we going to deal with an emergency if we don't communicate? The answer is simple, ...not very well. We NEED an effective flow of communications – in BOTH directions – if we hope to achieve success in what we are doing.

During my time ashore, I spent years working with hundreds of married couples on the verge of divorce – the tough cases. Believe me, in the majority of cases – approximately 2/3 in my experience, it comes down to a breakdown in communication. How often do you hear people say "we're incompatible," or "no longer in love," or, "we have grown apart?" What they are really saying is "we don't know each other anymore." Why? Because they can no longer communicate. Without minimising a complex subject, the reason for that is fairly simple, we all communicate differently, some of us are really good at expressing emotions (usually but not always our female counterparts) and others (males) are usually good at getting the logic across. Both are important, but it is essential that we learn some basic skills, if we hope to communicate effectively. The most basic of these are the "sending" and the "receiving of the information we're exchanging. Of course this applies at sea also – sometimes we hear of conflicts between two officers on a ship. Again, in my own humble experience, much (but not necessarily all) of this comes down to communication. Here are two quotes to think about:

1. "Constantly talking isn't necessarily communicating." — (Charlie Kaufman)

How many of us know someone who calls a meeting (whether formal or informal) then does ALL the talking, repeats himself (or herself) to stress what they want the other person to understand, then don't bother to check whether that person has understood or not? The fact is that the other person most likely switched off after the first repeat, then got bored with the continual repetitiveness, and started day-dreaming, forgetting what the "conversation" was all about in the first instance? Then WE blame THEM for not listening! If you are a little verbose, here are some simple rules to follow:

- a) Think about what you want to say, then express it in such a way that the listener will understand. Remember that it is up to YOU, the speaker, to speak at the right pace, clearly, so that you will be understood.
- b) Choose the right place, and the right time. NEVER undermine somebody in the company of their peers or subordinates, this is bullying. If he is busy, and with others, it may not be the right time.
- c) Put ego aside, and mind your non-verbals. Effective communication starts with a positive comment, eg, "You did a great job on the xxx." Then explain what it is, without throwing in emotions or judgements which will only destroy the Listener. Be assertive by all means, but don't be a bully. (Being "blunt" is also not honesty, it's often bullying.) The days of conquering all in front of you, are long gone. Your EQ and wisdom will achieve better results than by being controlling.
- d) Explain what it is that you want to convey, then give the listener - using just enough words, no more than necessary- the opportunity to ask you clarifying questions. Don't let it go until you are sure that he has understood (not heard, or agrees with you!)
- e) Then conclude with a summary statement at the end of the conversation. (By this I don't mean to repeat everything yet again, but to summarise BOTH sides of the conversation, in particular, the agreement which has been reached – how something will be done for example.

2. **"Listen with curiosity. Speak with honesty. Act with integrity. The greatest problem with communication is we don't listen to understand. We listen to reply. When we listen with curiosity, we don't listen with the intent to reply. We listen for what's behind the words."** — Roy T. Bennett, *The Light in the Heart*

This is the major fail on the part of the listener. Has he been hearing, but not listening to what is being said? Is he processing the information being imparted? Often, the answer is no. So, here are some brief points to keep you on track:

- a) Stop doing what it is you're busy with, and focus your attention on the speaker. Regardless of your opinion of that person, act with integrity by trying to understand what is being said, and the purpose behind it. Very important – face the speaker and maintain eye contact. Try to understand the non-verbals, instead of judging them.
- b) Excuse the other person if he doesn't maintain eye contact – he may have a very good reason for not doing so, for example, culture.
- c) if you're really busy, and the conversation is a brief but important one, WRITE DOWN THE POINT in your little pocket notebook that I hope everyone keeps. If not, you'll most likely forget all about it. (I certainly would, and do!)
- d) Avoid ego and defensiveness. This is easy to fall into, but is a cancer to communication. Similarly, don't judge the speaker, try to walk in his shoes.
- e) Put ego aside, listen carefully and try to picture what is being said, instead of planning how you are going to respond. Don't interrupt, wait for the speaker to pause before asking clarifying questions!
- f) If you are listening to someone telling you about their problem, don't try to offer solutions, unless asked! All he or she may want, is for you to *listen*.
- g) Ask questions only to ensure understanding. Give feedback, or mirror back to show that you understand what you have heard (closed loop communication) and WAIT for confirmation. Only if the speaker confirms that you have heard correctly, should you proceed. Keep on, if you don't get a reply... (We all know situations where this is particularly important.)
- h) If there is something you don't understand, or if you believe that the instruction is obviously wrong, and will have consequences, don't be afraid to say so. It is your responsibility to do so, and there are times where you may be prosecuted if you don't.

This is a bigger subject than is possible to do justice to in two pages, but there is much material out there on it. Find it, and practice it! It can make the difference between success or failure as you mentor, or are mentored.

Stay safe,

Mike Melly