
To : Seafarers Our Ref : Mentoring Letter 16
From : Marine Mentor Date : 7 May 2020

Fellow seafarers,

April was a tough month for most people on the planet. Tougher for some than for others. I personally have been kept focussed by the plight of some young aspiring seafarers who were sent home from maritime secondary school to their squatter camps. It certainly opened my eyes, and showed me that no matter how bad things seem, there is always somebody far worse off than I am. I also consoled myself with the fact that lockdown was only for 3 weeks. Until it got extended for another two, and then indefinitely, albeit in a new form. Facebook and Whatsapp groups are rife with fake news, complaints and negativity, all of which annoy me, but again I try to focus on what I can change, and accept that which I cannot. Oddly, most complaints seem to come from the middle-class, while for the poor it's just another struggle.

May Day has just gone by in a flash. From where I'm sitting ashore, it seemed that the work and efforts of Seafarers were recognised more than ever before. Perhaps this was not enough, but it certainly was a great improvement on previous years. I've never seen so many messages of support for seafarers from various organisations, as I do now. So, although the whole issue around Crew Changes can be depressing, it is what it is, and I'm delighted to say that by far the majority I have spoken to, are dealing with this very positively. Just know there are many people ashore working hard to change this for you, and they're doing all they can. There will of course be some aboard who are perhaps a little negative – and not unusually so either. We're all human after all, but the reality is that this negativity affects others – as well as any mentoring relationship. It's very difficult to mentor someone who is negative – they're usually closed to ideas and suggestions, and as for me, don't even try to mentor me if you're in a negative frame of mind. Stay away from me!!

I don't know how you manage negativity, but I struggle with it. It is one thing which really irritates me, and although I try to be patient and understand what is causing it, I am not always very good at that to be honest. For example, in the past, if it seemed that my wife was being negative, I'd immediately start giving her reasons why she should not be feeling negative. Then she'd get mad at me, which I found somewhat confusing. To me, I was cheering her up, and could seldom understand why she got mad at me, when I was in fact being sympathetic. It took me years to get that what I was in fact doing, I was again giving her solutions instead of simply validating her feelings. Ok, this does take patience, but I've become quite a lot better at this – just please don't ask my wife in case she remembers!

So, how DOES one deal with negativity? Here are some pointers in case it's something you are experiencing aboard, or in your mentoring relationship:

1. First of all, ask yourself if your shipmate is perhaps having a bout of depression. If so, this is not the kind of negativity I'm talking about, this is depression which needs to be handled very differently, compassionately, and not by saying "get over it." I'm talking about the habitually negative person. Claro?
2. Your "Sob Sister" is usually merely "dumping garbage" on you. Just smile, and try to move away if you can. It is contagious, and that person will only feed off your comments, and drain your own energy from you. If you are cornered, ask yourself why they are so unhappy, try to understand where it's coming from. It often has nothing to do with what they're saying, perhaps they are unhappy in their job, perhaps depressed, maybe frustrated, or simply lack self-esteem and think they feel better by criticising someone else. Distance yourself, don't buy into it. Shield yourself from it.

3. Don't react when the whinge starts. Don't engage, as you'll simply get infected by that dark, toxic cloud. Unless it's your way of feeling valued of course, but if that's the case, then you need to ask yourself questions about how you help others, and who you help and why. Are you co-dependant? (There's something to look up.) Value yourself more, and you'll find that it's probably not benefitting you in any way. There is NO way that trying to "bright-side" it is going to work, ask me. Trying to persuade them to stop being negative, is only going to encourage them more. This by the way, is called "Polyanna" advice. There's a strong message in there to remember!!
4. It is not your job to make that person happy. The only person you can change is yourself. Don't even try, you'll only create more frustration!
5. Maybe they just don't know how to express themselves in a more positive and engaging way. Think of something good that the person does, or has done, and ask them about it. If they still don't get it, tell them something good that you or someone else did that day, or if it's your Mentor, ask him what his greatest achievements were, what brought him the most pride. If you do this repeatedly, hopefully they'll get the message and realise how negative they've become and will stop bombing you.
6. Protect yourself – the best way being to be secure and confident.
7. Create space between you and them, avoid one-on-one scenarios, try to join a group.
8. Don't take it personally, listen without judgement, and if you HAVE to say something, keep it objective and unemotional. Reframe negative language and reflect it back with a leading question such as "what are you going to do to get it done correctly next time?"
9. Direct the conversation your way, take charge of it. Turn it, by saying something such as "yes, I can see that you're upset. By the way..." and try to change the subject.
10. If you're STILL cornered without any hope of escape soon, go back to (5) and remind them of something they were happy about. Chip away at the negativity, and don't let it affect you.

Remember, you do not have to tolerate negativity. A "Sob Sister" is NOT your friend, and will ruin your contract. If you are trying to mentor someone who is displaying only negativity, and you have affirmed their efforts only for them to reflect back negatively, disengage temporarily. It's not going to have any benefit until they have regained control of themselves and their emotions.

Stay safe!

Mike Melly

NEXT: Dealing with your own negative emotions