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To : Seafarers                      Our Ref : Mentoring Letter 17 –Dealing with my negativity  
From : Marine Mentor              Date : 15 May 2020

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Dear colleagues,

When I returned to my old company after an absence of many years, I felt dismayed at the levels of negativity that I encountered. What had happened that some people found it necessary to bad-mouth others, at every opportunity? Was it really this bad at sea nowadays? Had the life of the seafarer changed as much as I had been warned it had?

Here's a funny old thing. I have had the benefit of having suffered from depression, I know that "Black Dog" personally, and have tamed him, I understand anxiety after many years of running my own business, and have lived with that heavy heart-pumping that makes you toss and turn all night, sleeplessly, and churns your stomach. I have felt let-down by others on countless occasions over the years, and have reacted to these poorly at times. How can these have any benefit, you may ask? Because they are all experiences I have learnt from. They may not have been pleasant at that time, but were overcome, and today I am grateful for them. They have all helped me to re-focus at times in my life when I needed to. They have taught me how to *respond*, rather than *react*.

When I joined this Company's shore management team in Durban, I did so nervously at first, with the weight of the negativity I had encountered weighing me down heavily. However, I also felt a strong calling to try make a difference wherever I was able to, and discovered strong support from my new colleagues. Therein lies the first signal, how can a management which is being bad-mouthed so badly, be so concerned about seafarers, and share my strong desire to alter the landscape, if things were really as bad as they were made out to be? This made no sense to me. And now we have Covid-19, which has brought the entire world to a standstill. At first, I felt really irritated about the fake news, and the negativity surrounding the lockdown. After all, don't we value our lives more than a temporary loss of freedom? Of course as time has gone on, and lockdown has been extended, serious issues have arisen. I am acutely aware of the impact it has on our seafarers, both those stranded at sea, as well as those at home with nowhere to go. It's logical that this will have a domino effect on those who suffer with a history of being negative, and through them, on their shipmates. This can be very serious for all concerned, so I tried to unpack what causes negativity, and how to confront and manage it effectively, to be able to assist you as you struggle with the ongoing situation.

First of all, it is important to distinguish between "Negativity" and "Depression." Of course they are related, continuous negative self-talk is going to lead to depression for sure, but they are not the same thing. Depression is a clinical condition which more people experience than you realise. I'm not an expert, but even they are not 100% sure what causes it. It's complex, and there are clearly a number of causes, mostly related to our environment, that is, our jobs, our home, our diet, our lifestyle. Genetics, events (eg death of loved ones,) there is a long list. We'll deal with these next week.

Unlike depression, negativity is a mindset, or an attitude. Like depression, there can be several reasons, including lack of job-satisfaction or job security, perceptions about management styles, excessive workload, lack of recognition. Modern causes include the challenges brought about by Covid-19, such as fake news, quality of the hurried legislation and the distress it causes (eg crew changes, inability to travel.) There are of course others also.

Management has many responsibilities, some legal, some fiduciary, some social, as well as of course to their employees. Of course, if they get the legal or fiduciary ones wrong, they face legal sanction. Other errors perhaps don't have the same severe consequences, but may lead to a breakdown in trust, for example, which is easily broken, but difficult to repair. One poor comment or communication for example can undo so much good work by others. It's not only management who have responsibilities, employees can and do make many mistakes as well, and they too face consequences. Negativity for example cannot be blamed on the employer alone, the employee also has to shoulder responsibility. Some mistakes may be job-related, but others fall into the same category as those made by

errant managers. These include backbiting about co-workers or managers, exaggerating others' mistakes (which is effectively bullying,) speaking ill of others (gossiping,) refusing to recognise good work by others (lack of appreciation,) disrespecting other's views, speaking your mind without bothering to consider the fact that you may be revealing bad manners, failure to accept responsibility for your mistakes, defensiveness, being moody, countering others' positive comments by being overly cynical, treating others as inferiors, critical, sneering, or just looking for all the weaknesses in a discussion. It goes without saying that each of these is simply bad behaviour.

Negativity is a cancer which spreads rapidly and ruthlessly and has a terrible effect aboard a ship. Negativity by even only ONE person, can spoil the work environment for others, and reduce productivity. Contracts suddenly start dragging, and seem to take twice as long as they should. Social life on the ship dies. Subordinates stop looking for solutions, knowing that they will either be put down, or that their efforts will otherwise be undone. Shipmates spend all their spare time hiding in their cabins, and become vulnerable to depression. To summarise, it is not only the person who has developed a negative attitude, who suffers, but also those around him.

Treatment of negativity is very different to that of depression. It does not require medication. It requires a change of attitude. If you recognise this in you, then it's time to change. You can, here are some thoughts on how to...

1. Attitudes are notoriously difficult to change. When something really sucks, then everything seems to! But, think of how life will change if your attitude changes.
2. Remember that you cannot change others, you can only change yourself. Get to work, and watch for the changes that follow in others.
3. Try to figure out what is really bothering you. It may not be who or what you think it is. Are you feeling unfulfilled? Lonely? Are you receiving all the wrong signals from your family ashore? Are they perhaps feeding off *your* bad attitude? What do you need to change this?
4. Think about the things that you should be grateful for. Develop an Attitude of Gratitude.
5. Start using positive speech – eg, Instead of saying my (insert subordinate's rank here) is useless at doing (XX,) say what a good job he did at (YY.) Give credit where it's due - generously, not begrudgingly.
6. Find someone aboard who always seems to have it together, and talk to that person. Use him (or her) as a role model. Try to self-improve, emulating the best you enjoy in others.
7. Instead of thinking about the bad things you perceive management or someone in management to have done, think of the good things done. There is much – for example, Crew surveys have been done at fairly regular intervals, and these have brought benefits such as free WiFi aboard all company vessels.
8. Instead of complaining about your salary, or about lack of promotion, think about the number of promotions that *have* happened. The Company actively pursues a policy of promoting from within wherever possible, and lays out career paths for all officers. Have *you* done what is necessary to obtain the CoC you need, and have you performed at a level which has earned you recommendations for promotion? If not, it's not too late.
9. Change the way you think about a situation. Build a new reality around it. (Using the example of WiFi, think about how few companies actually DO provide WiFi, or how much those that do, charge for it. Instead of complaining about being stuck with an extended contract, think about the constructive and tireless efforts being made by many ashore to engage with governments, and to get you home.
10. Stop being a victim! Victims blame everyone but themselves. Take responsibility for your own thoughts and actions.

Change is all the more important if you are mentoring someone, as you cannot hope to be a positive influence on his/her life. Similarly, if you're being mentored, think of how tough a job it must be for your mentor!

Finally, nobody likes to feel negative, it does nothing for your happiness index. Similarly, do not mistake an empathetic ear as someone who is remotely interested in your story. They are more likely trying to be kind than anything else. Please consider the effect that your negativity is having not only on them, but on the ship, and ring in the changes. You'll be much happier and so will others.

Kind regards,

*Mike Melly*

NEXT: DEPRESSION