
To : Seafarers Our Ref : Mentoring Letter 20 – Golden Stripes
From : Marine Mentor Date : 29 June 2020

As seafarers, we are blessed to have a great many role models. **Ernest Shackleton** for example clearly understood the delicate balance needed for effective leadership: being strong without being rude; kind without being weak; bold without being a bully; thoughtful but not lazy; unassuming but not timid; proud without being arrogant; and having a sense of humour without being reckless. These attributes helped him to keep his crew and himself alive for 300 days, sailing on a lifeboat through monstrous seas, trekking across the icy emptiness of the Antarctic, and subsisting on limited rations. This was no wimp, he is a man who each of us seafarers would look up to. Why? He was a Servant Leader, with outstanding soft skills. He was a legend, one whose name will outlive many generations. His were great qualities to have, but as much as we aspire to be like him, how do we actually achieve that? It's impossible you may say, but I disagree. Leadership is something we can all work at. We can all be Ernest Shackletons if our ships become ice-bound literally, or figuratively.

I've read an excellent book recently, titled "Golden Stripes : Leadership on the High Seas" by Capt VS Parani. I recommend this to all seafarers, both deck and engine room (It's available on Kindle.) I'd like to share some of Capt Parani's observations, after all, mentoring is about leadership in so many ways – it means developing and polishing our soft skills, exercising leadership- qualities as a mentor, as well as in learning how to become a good leader. A Servant Leader.

As Capt Parani says, "**Every mariner has leadership responsibilities in his own right. These responsibilities are the real Golden Stripes.**" How do we earn these "golden stripes?" Here are some of his suggestions:

- Skilled leaders lead by expertise, not by authority
- Genuine leaders lead by example – they respect and reinforce the values, systems and a code of conduct required on their ship.
- True leaders inspire others – they direct, coordinate and supervise the activities of their team, all the time remaining aware of their responsibility to create a positive atmosphere and sense of community aboard.
- Effective leaders think ahead. They plan and systematically achieve their targets. They are proactive instead of reactive.
- Gritty leaders have a "can-do" attitude. If a leader gives up, so will everyone else – who wants to follow a negative, lazy person?
- Dynamic leaders are passionate and committed.
- Active leaders get their hands dirty when required.
- Influential leaders communicate well. They are intentional without being aggressive. Successful leaders do not strive to get followers but want to build leaders. Leaders enjoy coaching, mentoring, and training others, urging others to take on more responsibility.
- Leaders are modest, after all, when you give respect, you gain respect as a leader. Leaders who aim to serve the team and the team goal ahead of themselves earn everyone's respect.
- Bold leaders lead with courage – think about Captain Phillips of the Maersk Alabama.

This series has been about the various aspects of mentoring. Let's sum up more of the most important things to watch out for, such as what we need to do, and what we need to avoid:

The top 3 skills of a Mentor

- Active listening
As difficult as it is, we need to shut down all the other thoughts that go through our minds, when the other person is talking, and to focus on what they are saying, without judging, or planning how to reply.
- Building Trust
This takes time, but it has to be authentic. Give your mentee your full attention, do what you say you'll do, keep everything confidential. Practise what you preach!
- Giving feedback
Make sure that this is neutral, and objective. Explain the situation, explain what he/she did, (without theorising about his or her intent,) then describe the impact it had (on others or on the job outcome.) This is an opportunity for you to practice your communication skills! Allow the Mentee to come to his/her own conclusions!

Common mistakes

- Talking too much.
Listening is more valuable than talking in mentoring. Rather ask probing, effective questions.
- Being a poor role model
A "Do as I say, not as I do" approach will sink the mentoring relationship. Act ethically at all times, poor behaviour such as running down the company or the boss, only shows you up in poor light.
- Not "being present" for the mentee
We're all busy, but we need to make time in our schedule for our Mentee. It's fairly easy aboard, but if the mentoring relationship outlasts either of your contract, then there are a number of ways to stay in touch – Whatsapp for example.
- Failure to set goals and objectives
These should not be the Mentor's goals! The Mentee has his/her own expectations, and efforts should be made to tailor the relationship so that it meets the Mentee's expectations. It's important to hold an honest conversation on this topic, so that realistic goals may be set by the Mentee.
- It's not only about the job.
I attended a webinar recently, and all talk revolved around bridge skills. A good Mentor will however go way beyond that, and be able to assist his/her Mentee in other areas, including life skills.

Again, an entire chapter could probably be written on each point above. This is therefore only a very brief summary, but it's very important to go and do your own reading on each. Google is a great tool, use it. Buy the books too, and most of all, continue to invest in your own career, as well as those you lead.

Thank you for reading these letters. I hope that they have in some way helped you to plot a new direction in your career, or even to validate the direction you were following previously. Most of all though, my hope is that they have in some small way helped you to contribute to building a more positive shipboard environment, a happier and more fulfilling one. It's not always easy being a seafarer – especially in 2020 – and drifting along with the wind and current seems absolutely pointless when we have a rudder and compass to steer by. Hopefully these letters have helped you to start building that rudder and compass.

Mike Melby