

**‘Communicating on a level playing field’
(Lets pursue the standard for Maritime English)**

MarTEL

I don't know of any ship that has not run into challenges or difficulties at sea due to deficiencies in communication.



Approximately 10% of all serious personal injuries occurred during mooring or towing operations. A significant proportion of these claims were the result of slips, trips and falls, but almost half were caused by parting lines or involved seamen who were killed or injured while standing within the bight of a rope. 40% are due to lines breaking or tightening unexpectedly. Add the lack of communication component to injuries and there could be a catalogue of disasters waiting to happen.



Images of this nature have unfortunately been the backdrop of poor communication aboard ship coupled with operational errors where fatigue has overcome many seafarers during a very long working day.

It is also highly likely (though not necessarily) that the ship was multicultural. Difficulties ranging from inadequacies in comprehension, expression or inadequacies of 'Maritime English'. (There has been considerable losses at sea, some might say due to continued lack of communication). To the company it means loss of time, money and materials to name a few.

Companies would benefit by ensuring personnel are proficient in Maritime English and possibly by suggesting that Maritime English becomes a criterion for employment.

The overall 'company' belief is that Maritime English should not vary according to rank. The 'standard' should as a basic minimum reflect the rank. The captain should be well versed in Maritime English'.

SMCP (*Standard Marine Communication Phrases*) alone does not cover linguistic awareness. It needs to extend to social and cultural elements. It can be difficult from a seafarer's point of view to put across remotely difficult concepts. SMCP does to some degree facilitate the learning experience. It does not provide linguistic coverage to be able to replace a good knowledge of the English language.

From company and seafarer's perspectives there are challenges which have to be addressed:-

- lack of communication
- cultural differences
- sometimes no standardisation of training ie difficulties with different ways of working
- development / training
- commercial pressures
- hours of work and rest / fatigue / manning levels
- selection procedures
- communication / cultural matching
- organizational management
- competency and skills
- automation

Training issues

Human error plays a vital role in most marine accidents, including those whose structural or equipment failure may be identified as the primary cause. The knowledge, skill and experience, health and behaviour of seafarers are directly related to safety at sea; therefore, inadequate training and poor communication due to language barriers need to be addressed.

Seafarers from traditional maritime countries such as Norway, UK and Japan are known for their strong vessel operation knowledge and practical skills. Since the shipping recession, however, the total number of experienced seafarers from these countries has declined sharply.

Today, the Asian region in particular, India and the Philippines is considered the 'powerhouse' of global shipping, with nearly two-thirds of the world's seafaring population from this area. The Philippines alone has some 290,000 registered seafarers, and countries such as China and Vietnam have an enormous pool waiting to be tapped.

In many cases, financial constraints impact the delivery of maritime training. Due to lack of funds, maritime training institutions often operate in the countries from which crew members are recruited, and many of the facilities are insufficient and out of date. Because of these problems, training institutions located in developing countries often cannot sufficiently train the large numbers of crew members needed in the international market.

To meet these challenges, institutions must revise their programs and upgrade their facilities, which requires increased investment. In addition, ship owners must be prepared to invest in training and retraining. To best achieve these goals and to ensure safety and protect lives and property, stakeholders must form stronger alliances. This co-operation can take various forms:-

- Invest in training facilities to increase the practical skills of the seafarer
- Provide a certain number of qualified seafarers for a company according to its manpower planning strategy
- Establish a special fund for upgrading qualifications of maritime trainers as required by STCW 95
- Develop new training curricula to meet shipping company needs as a way of enhancing better performance from crew and ships

At the moment a gap exists between training and job requirements in the continuous learning process. As a result knowledge may not be properly absorbed and the emphasis on theoretical learning may diminish the value of practical training. In addition, many training institutions are short-staffed and have a large number of trainees, therefore, each individual's training and practice time is relatively limited.

Communication challenges

Mixed nationalities aboard a vessel means a variety of languages, in some cases more than ten may be spoken. This can cause communication difficulties, inadequate communication between officers and crew and pose a hazard that directly affects vessel operation and safety. Under normal situations, a language barrier may not lead to difficulties since the seafarer has time to repeat the request or solve a problem in other ways. In an emergency situation, however, some seafarers may not be able to exchange crucial information, a situation that was clearly demonstrated by the Scandinavian Star disaster.



The Scandinavian Star

During the night of April 7th 1990, at about 2a.m. local time, two fires broke out on deck 3 in the passenger section of the ship. The subsequent investigation into the disaster discovered that the second fire was deliberately set. The captain and crew ultimately abandoned ship before all the passengers had been evacuated, leaving many still on board.

Many passengers had difficulty escaping from the fire for several reasons:

- Many people did not hear the alarms, therefore they did not wake up
- They could not find their way out because the thick smoke made it nearly impossible to find the nearest escape routes
- The smoke contained poisonous hydrogen cyanide and carbon monoxide fumes causing unconsciousness and quick death
- The many Filipinos in the crew did not speak or understand Norwegian or English, were unfamiliar with the ship and had never practiced a fire drill, so they could not communicate with each other or the passengers and did not know how to respond to the fire.

Prior to the above incident the Scandinavian Star had another fire in 1988. In 1988 it transpired that the inability of the crew members to communicate with each other and with passengers was a serious concern and created confusion during the fire fighting and evacuation activities.

Conclusion

Statistics on marine casualties indicate that a common signature ie human error is present in most maritime disasters. To address this problem, the marine industry must strive to minimise poor human decisions that contribute directly or indirectly to a casualty or pollution incident. Education and training are an effective way to achieve this goal.

The industry must focus on addressing the problems that affect maritime education and training, particularly in developing countries which are a major provider of mariners. Stakeholders must form stronger alliances in order to better train seafarers, and training institutions must be evaluated to identify and correct their weaknesses.

In addition, competence in practical skills must be given higher priority. Onboard training programs and practical training activities must be enhanced, as must the English Language qualifications of seafarers.

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