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The People Conundrum

Managing in a Dynamic World – the changing face of maritime

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Abstract

For decades, key advisers to the maritime industry warned of the dire consequences of a shortage of qualified seafarers on our shipping industries[1]. At the same time research by others[2] has highlighted the demand for increased skills in the sector and an ongoing, if not growing, demand for maritime expertise.

Attracting the best talent into any sector is critically important to a sustainable future but for maritime this is a particular challenge as prospective recruits have different expectations for their employment in areas such as:

- Work-life balance
- Career purpose
- Digital connectivity
- Mental health
- Opportunities for personal and professional growth.

At the same time, the maritime sector has a real image problem with the industry perceived as old-fashioned and harsh; news headlines spotlight much that is wrong including, collisions, groundings, illegal detention of seafarers, criminalisation of the seafarer and much more.

The industry is castigated for its contribution to global emissions despite the fact it is the cleanest most efficient form of transport in existence.

In this most challenging of industries this paper looks at some of the key issues affecting our people and the importance of adopting management styles that meet contemporary expectations.

[1] BIMCO and ICS papers on the future of employment demand in the maritime sector
[2] ITF and WMU research into the impact of technology on the transport sector

Introduction

Every organisation faces challenges when deciding how best to manage its people and other resources. The concept of fair reward for a fair day's work underpins many activities but maritime, like many industries is more nuanced than that.

The nature of weather, times of work, complexity of vessel operations, trading patterns, crew backgrounds and many other factors will impact on what might work best. So how can we create an environment that enhances leadership, improves safety culture, team motivation, communication and improves the well-being of individuals? All important factors.

At the same time, we have an industry very output focussed, task oriented, competitive and commercially driven. We have, in most instances, appointed our senior staff to support these priorities coupled with their professional expertise, knowledge and experience. What does this mean for their leadership style and will the attitudes and values of the merchant service match closely the expectations of the next generation of seafarers and future maritime leaders?

A Changing Environment

The regulatory framework is changing. At a macro level, the International Maritime Organisation, IMO, will be reviewing and most likely making extensive changes to the Standards of Training Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) over the coming years.

At the same time industry leaders within the bulk cargo sectors, both liquid and dry bulk, have instigated programmes of expectation and inspection designed to improve the standards of operation and safety of these vessels.

There is more to do to address these issues on other vessel types with container fires, battery fires, security of cargo and many other factors still needing significant change and considerable improvement.

The industry is changing too. New fuels, technology, remote controlled and autonomous ships all provide a challenging backdrop for our workforce, both at sea and on shore.

How can we ensure we adopt the right philosophy for the future? There are many factors but this paper will focus on two important areas:

- Leadership
- Industry reputation

In such a period of change we need clear direction, seafarers who are adaptable, versatile and willing to learn. It is for our leaders to ensure this happens – but how?

Much has been written and spoken about the responsibilities of command and the technical skills required for senior appointments. But there should be more to senior roles than that.

Senior positions are also leadership roles yet often our senior staff are ill-prepared for that dimension to their work.

At the same time the expectations of our more junior colleagues are different from those who joined the industry a decade or even longer ago. Very different.

What are people looking for?

The work environment at sea has changed, like every other workplace in recent years. Changes in technology, the ability to communicate with friends and family 24/7 and ready access to information has transformed how people think and the option they have.

Of course, people expect to be safe in the workplace, to be paid on time and to understand the length of time their contract will expect them to be away. Accrual of leave and opportunities to progress professionally can all help with recruitment and retention. But ‘hygiene factors’ are not enough. These are just the basics.

Projects such as the ‘Kind Leadership’ initiative being worked on in the United Kingdom by the Maritime Professional Council have helped reveal areas of changing and increasing importance.

Interviews with stakeholders from across the industry clearly shows that there is less acceptance of a ‘top-down' approach to authority. Employees, including those at sea, expect to be consulted with, engaged in decision-making and respected from a very early stage of their professional life.

Long periods away from home are less palatable to today’s seafarers than to those of previous generations and access to the internet expected whether at sea or on the shore.

Today’s seafarer is much more aware of entitlements to shore leave, hours of rest, decent accommodation and food. They expect to be supported in their professional development and often to have their training paid for.

Once on board the ship, leadership styles matter. People who have confidence in their seniors, are treated with respect, supported when times are difficult and engaged with positively are better motivated.

Better motivation can help lead to safer operations and clearer more effective communications that help ensure misunderstandings are minimised. Building of a team supports the adage of ‘when the team works, the dream works’.

Just Transition

A great deal is spoken about ‘Just Transition’ which was almost a tangible output from CPO26 in Glasgow. Led by the Lloyds Register Foundation who describe their task force as follows:

> *The Maritime Just Transition Task Force operates with one mission at its heart: to make sure that the shipping industry's response to the climate emergency puts seafarers at the heart of the solution. Its purpose is based on the principle that while solutions need to be found to tackle the greenhouse gas emissions caused by shipping ……. this must not be done at the expense of those who are the lifeblood of maritime - seafarers.*

And the International Transport Workers Federation echo the human factors line with their statement from Brank Berlan:

> *Investing in skills now to support the green transition, strengthening global training standards and delivering worldwide training so that no seafarer is disadvantaged, just because of where they live in the world, is vital as part of that fair and just transition. It's also crucial that all of us ensure a safe working environment for seafarers as well as making sure future technologies are effectively managed and operated.*

Key then to a Just Transition is for seafarers to know what is required of them and why it is required. They also need access to the right training; it is the position of this paper, that every seafarer should have sufficient training to understand the risks of the next generation fuels. They must be able to serve on ships using these fuels and have received the training necessary to respond to any emergency.

Clarity of purpose and security of employment would seem to underpin the requirements. Investment in training and a positive engagement between employer and employee can only help ensure respect, loyalty and commitment can be demonstrated on both sides of the employment table.

Succession Planning

One key leadership responsibility is succession planning – ensuring the next generation is fully prepared and ready to take over the leadership roles and responsibilities of tomorrow.

To do this we must commit time and energy to developing their professionalism, knowledge and judgement. We must allow them to grow into roles of responsibility and to embrace the challenges ahead.

If we want the best professionals in the future, the best leaders, we have to attract the best talent into the industry. Here were seem to do ourselves a great disservice.

Every school-leaver will research the job opportunities on offer, the benefits and rewards, the chance for growth and professional development. They will research the industry and those who work in it.

Today that research will take them to the internet and what a sad story they will find. There is scant good news about lives at sea.

Instead, there are hundreds of ‘keyboard warriors’ bemoaning how life is not what it used to be. Even the welfare charities claim that millions of seafarers ‘face danger every day’. Social media posts focus on harassment, abuse, bullying, criminalisation, abandonment, lost wages and long voyages.

We can do better and we should do better.

Of course, there are matters to resolve and to improve, but let’s not snuff out the enthusiasm of a young school-leaver enchanted by the opportunity of travel, responsibility and the chance to work in an industry that really does serve the world. A job that has real meaning.

We want the brightest and the best, let’s make our industry and place that welcomes them!