



Captain's Column

Mentoring at Sea

Mentoring has been an essential element of sea-going lore for centuries. I daresay the very concept of mentoring had its birth at sea. 'Learning the ropes' is a common phrase that is attributed to this ancient sea-going tradition. For various reasons, it has been relegated to the shadows in the past few decades, and it is easy for it to become just 'one more thing' that is overlooked in the vast number of activities that have to be carried out at sea. This is something that The Nautical Institute intends to change.

In the maritime industry, we have heard a lot – and rightly so – about the importance of training. But training can often take a structured and prescriptive approach that tends to draw boundaries around free thought. And therein lies the fundamental difference between training and mentoring. Training transfers underpinning theory and lays down the rules and the laws of things, which is very important in itself. But it is the informal and effortless transfer of experiential skill-sets through artful mentoring that rounds off the competency profile.

Very few of us can look back in time and not remember the names of those few good men and women who have left an indelible imprint on the way we think, speak and act in the course of our work, and indeed, our lives. In that sense, mentors attain immortality and live on through their successors long after they have retired and passed on.

In the last three decades, the shipping industry and the maritime profession have both seen rapid and bewildering changes. We have witnessed fundamental changes in the application of technology. ISM and STCW evolved in response to concerns raised about falling professional standards through the political and administrative process. They can help create a mitigating structure. But I believe it is up to us professionals and peers to bring the heart into play through mentoring. Ship safety itself is greatly enhanced through the mentoring culture – and there have been many casualties where effective mentoring could have prevented the mishaps. While safety is a noble goal in itself, I'd add that safety and protection of the environment have become genuine drivers of business assurance in niche markets.

Fast promotions and reduced sea-time requirements between certificates of competency are sources of concern as they leave very little

time to gain enough experiential skills and knowledge. With the increasing focus on safety, the mean time between incidents or breakdowns has also increased. This, I feel, has only added to the paucity of real life experiences, which are so essential to preparing for ascending responsibilities. This makes it all the more vital to pass on experience in the form of mentoring.

Unlike onboard training, which demands a considerable amount of time and resources, mentoring is an informal process and is best imparted while engaged in shipboard operations – far from taking attention away from crucial tasks, it can be done at the same time. Most of the challenges and roadblocks are mental and emotional. While there may often be both language and cultural barriers to overcome in order for mentoring to succeed, this is achievable through a top-down corporate culture of nurturing talent, promoting excellence and being intolerant of prejudice and 'whining' about junior officers. Perhaps 'mentoring potential' is a parameter that should find its way into the performance appraisals of both sea-going officers and shore-based executives.

Given the inherent informal and unstructured character of mentoring, however, it cannot and certainly should not be a statutory or regulated subject. The responsibility to promote and effectively implement mentoring therefore falls on professional peer groups and associations as well as on the responsible corporate citizen.

In The Nautical Institute's latest publication, *Mentoring At Sea*, André le Goubin provides some very sensible and interesting tools for the mentor. Reflection is such a fabulous tool and so seriously underrated in these days of excessive and mindless chatter on blogs, Twitter, Facebook and such-like. His book outlines the '10 minute challenge' – highlighting that while mentoring is crucial to the development of tomorrow's officers and Masters, it does not need to be either time-consuming or onerous.

Reverse mentoring is another gem that challenges the pre-conceived notion that you need to be a senior professional to qualify as a mentor. Increasingly, the seniors could do well to learn a trick or two from Generation Y, who seem to be gifted with a baffling level of ease and comfort with technology that seems to be denied to more experienced professionals.

Relevance is another critical tool. You simply can't teach obsolete tricks to any dog, old or new. While we are sentimentally attached to the things that were bread and butter in our time, we need to understand that youngsters will quickly sense that you haven't bothered to update your skills and knowledge over time. This is the starting point of the generation gap. Instead, mentoring should close that gap, and be the beginning of a thoroughly rewarding journey for all maritime professionals who long to share their hardwon knowledge and skills across the flimsy boundaries and barriers of nations, cultures and regions. 🌐

