



# Mentoring at Sea

## The 10 minute challenge

by

Captain André L Le Goubin MA FNI

# Mentoring at Sea

## The 10 minute challenge

by

**Captain André L Le Goubin MA FNI**

André L Le Goubin has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988 to be identified as the author of this book

**Published by The Nautical Institute**

202 Lambeth Road, London SE1 7LQ, England

Tel: +44 (0)20 7928 1351 Fax: +44 (0)20 7401 2817 Web: [www.nautinst.org](http://www.nautinst.org)

© The Nautical Institute 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except for the quotation of brief passages in review. Although great care has been taken with the writing of the book and production of the volume, neither The Nautical Institute nor the author can accept any responsibility for errors and omissions or their consequences.

The book has been prepared to address the subject of mentoring at sea. This should not, however, be taken to mean that this document deals comprehensively with all of the concerns that will need to be addressed, or even, when a particular need is addressed, that this document sets out the only definitive view for all situations. The opinions expressed are those of the author only and are not necessarily to be taken as the policies or views of any organisation with which he has any connection.

Book Editor Paul Bartlett

Author portrait by Rachael V Le Goubin

Images courtesy of Danny Cornelissen ([www.portpictures.nl](http://www.portpictures.nl))

Design and typesetting by PMD Visual Communications

Printed in the UK by Geerings Print Ltd

**ISBN 978 1 906915 39 1**

# Foreword



by **Captain Krish Krishnamurthi FNI**

President  
The Nautical Institute

**M**entoring 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. That is, until André Le Goubin so elegantly and passionately brought this to the collective consciousness of The Nautical Institute.

André writes this book in a wonderfully easy, conversational style with none of the structured and prescriptive approach that so often 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. Business and work cultures have transitioned from a national to a multi-national character. In the milieu of globalisation, most small and medium shipowning and management firms have experienced a dilution of their individual brand as they subscribed to the lowest common denominator that international competition seems to demand.

In response to concerns raised about falling professional standards through the political and administrative process, ISM and STCW evolved to create the mitigating structure. But I believe it is up to us professionals and peers to bring the heart into play through mentoring.

André makes a very powerful point that ship safety is greatly enhanced through the mentoring culture. He has sprinkled this book with some excellent case studies of 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.

Unlike onboard training, which demands time resource, mentoring is an informal process and is best imparted while engaged in shipboard operations. Most of the challenges and roadblocks are mental and emotional. The author makes a strong case for transcending language and cultural barriers 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.

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. Ironically, with 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.

Given the inherent informal and unstructured character of mentoring, 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.

André 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. The 10 minute challenge harks back to an ancient philosophy that all the answers to life's greatest challenges lie within us, if only we'd care to search inwards through calm reflection.

Reverse mentoring is another gem that challenges a pre-conceived notion that you need to be a senior pro 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 by the gods 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.

While I realise the writing of this excellent book on mentoring at sea is the culmination of a most satisfying personal journey for André Le Goubin, it is also the beginning of an equally rewarding journey for all maritime professionals who long to share their hard-won knowledge and skills across the flimsy boundaries and barriers of nations, cultures and regions.

# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b> .....                                       | <b>v</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1</b> The basics of mentoring .....                  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 2</b> The value and importance of mentoring .....    | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 3</b> The need for onboard mentors.....              | <b>15</b> |
| <b>Chapter 4</b> Reflection for seafarers.....                  | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Chapter 5</b> The 10 minute challenge.....                   | <b>21</b> |
| <b>Chapter 6</b> Barriers to mentoring .....                    | <b>27</b> |
| <b>Chapter 7</b> Overcoming barriers to mentoring.....          | <b>45</b> |
| <b>Chapter 8</b> Experiential knowledge through mentoring ..... | <b>51</b> |
| <b>Chapter 9</b> Shore support for onboard mentoring.....       | <b>59</b> |
| <b>Chapter 10</b> Reverse mentoring.....                        | <b>63</b> |
| <b>Chapter 11</b> When NOT to be a mentor .....                 | <b>73</b> |
| <b>Chapter 12</b> Developing a culture of mentoring .....       | <b>75</b> |

# Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the mentors in my life, past and present, who have helped me get to where I am now. Although many, none did more than Captain J M (Jack) Healy, who recognised my love of the sea at an early age and did so much to teach and encourage me, while I was still a boy. While he has crossed the bar, as have so many others, I hope that this book will continue or resume the process of transferring experiential knowledge at sea by mentoring that was so natural to seafarers like him.

It is also dedicated to my wife Debbie and our children Philip, Rachael and Robert, without whose encouragement, steadfast support and sense of humour, I doubt I would have even attempted much of what I have achieved over our years together.

Finally, it is dedicated, with grateful thanks, to all at The Nautical Institute who have supported and partnered with me through my masters degree studies and encouraged me to continue and develop my research into this book.

Together we can make a difference.

# Introduction

Before we start properly, I would like to talk to you about this book and my style of writing. I am not a professional writer and this is not a text book. I am an ordinary mariner who is very concerned about mentoring and who would like to have a conversation with you about it.

Imagine that I have come on board your ship or to your place of work. I am with you on the bridge, or in the machinery control room, for example, having a discussion on how, between us, we can improve life at sea for today's seafarers, by sharing experiential knowledge for the benefit of ourselves and those who will come after us.

We have started chatting about mentoring, as often happens to me. You will have your views and I have mine – I respect that. In this book there will be as many questions as there are answers but that is no different from any conversation that takes place. All I hope is that you will read this and, although you will probably not agree with all of its contents, you will find some of it thought-provoking and be challenged to pass on some of the knowledge you have gained to someone else. For that is what it is all about. If that happens, then I will have achieved my objective.

By way of introduction, let me tell you a little bit about myself. I was born on the island of Sark in the Channel Islands, an island of just three miles by a little more than one. Although I was the son of a baker, it was soon apparent that the 'sea was in my blood' as, by the age of four, I am told, I had decided that I was going to sea. Of course, at that age I was going straight to be the Captain! I never wavered from that desire. From the age of eight, I spent the majority of my spare time with fishermen on board a lobster fishing boat.

In 1973, I passed the 11 plus – an examination enabling me to attend a grammar school in either Guernsey or Jersey. As we lived on a small island accessible only by boat, when the weather was OK, I would have to go away to school to board there. My parents didn't want this and decided that, rather than break up the family, we would all move to Guernsey, a somewhat larger island nine miles from Sark.

Once settled in Guernsey, I again spent my spare time at sea – this time on a small cargo and passenger vessel trading between the islands. Working as a deck boy had the most profound effect on me. I had tuition in the art of old-fashioned seamanship from the Master of the vessel, who was a strict and principled man who was born in 1921. I believe he ran away to sea from Ireland, sometime before the second world war, when just a boy. Today, I still reflect upon those times and regularly use the skills he taught me; skills such as basic shiphandling, meteorology and cargo work. I am trained to a far higher standard in these skills today, but his teachings provided the solid foundation that all else was subsequently built upon.

At the age of 16, I was legally able to 'sign on' and so became a paid member of crew during my school holidays. As ordinary seaman, I obtained my steering certificate, my first merchant navy qualification. In the school summer holidays of 1979, and again in 1980, I signed on as a deckhand aboard a slightly larger coastal vessel trading between the Channel Islands, England and France. How I wish the industry today still allowed youngsters opportunities to go to sea and learn their trade, even before they leave school. The people who taught me those early skills were, in my opinion, true mentors.

Nine years followed sailing deepsea with Cunard Shipping Services. I was lucky, as this was the cargo division and Cunard's wide variety of vessel types gave me a diverse learning experience. But this was the 1980s during the infamous decline of the British merchant navy as we knew it.

By 1989, the fleet was seriously depleted, the voyages were becoming longer and conditions were changing rapidly. So I decided to look for a new job in the ferry trade. Suddenly, I was in the right place at the right time and, at the age of 27, I was offered command of a passenger-carrying hydrofoil. This was probably the steepest learning curve I have ever had to negotiate and – I have to be honest – it wasn't without its 'learning moments'. As I reflect on those times, I have come to realise that although experiences can be good or bad, the knowledge gained from those experiences can only ever be good.

I stayed with the fast ferry trade for nearly 10 years, with the exception of three years working ashore for the local Channel Island government. That time only served to convince me I needed to be at sea, working on ships and with seafarers. By now married with children, I moved to the UK mainland to work on high-speed car and passenger-carrying catamarans crossing the Dover Strait. This gave me a very different perspective on maritime life as I crossed that narrow stretch of water up to six times a day. I had to weave my way through the 300 ships that transit it daily with my vessel travelling at speeds of up to 43.8 knots. That was the fastest I ever travelled – when I was on a brand new 100-metre monohull approaching the port of Calais one fine Sunday morning.

In 1998 the writing was on the wall for the cessation of duty free sales between European Union countries. The ferry company I was working for was largely supported by the revenue from these sales and so I decided it was time to move on.

I had, for a long time, nurtured the idea of becoming a pilot. My grandfather had been a pilot for the Island of Sark, probably the first one, and he had written the syllabus for the pilotage exam I sat so many years later, when Master of a hydrofoil. During my Sark pilotage examination, some of the more elderly Masters on the examination board that day remembered my grandfather well. No pressure then! I passed successfully and the party afterwards was certainly one to remember!

Soon after, I applied to the Port of London Authority and a chance meeting with a pilot at a Nautical Institute meeting enabled me to take a trip up the Thames and gain introductions to all the right people. Following successful interviews, I joined the PLA in 1999 as a trainee pilot.



If you had shown me then how my dining room table would look in six months' time, covered and weighed down with the charts, publications and paperwork of everything I would need to learn to become an authorised pilot, I would have said that I was not capable of absorbing that amount of information. As it was I did manage it, but it was hard work and I can honestly say I have never studied so hard in my life. However, the feeling when I officially became pilot number 241 made it all worthwhile.

I loved that job – even the study that took me through from Class 4 to Class 1. I particularly enjoyed piloting bigger and deeper draught ships. However, after a few years my wife and I became restless. We dreamed of moving to somewhere where the sun shines a lot more than it does in the UK. We had become very disillusioned with our way of life, the rising taxation and, in our opinion, falling standards. But, if I was honest, it had as much to do with the lack of sunshine. So there I was one morning, having breakfast and flicking through the latest *Seaways*, the publication of The Nautical Institute, of which I have been a member for many years. I saw an advert for a marine consultant to join a worldwide company of marine and engineering consultants with an expanding office in Florida, work visa included.

We had visited Florida for a number of years and we loved the place so I decided to research the company. To my great surprise I discovered one of my old maritime college friends ran their Norwegian office. I applied for the job, got it, obtained the visa, and within five months, we had packed everything into a 20-foot container and emigrated to Florida!

This sounds so simple when you put it down on paper but it was one of the biggest decisions of my life. Most people were supportive, some people thought we were daft and some thought that I must have done something terribly wrong to be leaving a job that is considered by most mariners to be the pinnacle of a seagoing career. I can only agree with all those sentiments (except that I had not in fact done anything wrong!). But imagine if, a few years later, we were still in the UK and playing the 'what-if' game.

Sometimes you just have to bite the bullet and go in what your heart says is the right direction. However it wasn't easy and I missed being a pilot, but the US turned out to be everything we had hoped it would be. It is not perfect. The way of life certainly wouldn't suit everyone and how I miss my real fish and chips. But it suits us and I can only hope it stays that way.

I spent two years in South Florida and then moved to the company head office in Houston where I stayed for the next six years. Well actually, during that time, I could be anywhere, as I spent much of my time away from home on board ships and offshore, engaged in many marine activities but primarily marine accident investigation and casualty work in all its guises.

Very recently, the call of the sea has become too strong again and I have left the consultancy and returned to seafaring, as a mooring master in the lightering trade, a job where I can (perhaps) see myself spending the rest of my working days.

So why am I telling you all this? I know you did not pick up this book to read the memoirs of André L Le Goubin. I simply want to give you a flavour of where I have come from and why I am so concerned about mentoring. I know that your background will be different from mine, as we are all unique and follow individual career pathways. But I am also aware that we will have a lot in common, as you will have met many people along the way who have helped you get to where you are now, as I did.

These people may have been Masters, mates, chief engineers, superintendents, relatives, friends or complete strangers whom you didn't know and have never met again. The one thing they had in common was that they shared some knowledge with you that came from their experience and you benefitted as a result. They were your mentors. So what do I mean by that? Who or what, is a mentor? Let's just pause for a few minutes and look at some of the definitions of words I will be using throughout this book.

### **Mentor**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes a mentor as 'an experienced and trusted advisor' and sources the origin of the word as 'from the name of Mentor, the adviser of the young Telemachus in Homer's *Odyssey*'. In the context of this book, I simply define it as the possessor and distributor of experiential knowledge.

### **Mentoring**

One definition of mentoring is that it is a form of knowledge transfer based in part on altruism. I like this definition as, for me it sums up the unselfish act of knowledge transfer that I benefitted from in my early days at sea. For our purposes, I have followed this theme and defined mentoring as 'the act of sharing knowledge without a designated reward'. This definition in itself has caused a certain amount of debate, but I believe it suffices.

I have had lengthy discussions with various people about the definition of mentoring and whether there is actually a designated reward for mentoring. I do not believe that there is. However, many would disagree. This is exactly what I want! You will not agree with everything I say, I know that and, if you think there is a reward for mentoring then great, but I am currently holding fast with my belief.

I am open to discussion and, after finishing this book, I hope that you will engage with this conversation about mentoring and then tell me what you think. To help facilitate this, The Nautical Institute has set up an online mentoring forum and this can be found at [www.nautinst.org/en/forums/mentoring/](http://www.nautinst.org/en/forums/mentoring/).

### **Experiential knowledge**

I have defined this as knowledge gained from professional 'on the job' experiences and reflected upon. This knowledge can come from a wide variety of sources or experiences but, in my opinion, it often has the most impact when it comes from an accident, incident or near miss. However, it does need to be reflected upon before it can become experiential learning. I will say much more on this further into the book.

## Candidate

I really struggled with this one as I would like to use the word apprentice, as traditionally that is what I think we are when receiving mentoring advice, but the word does not seem to be politically acceptable these days and is considered somewhat demeaning. Then I tried mentee, but that just doesn't sound right and so I finally settled on candidate. This term would also include a person at any stage of life because, as most of you I think would agree, learning never ceases. I simply define a candidate as anyone receiving experiential knowledge via mentoring.

## Reflection

According to the Institute of Work Based Learning, reflection is 'a thoughtful (in the sense of deliberative) consideration of your experiences, which leads you to decide what the experience means to you'. Over the last few years, reflection has become a very useful tool for me, particularly to review the actions I have taken and to help me be comfortable with the decisions I have made. A little later in this book we will take another look at reflection from a practical mariner's point of view and tie this in to how, through reflection, we can be more successful mentors in today's merchant navy.

Just before we go on, however, I need to mention to you something about my views on race, religion and culture. Why? Because, in this book you will hear me talk a lot about language, culture and cultural differences as we discuss the barriers to mentoring – and I need you to understand my views as I don't want you to dismiss me as a racist or bigot. I am not. I have friends who are Catholic, Protestant, Hindu and Atheist and I also have friends whose religious beliefs I have no idea about. My elder sister is an ordained Minister and I have my own views on religion which I do not share unless asked.

You see personally, I don't care what colour your skin is, what language you speak or which God, if any, you worship, as we all share a common bond – and that is the sea. Whether you are a Master, manager, shipowner, operator, teacher, engineer or maritime lawyer, one thing I can pretty much guarantee is that we are connected in some way by the sea.

I love the sea. I was born near it and can't remember a time when I did not go fishing. Even now, although I work at sea, I also spend a lot of my spare time on, in, under or at least near the sea. When I die, I would like my ashes to be scattered in the Gulf Stream so that I will sail the North Atlantic on my final voyage. That's not morbid, it is just the person I am. I am white and speak English as my first language – I have friends who are not, and don't. It just does not matter, but it is very important to me that you understand this.

There is one last thing that I must point out before we move on to the basics of mentoring. Throughout this book you will read examples of accidents and incidents. These are not examples of actual accidents or incidents I have investigated, as it would not be appropriate for me to use those without the express permission of all the parties involved. The examples I have used are fictional but based on facts that I have acquired

anecdotally, from reading through hundreds of published accident reports and from my own experiences. Unless I specifically say that the example is real, any similarity to cases I have attended is purely coincidental.