

# A ship's master: manager, leader or seaman?

**Eric Murdoch**, of The Standard Club, gives his perspective on the role of a ship's master

**T**he training requirements for certification schemes for ships' officers are defined by international convention and are essential if a common standard of proficiency is to be achieved but do these schemes fail to modernise and are we assuming ships' crew are better trained than they really are?

Working at sea is very different to the job you and I have. We get up in the morning, have a cup of tea, travel to work, arrive, have another cup of tea and then settle down for a day's work. At the day's end our toil is over and we return home having completed another day. Few sleep in the office. Working at sea is not like this at all: the mariner will get up in the morning and go down to the ship, wherever it may be, and stay. Depending on what the ship does, it could be a short stay lasting weeks or a long stay lasting many months. Even with modern radio communication, when a ship crosses an ocean there are times when the nearest land is thousands of miles away and the mariners' world ends at the ship's side rail.

Working on a ship has other quirky differences. I am a chartered engineer. I have various academic qualifications but do not have a certificate saying I am competent to do the job I hold. Our CEO does not have a certificate saying he is a competent CEO, because such certificates do not exist. Yet a ship's master cannot be a master without holding a certificate of competency as master. This is both good and bad. Yes, it is comforting to know a common standard exists and that someone is checking. But it is less comforting to know that a ship's captain need only present his certificate to a prospective employer to get a job at sea. The certificate demonstrates that a minimum standard of proficiency has been achieved. But while technical fitness is shown, do we really know what the minimum standard of proficiency is? That the training received was relevant? Whether the right things have been taught correctly? That the experience is sufficient? The certificate says it is, but in my experience we incorrectly assume the holder has more knowledge than they actually have and that training covered all necessary subjects.

It is accepted that a graduate naval architect, even after training with good experience, would not have sufficient knowledge to design and build a ship. Ships cost a lot of money and are complex. So why do we automatically assume that the holder of a certificate of competency has sufficient knowledge to perform the job stated on the certificate? Why do we assume that a master has been fully trained in seamanship, leadership, management, team building, effective performance appraisals, about all port risks in all ports, about all cargo, its hazards, stowage and care, not forgetting the wonders of the deep. The sea may be their world but it keeps its secrets.



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My experience is that a ship's master receives very focused but limited training. That certification schemes are a minimum standard – entry level – which are heavy in technical skills. For example, a ship's master is a manager but a manager who is seldom taught how to be one. A ship's master is a leader but a leader who is seldom taught how to be one. Fortunately, they are taught how to be good navigators and seamen, how to operate a ship and how to sail from Rotterdam to Shanghai arriving in one piece. But they are not taught sufficiently about human factors or management.

The disadvantage of a statutory certification scheme is the difficulty in trying to modernise the syllabus and making change. Today's master, above all, is a manager and training in management techniques are essential. During interviews on board ship we see large knowledge gaps, especially with application of safety management systems (ISM), with risk assessment, with the importance of effective near-miss reporting and that ISM should be ship, rather than company, led. Masters do not really understand the management side of safety management and consequently ships are less safe. But they do understand the safety side.

Ask any ship's master if they receive training in team skills, or on human factors, if they have been on an ISM lead auditor course or received teaching on accident investigation/root-cause analysis, never mind just culture ... I rest my case. **MRI**



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