

Seagoing managers or leaders at sea?

Chris Haughton FNI

If decision-making is moving away from the ship and towards tighter shoreside control, do we really need ships' officers to be leaders at sea or just efficient managers?

For the past four years, and for many more before that, at a nautical college in the UK, I've been facilitating leadership, management and teamwork development programmes for masters and officers of all ranks, including face-to-face modules and executive coaching. Participants have included nationals from Belgium, France, Holland, Russia, Croatia, Georgia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, India, the Philippines and the UK.

It is thus pleasing to see the increasing profile of leadership and management development issues, most recently shown in issue 25 of the Institute's *Alert!* bulletin. My own exposure to serving seafarers is enabling me to build a vivid picture of modern day practice from a leadership perspective, and is allowing the building of a hypothesis, as yet untested. The four points below provide more questions and points for discussion than answers: they may not be new, but I believe they reinforce empirical evidence being put forward elsewhere.

First, the locus of decision-making seems to be moving further and further away from the ship. Increasingly it seems that even the most mundane, operational decisions are being taken ashore.

For example, in one tanker fleet masters reportedly have to refer medical cases to the designated person ashore (DPA) before sending crew ashore to a doctor. This is

questionable on so many counts and is not the reason, I think, why the ISM Code and the role of DPA were set up.

The very real symptoms of under-performance – in this case alleged cases of malingering, leading to delay and high P&I calls – are being addressed instead of the underlying causes. They reveal knee-jerk management policy which is always searching for a quick fix but which ignores the analysis of fundamental causes. This is much more difficult to do but it will lead to effective and sustainable change. In this case, it's difficult to see what the new policy will achieve – except to annoy the ship's staff.

Company managers are keen to announce that they're available 24/7 and rarely switch off their Blackberries. Under pressure from owners, charterers, classification societies and flag states, all demanding real-time solutions, managers are seizing the decision-making functions traditionally associated with the ship's master. This effectively rescues seagoing officers from the need to exercise judgement and is breeding a dependency culture in officers and masters which may be hard to eradicate.

Second, thanks to a worldwide, ever-increasing obsession with 'leadership' we're now exposing ships' officers to personal development programmes designed (one hopes) to promote learning and independent action. So we seem to be facing an ironic dichotomy where more and more is decided ashore while simultaneously we encourage the development of people at sea – to do what exactly?

Is it leadership?

Masters and officers (except in some rare instances) do little that the commercial world would recognise as leadership. In the terms of Harvard Business School leadership expert, John Kotter (*A Force*

for Change: How leadership differs from management, New York, The Free Press, 1990), they are not expected routinely to vision, strategise, align or set direction. They may do a bit of inspiring or motivating and be introduced to the concepts at the odd staff seminar or conference, but that's probably all.

On a practical level, the sailing masters I work with rarely have anything to do with strategic decision-making, newbuilds, fleet expansion, vessel disposal and dry-dock planning, for instance. Often even operational decisions to do with bunker stems, stores and crewing have been taken away. Masters who do get involved are usually seconded ashore for the purpose. We seem to go out of our way to build the management silos rather than dismantle them.

The majority of masters and officers go home on leave and don't have to worry about anything to do with the company until the next contract or trip. This is probably just as well, as seafarers need the downtime to recover from the high, sometimes excessive, operational performance levels they are expected to deliver while they are at work.

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The Nautical Institute is a company limited by guarantee No. 2570030 and a registered charity in the UK No 1004265.

© 2011 The Nautical Institute
ISSN 0144-1019.

Printed in England by O'Sullivan Communications, Southall.

Typeset by Tradeset Ltd, Eastcote, Pinner

It would, of course, be disingenuous to suggest that all organisations operate like this. Many companies take organisational development seriously and have development programmes for their shore management as well as the sea staff. The managing director of one such management company in the UK's north west, for example, is turning the clock back by returning decision-making to the ship: there the shore management development is integrated with that of the sea staff. Another example is a gas tanker fleet in Europe that integrates its superintendents with sea staff on a modular development programme. This is proving most effective in breaking down some of the barriers, real and imagined, between sea and shore staff.

Third, given our multicultural maritime sector, are we imposing a western cultural model of leadership and management in places and societies where that is less readily accepted? This is a massive issue and needs a greater depth of treatment than possible here.

Finally, and to complicate matters further, we should remember the law underpins all our actions. Masters find themselves responsible and liable for everything under the sun, reflecting that time long ago when the master really was in charge. Regrettably the blame and criminalisation culture is alive and well in the maritime sector. So, we have a situation that, while shore management is seizing control of all major and increasingly minor issues, all too often the master and his/her officers are left carrying the can if/when it goes wrong.

Putting these points together, there is an argument building that the latest planned interventions may only worsen the situation. Officers are now much more aware of what they could be doing but which they are prevented from doing by autocratic and stifling management systems and protocol. Do we actually need leaders at sea, apart from those critical safety and operational times when someone has to take charge? Or should we instead be content with efficient seagoing

managers? Empirically, this seems to be the way we're heading.

More fundamentally, and in addressing some of these issues, should management and leadership development start with flag states, companies and organisations ashore before moving out to sea?

AGM Council Notices

Council notice: 1

In accordance with article 10 of the Constitution, the Annual General Meeting will be held at the Marriott Victoria Inner Harbour Hotel, 728 Humboldt Street, Victoria, BC, Canada on Thursday 2 June 2011 at 1700 hrs. The programme includes the President's address, business, elections, and presentation of

Fellowship Certificates and other Awards.

The AGM will take place after the first half of the Command Seminar on *Vessel management onboard and ashore today and tomorrow* and will be followed by a Reception and Dinner.

Council notice: 2

In accordance with article 20 of the Constitution, Council shall notify all

members of vacancies which are to occur among the officers and members of Council at the Annual General Meeting on 2 June 2011.

In accordance with article 21 of the Constitution, any two members entitled to vote may nominate eligible persons for election to Council – please send your nomination in writing to the Chief Executive at NIHQ.

Council Members

Seagoing

- Mr M Winter FNI
- Capt H F Elliott MNI
- Cdr J G Jones FNI
- Mr I C Lawler MNI
- Capt A Nosko MNI
- * Capt B E Cuneo FNI
- * Lt Cdr H C Cook MBE MNI
- * Capt A Gatti MNI

* Those who retire and offer themselves for re-election.

Members without asterisks have served the maximum of six years on Council and under the terms of the Constitution must stand down this year, or have expressed a wish to stand down.

By Order of Council

Shore-based

- Capt S S Butalia MNI
- Capt R F Elroy Jr MNI
- Mr G Reay MNI
- Mr C Haughton FNI
- Capt S M A Mahmoodi FNI
- * Capt T J Bailey FNI
- * Mr G J P Lang FNI
- * Capt D A P McKelvie FNI

- * Capt T J Proctor FNI
- * Capt M J Donnelly MNI
- * Lt Cdr S E Gaskin FNI
- * Lt Cdr D J S Goddard MBE, MNI
- * Capt G C Leggett MNI
- * Capt V Madruga Santos MNI
- * Mr I R L McDougall MNI