

WELFARE OF SEAFARERS



THE HONOURABLE COMPANY OF MASTER MARINERS

*People & Safety
Working Group*

Published 30th April 2021

The Issue

Despite the fact that the bulk of international trade in materials and goods is carried by sea, the welfare of seafarers is not always given proper attention by those responsible for oversight of maritime business and international regulations. This has been brought into stark relief by the Covid-related issues that have seen seafarers trapped, either in their ships or ashore, and unable to return to their families because of travel restrictions. Arguably, the welfare of seafarers has never been more overlooked than it is today.

The Facts

Ships are safer in the 21st Century than ever before, but the same cannot be said for the mental wellbeing of those who crew them. As a result of the application of evolving technology into the design of ships, crew numbers have become smaller than before, with as few as 14 aboard the largest cargo carrying vessels. Furthermore, multi-national crewing results from current commercial practice and, for example, in the case of British seafarers, it is not uncommon for a lone officer to be the only member of the crew whose first language is English. The case applies equally to other nationalities who find themselves isolated by language difficulties. The combination of very high workload, extended contracts, fatigue, loneliness and limited opportunity for relaxation, more than ever challenges the mental wellbeing of young people who follow a career at sea. Long stays in port, which once allowed seafarers to vary work routines, to meet others, to visit distant places and to refresh their minds, have been lost to short turnarounds, handling efficiencies and minimum manning.

In the past, occasional mail with its inevitable time-lag allowed for a smoothing of the emotional ups and downs of being apart from loved ones. However, recent changes in society and communications present a freedom of choice and connectivity which, strangely, seem to heap yet more pressure onto the young as every disappointment, worry or concern over relationships in their lives adds mental pressure.

Anxiety in private life is almost certainly compounded by that in work too. Uncertainty about the future, repatriation, contractual changes or redundancy is commonplace. Automation on board or changes to work patterns may lead to further anxiety over loss of control, loss of understanding or job satisfaction. Seafarers often feel undervalued and that they have limited career prospects as industry changes take place and future developments are rumoured or proposed. Too often, they feel undervalued by those they work for and are demotivated as a result. Too often, minimum manning increases problems in ensuring proper operation of the ship which further stresses and demotivates seafarers of all ranks. Anxiety and lack of motivation in a seafarer will cost the ship owner money in the long run, whether as a result of attrition or an accident (see also the HCMM paper on Cost Savings from learning Events).

Senior officers in commercial shipping companies are qualified through examinations in professional competency, but their training and assessment does not include leadership and management to the standard necessary for effectively supporting their juniors. In isolated cases, an officer's leadership development may benefit from good role models, but this is a haphazard and inadequate way for the industry to prepare officers to exercise their senior management roles.

Directors of shipping companies are focussed on achieving profit margins, managing budget constraints and minimising the increasing cost of overheads. However, many fail to recognise the fiscal value in encouraging company loyalty through excellence in the management and welfare of seafarers to reduce attrition of trained staff and the nurturing of company ethos and values. Similarly, failure to provide senior officers with leadership training will cost the ship owner money through poor behaviours, poor departmental management, poor support of subordinates and poor command of the ship. Even long-established companies may not yet have well developed personnel policies, such as for bullying or whistleblowing, to ensure acceptable behaviours.

Human nature dictates that masters' leadership styles will vary and, across the industry, there is little appreciation of what constitutes the principles of good and effective leadership. More positively, mentoring is now more widely adopted to encourage career development, yet other aspects of seafarers' lives are unsupported. Cultural differences within multi-national crews further complicate the lack of welfare empathy by senior officers. Similarly, company communications may be cursory and fail to keep staff informed, updated,

involved, empowered, assured, or confident. Rumour will quickly fill a void in communications and seafarers have long been fond of rumour; however, rumour adds to uncertainty, concern and a feeling of undervalued isolation.

At the international level, the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) was introduced as the 4th pillar in Maritime Affairs (STCW, SOLAS, MARPOL & MLC). This Convention was adopted in 2006 and came into force in 2013 to regulate minimum working and living standards for seafarers. Health, welfare and repatriation are amongst the standards for which regulations are set. Despite incorporating many previously established International Labour Organisation Agreements, and even though this mainly regulates conditions of employment, it fails effectively to address mental welfare. The fact that it has demonstrably failed to ensure international cooperation regarding repatriation of seafarers during the Covid pandemic has exposed its weakness under international law.

During the Covid pandemic there have been many examples where the international shipping community and member state governments have failed to honour the MLC's principles, effectively disregarding seafarers' welfare. 'Force majeure' may have been a reasonable explanation for contravention of MLC regulations on seafarers' repatriation at the outset of the worldwide crisis but, now that we are into the second year of the pandemic, continuing contravention demonstrates how undervalued seafarers are on a global scale. This is particularly so at a time when they should be properly recognised as key workers in the international supply chain. In the longer term this will almost certainly prove to be a contributory factor in encouraging disillusioned but skilled and valuable mariners to quit the industry.

However, in fairness, many companies have attempted to make exceptional arrangements for the relief and repatriation of seafarers on their ships but, in too many instances, Governments across the world have failed to accept the need to allow the necessary travel.

Conclusions

Factors including reduced crew sizes, mixed-nationality crewing and unremittingly high workloads, have served generally to worsen the conditions of service for seafarers.

In many cases, little is done to ameliorate the pressures on the mental welfare of seafarers. The absence of training in the principles of good leadership compounds welfare and morale problems.

The complex nature of international shipping management, ownership, financing, insuring, registration and crewing, results in a blurring of the line of governance which needs addressing. The status quo may meet the needs of financial convenience for owners, but there is no direct line of redress when humanitarian issues arise. The impact of Covid 19 travel restrictions has had a disproportionate impact on seafarers' conditions of service and, at the time of writing, in many cases little or nothing had been done to rectify this critical situation.

The HCMM Position

In the short term the HCMM, as have other UK maritime organisations, urges the British Government to use its influence internationally to seek to overcome the difficulties that the Covid pandemic has placed upon the repatriation of seafarers and crew change processes. Similarly, the HCMM urges the British Government to take the lead in providing Covid vaccinations to seafarers on all British ships and other ships in UK ports.

In the longer term the HCMM intends to continue to raise its concern over seafarers' welfare, with particular regard to the absence of formal leadership training. Similarly, the HCMM will continue to call for issues surrounding the mental health of seafarers to be fully considered, addressed and supported across the maritime industry.

Additionally, the HCMM will seek opportunities to call for greater clarity in lines of governance of responsibilities for crewing matters across international shipping.