

Multinational Crews in Merchant Ships

by Captain Jaime Barrientos, Nautilus Chile.

The shipping industry through the centuries of its existence, and taking into account the maritime trade by ancient cultures such as the Phoenicians and others mentioned in the biblical stories, has been exposed to various manifestations of adversity and complexity in all matters that are part of the "Maritime Adventure". As a whole, these are relevant when performing the analysis on how to deal or cope with them to achieve the main objective, namely, to transport cargo efficiently and effectively.

We know that for work on board a team is required, which is formed from the messboy to the captain of the vessel.

Well, if you consider what has happened in the formation or creation of proper seamen for manning the various commercial ships which sailed the seas of the world in the last 40 years (time representing a number of sailors today) we may observe that they have become heterogeneous and multinational.

Not so far are the years in which the crews of the merchant ships were formed by seamen of the same nationality and even from certain places and regions to which they belonged. As an example, you can say it was usual in the case of Chile to find on board persons from near-to shore towns and cities, but rarely coming from other locations inland.

In recent years, it has been observed that an increasing number of ships that serve the global maritime transport of the world has increased the formation of mixed crews. In these cases, the multiplicity of persons whose ethnicity involves differences - not only language but also culture and religion - is a major challenge to overcome when facing prolonged periods of on board.

The reasons for this fact has been spread out in the shipping world, seeking to meet the needs of qualified seafarers to perform a particular function on board, most have to do with the difficulty of crewing managers of ships to find crew from the same country. The latter has been an issue in at least three causes and is easily verifiable, note the following:

- The first is based on the fact of higher wages for professional and technical officers and crews from developed countries, which has to do with the cost of living in those places and the personal targets of those individuals.
- The second cause is the fact that there is a noticeable lack of interest in working at sea, being able to achieve personal goals having a job on land. This, in turn, means having access to development of everyday life with greater ease and frequency without suffering self insulation work on a merchant ship, which usually means staying on board several months, either continuously or alternately.

- The third reason has to do with the need to reduce operational costs of shipping business, having the opportunity to recruit people with sufficient preparation in developing countries, mostly in the area of Indonesia, Eastern Europe and Asia – for example - where the cost of living is markedly lower than in countries with a maritime tradition located mostly in Central Europe and Scandinavia.

Then, something inherent to the personal needs of the person - such as those related to the emotions represented by the desire to express occasionally in their native language or share issues of common interest in cultural, national or religious nature, are dramatically hampered if an individual onboard becomes the only person who comes from a particular country. This fact could be considered irrelevant to develop their life normally on a ship but could eventually mean less work performance or origin of the development of psychic pathology emotional disorder, while promoting ascetic behaviour characteristics in the individual and risk for those who share the work unit.

There is evidence that is difficult to ignore, showing that a merchant vessel with mixed crew - especially those whose language and culture are markedly different - life onboard goes on without much interaction among the crewmembers. Every individual completes their particular tasks and after completing the daily work, isolation occurs in their respective private space. There, in the small place where his intimate life unfolds, the meeting with his family through memories, their music, their language and their God.

Fortunately, the technological today means it is easy to facilitate this type of daily contact, that every human being needs to be encouraged so they may face the following working day.

Mental and emotional health is not to be underestimated, so that computer equipment, mobile phones and other electronic elements, may help much in the encounter with what feels like close contact. Thus, home, family, friends and nation are close to where you are physically located, which may well be thousands of miles away.

Some people who regularly work onboard merchant ships show no affects from working in an environment where people come from such different backgrounds, others find this disagreeable and others simply do not care. Anyway - while navigating the seas of the world is interesting to observe how life onboard runs very differently to that which they lived only a couple of decades ago, where team spirit, solidarity and expressions of joy were not absent, despite the natural distancing from loved ones represented by the family, environment and friends, far away in the homeland.

The reality shows and forces the person - not ideally - to be developing the ability to become used to the environment in which they work and live. This allows, by mentioning some matters, to be adapting to new forms of behaviour, smells, tastes, restrictions and paradoxically also to live in their inner solitude.

The seagoing times, usually for 3, 9, 12 or even more months, influence the behaviour, performance and working efficiency of the individual as well as their relationship with all those, also far away from home, who share the work on board.

At the end of the long onboard period, eager to go home with its people, its language and local food. Thus, although not for long, the time on shore will bring new strength and enthusiasm to continue the routine of work at sea, which is expected to be in a human and material environment according to the times in which we live nowadays, that is, with greater facilities for live onboard, in probably a better and relatively comfortable way.

Although entities related to the shipping industry, such as IMO and ILO, may do their best in this matter but take into account that there is still something positive to be done to improve lonely life on board, without counting on higher costs for the employer, our suggestion could be:

Manning ships with mixed crews where at least two members come from the same country or nation in its entire component. Having the opportunity to interact with another person of the same cultural background always is of benefit, both to themselves and their employers. It is not healthy for a person to experience long periods at sea, a lack what is basic to life day to day in a friendlier environment in which social and emotional communication is in their native language.