SEAFARER TRAINING

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Bridge the divide in shipping

The shipping industry is starting to wake up to the problems caused by misunderstandings between crew members from different cultures. Yet cultural awareness training is still in its infancy. Captain Jan Horck, assistant professor at the World Maritime University in Malmo, considers what topics cultural awareness courses should cover...

Some seafarers have to use hand signals to communicate onboard Picture: Danny Cornelissen

Captain Jan Horck in the classroom with a multinational set of students

The vast majority of the world fleet now runs with multinational crews Picture: Danny Cornelissen

Many of today's merchant ships are an accident waiting to happen. Combine culturally mixed crews with low manning levels and you have a recipe for trouble — with casualty investigators discovering time after time that accidents are due to a lack of awareness or communication difficulties among the crew.

Examples of maritime accidents that fit this profile are: Xi Chang Hai (2000), Sally Maersk (2000), Sea Mariner (2002), Silja Opera (2003), Tricolor (2003), Hyundai Dominion (2004), Domiat (2004), Bow Mariner (2004), Fu Shan Hai (2004), Maersk Doha (2006) and Crimson Mars (2006) — to mention but a few.

I believe that the legislators have done little to find a good remedy to this situation, so the only effective solution is to educate. The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) has given some hints on this problematical issue, but not been able to specify a practical way to tackle the subject.

Teachers at maritime education and training (MET) institutions are still, therefore, trying to find the best way to translate IMO guidance into effective cultural awareness courses.

Paragraph 3.9.3 of the revised ISM Code guidelines states that the audit team should be able to communicate effectively with auditees. As a result of this, the designated person (DP) should be culturally aware and proficient in the English language.

A course for DPs has been developed by the World Maritime University. In this five-day course one full day is devoted to cultural awareness. The aim is to:

🔲 raise the students' awareness about diversity in general
🔲 help students to understand their own attitudes (a prerequisite to understanding others)
🔲 emphasise the importance of empathy — demonstrated in actions as well as words

Humans are not born with the ability to easily accept others whose behaviour is different from their own. This skill needs to be learned. We do have a fantastic ability to adapt, but this often comes with time, and in shipping there is no time for trial and error.
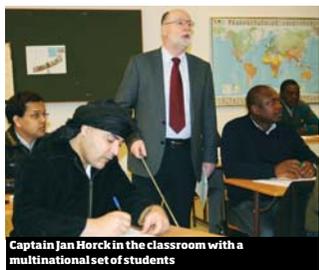
Often it is manning agencies who are responsible for crew composition, with shipowners habitually shopping around between agencies — totally contrary to the aspirations of crew cohesiveness promulgated in the STCW Convention. The result is a vessel with crew members randomly thrown together from different nationalities, with no thought given to the cultural differences among the seafarers, and no training to pre-empt any problems.

Maritime educational institutions also frequently find themselves with a multi-cultural/multi-religious student body, but here it is easier to get to know one another and think ahead. The important thing is to understand that conflict between cultures is not inevitable.

Certainly, a person's cultural habits are usually strongly ingrained and form part of their identity. But a measure of understanding and compromise is always possible if we approach the situation with an open mind.

Onboard ship, too, steps can be taken to foster individual awareness and promote mutual understanding. Misunderstandings tend to be far less frequent in working environments with the following conditions:

🔲 where there is little 'power distance' between colleagues (but respect is still shown)
🔲 where contact between colleagues is relatively informal
🔲 where contact between colleagues is mutually rewarding
🔲 where there is a positive social climate (a management effort)

Almost all known societies try to preserve their social capital by cultivating social bonds and encouraging informal networks of trust, solidarity and cooperation. These contacts strengthen a person's identification with the community and foster shared interests and values.

For a person away from home, their cultural identity can become a lifeline to maintaining their own sense of self, so it can be particularly challenging to accept other ways of behaving. If they do compromise or adapt, does that mean they are no longer 'the same person'? People can feel quite despairing about this, and it can help if they are given the opportunity during training to talk about personal transformation.

Cultural misunderstandings can be avoided by recognising communication styles, power structures, beliefs, and attitudes towards work and time. Education is the solution to overcoming barriers.

One important issue in the training must be to make people realise that racial diversity is often talked about as cultural diversity, and therefore people cover up what they are really talking about. It has become crude to talk about race, so race becomes labelled as 'culture' to avoid embarrassment.

It must be wrong to replace our concept of race, as a biological entity, with culture. If people do not wish to be grouped or categorised under the race that they are born with perhaps they will have no identity at all? Some people believe that there is an inequality between races, and this skewed stereotyped belief should be discussed in courses on diversity understanding.

The building of cultural bridges has the aim of confronting common fears on human diversity. On the learner's path to cultural awareness he/she must pass four recognised obstacles:

🔲 stereotyping   🔲 bigotry
🔲 prejudice   🔲 discrimination

> ## "Leaving people to learn the hard way can be very costly to the shipowner because of possible crew mistakes"
> Captain Jan Horck

Certainly, increasing cultural awareness makes it easier for people to accept the variety of human behaviour and the differences between themselves and others. But some might argue that offering diversity training courses and changing the working environment onboard ship is an excessive response. Surely people can just learn from their mistakes?

In some respects, this approach does have a role to play, but it is risky, because of the potential to cause wider harm. When people suffer psychological damage as a result of others' actions, this can be difficult and time-consuming to rectify.

Leaving people to 'learn the hard way' can also be very costly to the employer, the shipowner, because of possible crew mistakes.

So, assuming we should offer diversity training, what should this involve? As a starting point, we should not take for granted that people are consistent in their views. Once the different images are articulated, inconsistencies should be acknowledged and explored.

During the cultural awareness course it becomes important to work with issues that participants express with an amount of uncertainty. Often uncertainties generate better dialogues than determined standpoints.

The next step in the training is to focus on opinions and arguments and thereafter on contrasts and the reverse — thesis versus anti-thesis. These processes will develop blends or combinations of ideas: a synthesis. From a learning point of view, both support for and resistance to an initiative to change minds and opinions can be a positive approach. In summary, the training should be built on:

🔲 opinions and arguments
🔲 contrasts
🔲 a blend of both of the above: a synthesis

To be culturally aware means to be aware of the many variations there are in the content of a specific culture. But first it is important to be aware of one's own culture. When interacting with people from different cultures, the human being interprets the other's actions through his or her own cultural standards. This can cause misunderstandings — particularly so if the interpretations are linked to emotions.

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The cultural awareness instructor should be very well prepared and ensure that comparison between cultures not is on the agenda. To compare would most likely lead to unhappy course participants and could cause a lot of harm. The competencies of the instructor are defined by: knowledge of the subject, didactical competence, listening skills and the ability to interact with the students. The instructor should also be able to recognise behaviour patterns that interfere with the learning process.

Some MET institutions have started to conduct cultural awareness courses on their own initiative, although these are not explicitly recommended in the STCW. Where courses are conducted they are often an elective (non-mandatory) subject in the wider curriculum. Neither do there exist any recommendations on syllabi. Therefore there is a wide variation in the courses offered by shipowners, P&I Clubs, unions, etc.

The MET course at World Maritime University — where the curriculum focuses on maritime administration — includes a one-week module on the management of diversity. The duration of the course is 10 lectures of 90 minutes — 15 hours in total. The course also contains a 'train the trainer' element, helping participants to think about how they might run their own diversity courses and tackle the issue within their own organisations. Therefore the WMU course consists of two modules:

🔲 diversity management course content — why diversities have become a problem in shipping and the challenge of mustering women to take up management roles onboard

🔲 cultural awareness course-content — looking into the change of attitudes, communication and victims of prejudice, etc. Discussions and examples from group behaviour in role play constitute a substantial part of the contact hours

During the course, attention is also given to how to assess if a person is culturally aware or not.

Training promotes clearer communication, establishes trust, opens new horizons, strengthens relationships and generates substantial positive results for education and business. In order to avoid shipboard misunderstandings that lead to accidents, cultural awareness must be given a time slot in the curriculum of trainee seafarers and as be offered as a refresher course for experienced seafarers. The captain should not have to be worried all day because of misunderstandings among the crew.

Breaking down the barriers of culture

Catherine Logie is the author of IMO Model Course 3.17 in Maritime English and was lead author of the IMO's Maritime English Instructor Training Course

Marlins manager Catherine Logie has worked in maritime training for 13 years and originally qualified as teacher of English as a foreign language. She considers how companies can make multinational crewing work...

🟩 'People are our greatest asset' — it's every ship manager's mantra, yet do employers invest sufficiently in their greatest asset? Many a training dollar is sunk into leadership training and crew resource management courses to address the 'human element', but one area is still not adequately understood: the impact of culture on communication and safety.

Most companies now employ mixed-nationality crews, and effective teamwork is expected. The success of teamwork depends on good communication, but it is not always easy to navigate successfully in multi-cultural teams: misunderstandings are often attributed to difficulties communicating in a common language. However, culture is also a contributing factor that impacts significantly on compliance, safety and performance.

A leading ship owner-operator recently carried out an extensive study which underlined that culture was the root cause of many of the accidents onboard its vessels; a fact borne out by many accident reports.

The importance of cross-cultural understanding is growing, but few employers know how to tackle it, as this is not a traditional training subject. Cross-cultural training can seem abstract, controversial, political, irrelevant, possibly taboo or too much of a 'soft' skill in an industry focused on its 'hardware'. It is hard to define, difficult to assess and non-mandatory, so it is often ignored.

Yet considering the number of incidents caused by the human factor, and given that multinational crews are the norm, isn't it time to pay attention to the impact of culture on communication and safety? Could seafarers do their jobs better, communicate more effectively, have fewer accidents, stay with companies longer and be more motivated if cultural barriers were reduced?

Culture is like an iceberg. The part above the water is visible but the largest part of it lurks under water, unseen.

The tip of the 'iceberg' consists of observable characteristics. We can recognise these visible differences easily in how people dress, eat and express themselves; in their body language and gestures; how close people stand; how much they smile; how loudly/quietly people speak, etc.

Typical examples include how Indians and Bulgarians shake their head to express agreement; how it is rude to give the 'thumbs up' gesture in some countries; and how you should never beckon someone from the Philippines by crooking your finger.

Such examples are interesting, but these alone are not likely to affect safety onboard, as professional seafarers are accustomed to making allowances for people from different cultures.

Unfortunately, many cultural awareness courses stop at describing the 'surface level' differences between cultures: this is not enough in itself.

The 'underwater' part of the 'culture iceberg' is where the real collision area lies. This is much harder to describe and identify as it consists of our values, beliefs and assumptions

of which we are often unaware. In multi-cultural teams at sea, this 'unconscious clash of cultures' becomes apparent in attitudes to safety, risk and management style, for example.

🟥 Consider some scenarios quoted by seafarers and shipping companies:

🔴 a junior officer from the Philippines was afraid to challenge a European senior officer's navigational error, resulting in a collision

🔴 a seafarer collapsed inside an enclosed space. Several crew members attempted a rescue: disregarding all their safety training, they entered without breathing apparatus and they too collapsed due to toxic fumes

🔴 on an engineroom inspection, it was found that some experienced engineer officers had used a 'magic pipe', allegedly to save the company money. The result was a large fine

🔴 low morale among a crew led to poor performance. The multinational crew formed cliques that did not mix socially, and the master's management style did not encourage people to approach him.

These scenarios could all hinge on cultural differences. To understand the root causes, it is useful to refer to the Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede, who defined six different aspects of national cultures, simplified as follows:

🟥 **Individualism vs collectivism — who do you put first: yourself or your community?** Onboard, your community is your crew mates. In the enclosed space scenario, the crew made an instinctive and urgent decision to save their mate: they may belong to collectivist societies with strong bonds to the wider social group, over and above concern for their own safety.

🟥 **Power distance ratio — how much do you value hierarchy?** The junior officer who didn't challenge the senior's decision respected authority and probably came from a 'high power distance' culture where you do not contradict your seniors. This is often found in more traditional societies such as S Europe, India and SE Asia, contrasting with N Europe and USA where people are often comfortable with a 'flat management' structure.

🟥 **Uncertainty avoidance — do you take risks or follow rules to the letter?** Some cultures value rules, procedure and safety (eg Germany, UK, Switzerland). Other cultures may be more fatalistic and inclined to take risks to solve a problem (S. America, SE Asia, Balkans). The engineers in the 'magic pipe' incident described above were probably from countries where risk-taking is the norm: this could also apply to the enclosed space scenario.

🟥 **'Masculine' vs 'feminine' tendencies — do you tend to be ambitious and task focussed or nurturing and people focussed?** This aspect is applicable to both men and women. Russia, China, Japan and Brazil are among more 'masculine' societies which promote a culture of competition and strength, whereas Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam

place heavy emphasis on group harmony, teamwork, social responsibility and cohesion. The unapproachable master in the scenario above may have 'high masculine values', ignoring the crew morale issue.

🟥 **Long-term vs short-term orientation** — in long-term oriented cultures, people typically plan carefully, set goals, anticipate consequences and save for the future, eg China. In short-term oriented cultures, people are more spontaneous, live for today and may opt for quick fixes over long term planning. This may also explain the actions of the engineers in the 'magic pipe' scenario.

🟥 **Direct/indirect communication — do you say what you mean or what others want to hear?** To varying degrees, westerners tend to value directness, but this can be considered very rude in many eastern countries where one needs to 'hear what is not said'.

🟩 Culture is complex, multi-layered and is not only national/regional. Distinct cultures also exist within industries. Shipping culture typically features:

🔴 collectivism (teamwork is essential)
🔴 a strong power distance ratio (crew roles are defined and hierarchical)
🔴 strong rule orientation (focus on safety and procedures)
🔴 'masculine' values
🔴 both long and short term orientation
🔴 direct communication

Cultures even vary between companies and between ships. Given this complex picture, it is inevitable that problems arise when people have to conform to industry values that conflict with their cultural norms.

🟥 **So how to improve cross-cultural understanding?** Cultural awareness training for cadets, seafarers and shore-based staff is needed. Additionally, company induction training should include some simple key messages such as these:

🔴 we can't know every culture's norms but we can keep an open mind and cultivate a positive attitude; showing interest is often all that is needed to compensate for lack of knowledge about another's culture

🔴 we shouldn't abandon our own cultural values: this represents our identity

🔴 challenging or criticising other people's values rarely resolves problems. When a culture clash occurs, be objective and first reflect on your own attitudes. Knowing where your cultural values lie on Hofstede's scale can help pinpoint where cultural differences lie

🔴 finally, misunderstandings are a normal part of communication and can be dealt with positively by keeping a sense of humour

Such 'awareness-raising training' is hardly rocket science — but as the world shrinks in the search for good staff, this is a crucial, low-cost investment in our greatest asset: our people.