

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AS AN “INDUSTRIAL TOOL AND AN EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL MATTER WHICH STRENGTHENS RELATIONSHIPS AT SEA”

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### ABSTRACT

When you take the challenge to be employed in a global shipping company that has ship-operations and seafarers all over the world, you need some training additives of intercultural communication competence such as motivation, tolerance for differences, open-mindedness, knowledge and skills. The ongoing seafarers are expected to be well-trained and of valuable quality. They thus depend on their training to build their profession. Therefore, the result of such a challenge for MET institutions is finding their way to achieve the learning outcomes and, first and foremost, to find their proper way to assess that seafarers are fit for being employed on board vessel. Consequently, in terms of *effective communication*, the higher levels of Maritime English must be strengthened. The seafarers' ability to speak and understand General English and Maritime English, and to use the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), as well, is not sufficient. The seafarer's ability to transfer information, to give feedback, to acquire cultural awareness and to master intercultural communication skills also plays a key role in his/her training.

“*Effective communication*” as stated in STCW78, as amended, constitutes a demanding message which should be accepted by Maritime English teachers and trainers to increase and highlight their activities. In this manner, Maritime English teachers and trainers will provide the powerful basis needed for a true safety culture and effective communication training at the core of promoting the seafarers' quality, competence and fitness for their goal.

**Keywords:** *Effective communication, Multilingual crews, Understanding Maritime English and IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP)*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”*

George Bernard Shaw

When it comes to communication, we all tend to think we are not bad at it. Truth is, even those of us who are good communicators are not closely as good as we think we are. This inaccuracy of our ability to communicate becomes deeper when interacting with people we know well.

When communicating with people we know well, we make hypothesis about what they understand—assumptions that we do not dare make with strangers. This tendency to overestimate how well we communicate and how well we are understood, as well, is so widespread that psychologists even have a name for it: “*closeness-communication bias*” (Kenneth Savitsky, Boaz Keysar, Nicholas Epley, Travis Carter, Ashley Swanson, 2011).

Our problem in communicating with friends is that we have a false belief of insight, namely getting close to someone seems to create the false appearance of understanding more than actual understanding: “The understanding, ‘*What I know is different from what you know*’ is essential for effective communication, but that insight can be elusive. Some [people] may indeed be on the same wavelength, but maybe not as much as they think. You get rushed and preoccupied, and you stop taking the perspective of the other person.” (Kenneth Savitsky, Thomas Gilovich, 2003).

Accordingly, we tend to treat knowledge and communication as two separate spheres. We act as competence was a private matter, attained through study of the lexicon in a particular field. On the other hand, *communication* is often consigned to the dimension of the social, a *tool* we use to interact with others of our kind. More than that, the moment we enter our professional life, we immerse ourselves in the jargon, our specialized language, and compliantly we follow precepts laid out by our respective domain. So far we rarely put deliberate effort toward expressing ourselves in a language that can be understood by those outside our ethnic group or family. Next we wonder why our efforts and achievements fail to echo.

Researchers at the University Of Chicago Booth School Of Business put such a theory to the test and what they discovered is so unexpected. Following the methodology of their study, the researchers paired subjects with folks they knew well and then again with folks they had never met. The researchers were taken aback when discovered that people who knew each other well understood each other no better than people who had just met! Even worse, people in the target groups frequently overestimated their ability to communicate, and this was more pronounced with people they knew well (Nicholas Epley, 2016).

## 2. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION ON BOARD SHIP

Facts are even more complicated when we take into consideration the maritime industry. The world is indebted to seafarers for their silent contribution to the global economy. The ongoing seafarers are expected to be well-trained and of valuable quality. They thus depend on their training to build their profession. Therefore, the result of such a challenge for MET institutions is finding their way to achieve the learning outcomes and, first and foremost, to find their proper way to assess that seafarers are fit for being employed on board vessel. Consequently, in terms of *effective communication*, the higher levels of Maritime English must be strengthened. The seafarers' ability to speak and understand General English and Maritime English, and to use the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), as well, is not sufficient. The seafarer's ability to transfer information, to give feedback, to acquire cultural awareness and to master intercultural communication skills also plays a key role in his/her training.

"*Effective communication*" as stated in STCW78, as amended, constitutes a demanding message which should be accepted by Maritime English teachers and trainers to increase and highlight their activities. In this manner, Maritime English teachers and trainers will provide the powerful basis needed for a true safety culture and effective communication training at the core of promoting the seafarers' quality, competence and fitness for their goal. Present-day maritime industry can clearly be described as global, as shipping represents an international environment advanced by the shipping companies, where multilingual crews work on board vessels together on a day-to-day basis. So the challenge is given by cultural backgrounds within the shipping industry. The target of safety management had recently shifted to culture and values on board vessels. "Safety culture" has evolved to the model of 'just culture', which embraces values and relies on effective communication taking place on board as well as between ship and shore, at all levels of communication.

In 1997, Reason J. presents the components of a safety culture as "*just, reporting, learning, informed and flexible cultures*". So he describes a *Just Culture* as an "atmosphere of trust in which people are encouraged or even rewarded for providing essential safety-related information, but in which they are also clear about where the line must be drawn between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour" (Reason, J., *Managing the risks of Organizational Accidents*).

Therefore, this process of "simply establishing acceptable versus unacceptable behaviour, if done properly in a collaborative environment, brings together different members of an organization that often have occasional contact in policy decision-making". This contact, as well as the resulting common understanding of where the lines are drawn for punitive actions, "enhances the trust that is at the core of developing *Just Culture*". The "Just Culture" feature refers to "a way of safety thinking that promotes a perceptive attitude, is resistant to convenience, is committed to excellence, and fosters both personal responsibility and joint self-regulation in

safety matters". The "Just safety culture", then, comprises attitude and structure, relating to both individuals and organizations. Personal attitudes and collective behaviour can facilitate the unreliable acts under specific circumstances that may be the messengers to accidents and incidents at work place. This requires not only the need to identify the safety issues, but also the need to answer with good action.

Taking into consideration all these, this concept of the "just culture" cannot be implemented on board vessel without knowledge and competence in Maritime English. When the lack of language skills combines with the lack of experience, these can be fatal for the ship and its crew. One of the requirements of the ISM Code is "that a shipping company should ensure that the ship's personnel are able to *communicate effectively in the execution of their duties related to SMS*".

For MET institutions especially, teaching and learning is a process involving both student and teacher to contribute to their success. Within this education process, learning must engage students in questioning their own ideas and their preconceived patterns of the world design, so that they might be able to reach a higher level of tolerance and understanding.

## 3. MET INSTITUTIONS CHALLENGE TO ACHIEVE THE LEARNING OUTCOMES

The well-trained and of valuable quality personnel are important in every domain, but in the maritime sector the crew is to a greater extent dependent on the competence of its members working on board vessel. "Each competence is connected with a degree of requisite *knowledge, understanding and proficiency*. These denominations correlate well with those used in the taxonomy for educational objectives" (Anderson, Krathwohl, Airasian, & Cruikshank, 2001).

The taxonomy, usually referred to as Bloom's taxonomy, categorizes "*skills and objectives for students*. Educational objectives are divided into three major domains: the *cognitive*, the *psychomotor* and *affective domain*". When it comes to educational objectives within the maritime field, the cognitive area becomes the most relevant. "The cognitive area constitutes, among other things, skill objectives of knowledge, comprehension and application" (Anderson, Krathwohl, Airasian, & Cruikshank, 2001). In 2013, Carmen Chirea-Ungureanu presented "these objectives in the way they correlate to those of the STCW78 as amended: *knowledge, understanding and proficiency*", and she described them as follows (Chirea-Ungureanu, C, *Ways to implement the STCW Manila Amendments for training in leadership and teamwork*):

### A. Knowledge

When it comes to cognitive levels, knowledge is considered to be the lowest. In this sense knowledge only requires that the student can recall previously learned material like facts, basic concepts and terminology. For developing communication and understanding skills, this can be knowledge of the standard representational symbols used by different cultures. Test of such knowledge can easily be achieved through written exams.

### B. Understanding

The level of understanding or comprehension requires a deeper understanding of facts and ideas, which can be shown by interpretation and description. For developing communication and understanding skills, a student might be shown a picture for situation awareness and be asked to describe how the cultural differences operate: Group-Individual, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Feminine-Masculine, and Short-Long term. Testing of comprehension can also be achieved in written format but would require more elaborate answers than just short ones.

### C. Proficiency

Proficiency is the highest of the skill objectives in the STCW Code. To demonstrate proficiency, you have to apply acquired knowledge". (Chirea-Ungureanu, C., *Ways to implement the STCW Manila Amendments for training in leadership and teamwork*). For developing communication and understanding skills, a student can be asked, to describe the importance of "closed loop communication" and how you achieve a "good communication climate" (Anderson, Krathwohl, Airasian, & Cruikshank, 2001). The best way to assess application of acquired knowledge would be to demonstrate proficiency through practical examination.

There are several seafarers training centers that describe their courses and the way that some competencies are easy to assess, whereas others call for extensive planning (<https://www.englishone.co.za>):

"The Maritime English course has been designed in accordance with the advisory *IMO Model Course 3.17 on Maritime English* to:

- a) Aid students in developing the essential professional language required by the maritime industry.
- b) Increase student's confidence and effectiveness when communicating in English.
- c) Provide a solid foundation of General English,

The development of these goals is considered in the Maritime English Course Outline, mainly:

- a) Health, safety, and security on-board
- b) Handling emergency situations
- c) Effective communication in on-board situations, ship to shore and ship to ship scenarios.
- d) Communication with shore-side authorities.
- e) Customer service on Cruise and Passenger carrying ships.
- f) Use of English (General English).

A strong focus on the skills of *Knowledge-Understanding-Proficiency* as well as intense Vocabulary development is within The Maritime English Modules, mainly:

- a) Ship handling
- b) Navigation
- c) Emergencies
- d) Meteorology
- e) Cargo work
- f) On-board operations
- g) IMO SMCP (Standard Marine Communication Phrases)

It is expected that by the end of the Maritime English course the students will develop the practical skills, including a command on the SMCP, so to ensure effective on board communication in today's global maritime industry, where the workforce is increasingly multilingual. Under the STCW 78 as amended convention, all officers must have a good standard of Maritime English. So, there are 5 key elements:

- **Health, safety, and security on-board**, to ensure the well-being of all those on the ship
- **Handling emergency situations** often between different nationalities in very challenging circumstances
- **Effective on-board communication** between crew whose only common language is English, so helping teamwork and unity
- **Communication with shore-side authorities** – vessel traffic services, port authorities, cargo, customs, and other personnel
- **Customer service on Cruise and Passenger carrying ships**, maintaining excellent standards of customer service and customer experience “.

Taking into considerations all these, the challenge for MET institutions to achieve the learning outcomes is part of an extended and organized process. The education and training process must be assisted “to give every teacher a sense of professionalism, excellence, motivation and assignee's satisfaction”( Chirea-Ungureanu, C, *Ways to implement the STCW Manila Amendments for training in leadership and teamwork, 2013*).

## 4. WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE?

One of the most essential characteristics for a well-trained and of valuable quality crew is *confidence*. While working as part of crew all crew members must be able to trust each other to get the job well-done. Therefore, confidence is challenging but in the case of a multilingual crew it can be especially difficult.

That happens across cultures, as there are differences in understanding the world design: time, feedback, agreements or conflicts sometimes.

Confidence makes any crew function very well, but that does not happen magically, especially in the case of a crew composed of multilingual members.

In 2009, Spencer-Oatey, H., and Franklin, P described the biggest challenges of intercultural communication:

- a. Being able to build rapport and find common grounds and interests, when you do not share the same culture references, popular topics, historical events;
- b. Being able to communicate effectively in a foreign language, which requires understanding of slang, sarcasm, sense of humor, linguistics and jargon as well;
- c. Being tolerant about people's values and able to understand the etiquette. Values prioritization varies among people, including close friends as well;

- d. Being able to have confidential conversations with people without arguing about topics that involve differences in values of life (e.g. the *meaning* of marriage, social relationships, gender roles, interactions, social justice, power struggles etc.);  
And last but not least,
- e. Being aware of our bias as everything we believe fits in our identity (nationality, ethnicity, culture, education level, values, knowledge, age, gender, emotional intelligence etc.) (Spencer-Oatey, H., Franklin, P. (2009).

In her paper, in 2013, Carmen Chirea-Ungureanu presented, the “team working that is not identified within the revisions to STCW as a specific competence: rather it is referred to in terms of ‘*necessary team member(s)...*’ and ‘*...consideration of team experiences.*’ As a maritime higher education institution, our aim is to provide workplace team workers with the theoretical and practical skills towards a culture of safety, to create positive behavioural changes and to ensure workplace outcomes are predictable, consistent and safe. As a matter of fact, there are these specific *intercultural communication* and *effective communication on board ship* training issues that this paper tries to tackle”. Keeping knowledge simple will be of utmost importance to achieve the training objectives and avoid making trainees, and possibly also trainers, afraid of the new subjects”. (Chirea-Ungureanu, C, *Ways to implement the STCW Manila Amendments for training in leadership and teamwork*, 2013).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To gain knowledge, we need mindfulness of the world we are living in. Hofstede, in 2012 explained that “the concept of “mindfulness” can serve as the first effective step in raising our awareness of our own systems of thinking and judging”. (Hofstede, 2012). Additionally, “through mindfulness, we can learn to be more aware of the similarities and differences that exist between different individuals and groups”.

The multiplicity of communication is amplified in multilingual crew situations. Each crew member, including those in leadership, brings their cultural preferences with them to the team. Cultural differences can create disharmony among crew members, but also can provide an opportunity to learn from each other. Therefore, understanding and participating in the exchange of cultural information through intercultural communication with those of different cultures is critical for positive crew relationships and effective productivity as a working group. The results are affected by cultural values and practices, which require both leaders and team members to practice flexibility, patience and a willingness to adapt to new paradigms and actively participate in meaningful ways in the development of the team.

Crew members as well as leaders must strive to be positive in their interactions, work to build trust, acknowledge cultural influences on leadership and teamwork, including decision making styles, and learn new skills that will help them to build a workplace that will be satisfying and effective.

In her paper in 2013, Carmen Chirea Ungureanu combining the “STCW78 as amended requirements related to *culture awareness, intercultural communication* and *effective communication on board ships*” represented the main feature of the issues in the syllabus of “Competencies in English Communication” course that was implemented in Constanta Maritime University’s curricula, “designed to meet MET expectations for students’ learning”( Chirea-Ungureanu, C, *Ways to implement the STCW Manila Amendments for training in leadership and teamwork*, 2013). To improve safety and be open up to effective communication, to transfer information, to give feedback, to acquire cultural awareness and to master intercultural communication skills always play a key role in the seafarer’s education and training.

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