

A Master's solitude

Captain Shahrokh Khodayari

I strongly believe that a Master mariner is a lonely person nowadays as many mariners maybe but he is the most secluded on board if we consider various aspects. I have a few points for explaining that it is so.

1. Cultural differences

On board a vessel which is run by multinational crew; it is oftentimes the case that master is either an entirely different nationality or one of them existent on board. This will surely create a barrier apart from the language and communicational problems. The fact that even for different nationalities who have close cultures like Europeans for instance, it may not be very difficult to make relatively good connections but for others with same language spoken, due to huge difference in culture and lifestyles, any kind of relation may seem quite difficult.

If for the above reason and the position of the master, there are very little ground to make contacts with others apart from the work orders and the operations, there would be no wonder.

For some people due to their type of language; a simple matter may take hours to talk about. For others this may seem absurd and offending.

The mariners were known as story-tellers, some of whom would go into fantasies and exaggerated talks of fiction. This may still be true in some groups of seamen but most probably the captain can not mix into these, especially if some parts of the stories are about difficult to very difficult masters who encountered the bravery of the story-teller.

2. Position of authority

The master on board a vessel being the person in charge or the big boss, is not expected to be liked very much or at least by most. He should issue orders and seek results from the operations, investigate into malfunctions and at times take up reprimands or punitive actions; these will make him somehow a disliked or less liked person. If we have a mixed nationality crew; the trouble can be accentuated. Many of crew from various backgrounds would like to construe or attribute the master's severity or implication of discipline to the colour of their skin or nationality, etc.

On the other hand there is an undeniable fact that at sea like any other job; one has to be very careful while mixing with subordinates or lower rank workers. The idea of calling people with their first name or even worse with nicknames, having free time spent together then working also in the same system may not really work. The misunderstanding that the boss is our friend now and we may take advantage; is bitterly there and we can not deny it. As a result we should consider levels of seclusion for different positions on board and for master; a more severe version of it. This may at times be inevitable.

To keep the so called chain of command, we need to lessen contacts with others even if we do not like it, but as we may guess the grave consequences like break in discipline; we have to take the preventive action.

This is oftentimes the case on board the multinational crewed vessels.

3. Work patterns and pressures thereof

As the time goes by; the work-load of the master along with the other staff is increased and with the introduction of newer (lesser) manning scales, there are very little time left to be able to get out of loneliness. This may not be physical; the master may have to do a lot of things with other personnel like getting information, issuing orders, etc. But in fact he is really alone and a good instance of all work and no play; he becomes a dull guy.

If we see the master has no time and the various things made him so busy, it does not mean that he is okay, he would most probably feel terribly lonely inside as for a human being the social contact is very vital.

It would be a gross mistake if a master thinks that his non-work-related comments are most welcome. This is not the case mostly. It is his position which would render his comment or entity tolerable by others. On board a ship with some difficulties the fact shall be very obvious. It can be very easy to know the truth that once the master has handed over the command, he will be treated like a de-crowned king; even the stewards bitterly offer him food.

This is a bitter fact, not always, but mostly so.

Most ship personnel take the master as the sole responsible person for the company's matters and disliked attitudes as well as things out of his control like weather changes. If there is any salary delay, punitive actions, lack of social services, dirty cargoes, approaching typhoon or even if the cook makes a tasteless dinner, that all is captain's fault and automatically this will be included and talked about in any gatherings or any other contact apart from the purely rigid job-orders.

The personnel are very much right as it was the case with the same master when he was a junior officer, it is not the person who is the point to blame, it is the position and rank.

This again can lead to master's seclusion.

There is another valid point that the competency level amongst the present-time seafarers is diminishing day by day; this would require master's more attention and consequently tensions arising from extra pressure. A master these days would prefer to have a guy who knows his job relatively well rather than becoming friend and be able to socialize with.

4. Calling ports conditions

In many ship trades today; the ports are in the farthest places to any society, requiring miles to drive and if at all the authorities allow you out, it may hardly be possible for the master, as he should be present when the quarantine officer, port state control inspector, security officer and so many others would come on board, otherwise his ship may get into so many problems. A vigilant master would never bargain a few

hours of haste and anxiety in the centre of a cosmopolitan port city to the detention of his vessel and the growls of the owner following by.

We may say that even in the port, the master is very lonely and the people come to him to do their business and at last he would be confined to the ship's whereabouts. ISPS restrictions are also a worsening factor in this respect.

In the olden times, the master was usually the owner or a person from a different sect or group of people and the others were on the boat to serve and satisfy his demands, the matter of being alone or not, would surely exist or might not have been as important as today.

In past twenty years the shipping business and activities related to; have changed drastically and one can say we have a problem now. Fifteen or twenty years ago, the port stays were quite longer, the number of people on board were 1.5 times now and dreadfully true; -more competent (at least mostly)-, the atmosphere on board was quite friendly and crew had time for each other.

But now the manning is short, quickly graduated, life and works matter in milliseconds, ports operate with pre-planned schedules for the next year and so many thorns in out sides for faster and faster operations.

The owners may cut the manning scales to a bare minimum and bring down the related expenses, but the consequences of mistakes through fatigue or mental disturbances, one of which being loneliness caused by all elements described above; may be much more considerable.

We should bear in mind that the master is the most responsible, questionable, and answerable and all arrows are pointing in his direction. He should not be left alone to deal with all these troubles. The company must give him the logistics support and manpower to run the ship safely.

Last but not the least we must not forget that the master is also human and needs the vitalities as all others do.