

Feedback on Alert!

In Issue No.7 the Editor made a plea for some feedback on Alert. The very least we can do is to respond positively, even if it is only to thank him and the sponsors of the Bulletin for devoting the time, talent and energy to creating this worthwhile forum to discuss the importance of the human element at sea.

We are now just past the halfway mark in this initial phase of the bulletin and it is worth looking back over the first 7 issues. We have had some excellent articles on every aspect of human factors with many experts writing on a range of topical issues. I can't quarrel with anything they've said and just hope there is someone out there listening. If all the identified problems could be resolved, the average seafarer would be a very happy person indeed.

And therein lies the rub. One of the most noticeable features of the Alert bulletin is the paucity of ideas or observation from those actually at sea. Do they, I wonder, feel alienated from articles that are sprinkled with phrases such as Human-Centred Design, Corporate Social Responsibility, total quality lifecycle, sustainable reporting and managing risk, or do they feel that nobody is addressing what they understand to be the real human problems at sea. Do those afloat see human factors in a slightly different light to those featuring in Alert?

One view, common to all experienced seafarers, is that it takes no more than about 10 minutes onboard any ship to detect if it is a well run vessel and happy. There are some very well run ships indeed, but too many that are not. And that surely is what human factors is all about; having a well-run ship with a contented crew who enjoy what they are doing and are adequately rewarded for their efforts.

It means having sufficient people on board to do the job properly. But the reality is that, despite meeting so-called minimum manning standards, too many ships are undermanned. But nobody listens to the man at sea who constantly complains about the high workload and long hours.

It means ensuring people are properly qualified to do the tasks they are on board for. But despite STCW 95, too many people who arrive on board demonstrate significant shortcomings in basic skills. But complain about it and your job is in immediate jeopardy.

It means observing common courtesies. Like saying thank you for a job well done. A recently retired container ships master I know didn't even get a letter of thanks from his owners.

It means talking to shore management. But some shore managers, let alone the owners, never go near their ships so sea staff never meet even have the opportunity to discuss their problems.

It means getting ashore occasionally to relax. But there are some parts of the world where this isn't allowed.

It means caring for those under training. Yet some cadets fail to receive proper training and are either ignored or, in some ships, bullied. Who can be surprised when they decide to leave the sea and take up employment ashore.

Cadets qualifying would like some guarantee of employment. It is extraordinarily demotivating to know that having qualified, nobody wants to know you or can satisfactorily answer the question how you become a much sought after master or chief engineer without progressing through the junior grades first.

It means having adequate rest. Too often, the seafarer and especially those in the short sea trade, have to work ridiculously long hours on board, but are unable to do anything about it.

Seafarers would dearly like some recognition for what they do. With one or two conspicuous exceptions, few merchant seamen are ever given credit for their achievements.

Seafarers would like to think they could live their lives without fear of prosecution if involved in an accident. Despite the efforts of many in the industry to affect a change of heart among the regulatory bodies, the situation gets progressively worse.

The list is endless and I can do no more than touch on the many human problems that exist at sea today but what I would like to see in future editions of Alert are more stories about what can be done to make the seafarer a happier person. A contended sailor is a good sailor but too much of what goes on at sea seems today to be sailing on an opposite course.

I congratulate the editor on what has been achieved so far and wish him well on the Herculean task that lies ahead.

John Lang FNI

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