

MISSION TO SEAFARERS, HALIFAX, CANADA

In my opinion a prime factor affecting safety at sea is fear. Fear on many different levels, amongst different members of the sea going community and it's affiliates. Combine this fear with aging, substandard ships and we have a certain recipe for disaster. Fear is not just the domain of the crews but us often a common feeling amongst many of the personnel involved in shipping. Some of the fear I have encountered is of the following nature:

A) Amongst shipowners and companies:

1. Fear of the competition
2. Fear of making less money
3. Fear of not making fast money

B) Amongst officers:

1. Fear of costing the company money, fines and penalties
2. Fear of technology
3. Fear of being usurped by younger officers

C) Amongst the crew:

1. Fear of not being capable
2. Fear of not completing contracts
3. Fear of repercussions of stating an opinion
4. Fear of repercussion of talking to union personnel
5. Fear of loss of livelihoods
6. Fear of abuse from senior or fellow seafarers or employees, physical, mental, sexual.
7. Fear for own life or that of families.

D) Amongst related occupations within the port and transportation industry:

1. Agents, stevedores, truckers etc.

A). *Fear amongst Ship Owners and Shipping Companies:*

1. The Competition

In the shipping industry we are talking mega-millions of dollars and assuming money is power once you have started making it, amassing it becomes addictive and people do not want to lose the power they feel from being rich. Most people in the upper echelon of the shipping industry are so removed from actual operations of their company that they are totally ignorant of the real people who are making the sacrifices that enable them to make millions.

2. Making Less Money

Assuming that making less money equates with the loss of power there will always be a drive to amass more. Most shipowners would not encounter a drastic drop in lifestyle even if they took a drastic drop in profits.

3. Fast Money

Working on the premise "get it while it's hot", people make as much money as fast as they can often without thought for human life.

B). Fear Amongst Officers

1. Costing Money

All seafarer's centres have heard of officers' punished for costing the company money. It can be for not meeting schedules, vessel damage, allowing stowaways to board. Officers are under tremendous stress to stay on the "right side" of the company.

2. Technology

We've all also heard the tales of woe from junior officers who feel they are carrying older senior officers who do not understand the new computer systems on board some ships. The ships are not necessarily newer models, I have been on old rust buckets that have state of the art computer systems (truly a false economy). Some older officers can be intimidated by new technology and unless the company offers or finances training they are less likely to take the necessary course to keep them up to date. My husband and I suffered financially on many occasions because he had to finance courses himself in order to maintain his ticket. Many people would have no choice but to choose to take the minimal amount of ongoing education necessary.

3. Fear of Being Usurped

Some older and /or senior officers may feel threatened by junior officers who may appear to be on a fast track to promotion. Some junior officers we meet have been promoted each time they've met minimal seagoing requirements and thus may bring a lack of experience to the job. It never fails to amaze me that we will be asked basic questions at our centre by senior officers who one would expect to have that knowledge in the position they hold. Most of the questions we are asked are pertaining to computers and it is frightening to think that some of these guys are looking to me for advice on computers when I think of what I feel is my own rudimentary knowledge.

C). Amongst the Crew

1. Fear of Lack of Capability

Many of the seafarers we encounter have been brought up in a culture of oppression and mental, physical and especially financial hardship. They are thrust onto a ship after often minimal training even for basic positions. Even the most confident person is often naturally intimidated by new and unknown situations. No one performs to the best of their ability in such a situation. I have seen crew members screamed at by their seniors for not performing a task correctly. It is very few of the seafarers I encounter who would have the confidence to ask for directions, especially from someone they are in awe of.

Many seafarers have minimal second language skills, which can cause hilarity for us at the seafarers centres (laughing with them, not at them) on occasion, but could cause accident, injury or loss of life on board ship.

2. Fear of Not Completing Contract:

The majority of seafarers who visit our centres are at sea because they were left with no other option. They would have left school and worked for minimal amounts of money for a few years and finally out of desperation, left home to go to sea and hopefully give their families a better life or at least an education for their children to prevent them having to resort to seagoing just to ensure a meager existence. There is a big difference between choosing going to sea for a career and going to sea because it is your last option for feeding your family.

Of course once you go to sea to better your families lifestyle you are under pressure to fulfill your contract which may be up to a year or in some cases even longer. Staying physically fit as well as emotionally fit is very difficult on board ship over a period of several months.

Because you absolutely have to finish your contract you cannot take time to get better from what starts as a simple ailment but die to lack of treatment and adequate follow up becomes a chronic ailment. By the time you are chronically ill you are not giving too much thought to your job so once more we face the possibility of endangering oneself and others. At the Mission I dealt with one guy who was to the point where he could no longer swallow solid food and had severe breathing difficulties due to tuberculosis abscess in his throat. He had lost about seventy pounds in weight and had been deteriorating for months but was trying to complete his contract so did not ask for medical help. Another seafarer was so scared of telling his senior officers he was in pain that his appendix ruptured out at sea and he was very lucky to survive the trip back to port and the subsequent surgery.

Dealing with the emotional implications of seafaring is a whole other ball game and seems to be an issue that is not really given much attention. I do know that some of the conversations I've had with seafarers show me that there is no way they can be performing at an optimum and safe level. Seafarers are working whilst worrying about families, finances, illnesses and a multitude of other worries that in the day to day stream of things would not seem a big deal to us but out at sea there is a lot of time to ponder and often a minor worry can become all consuming. Some seafarers are not given the option of fulfilling their contract. A common practice on cruise ships is to pool tips, the seafarer is then given a share on completion of the contract. Often the ship will be tied up one day short of a seafarer's contract and through no fault of their own the seafarer is not able to complete the contract but still loses out on the tips.

3. Fear of Stating an Opinion

Many seafarers we encounter live in fear of losing their job, stating an opinion from lack of pay to the quality of the food can antagonize their superiors and can lead loss of a job. Although we keep hearing that blacklisting is being eliminated there is no doubt that it still goes on so a seafarer will choose to drink the rotten water and put up with the illness it causes rather than risk punishment for speaking up. Some seafarers are not ever given the choice of being put on a ship. In their home political climate if they are told they are going to sea that is what they do. I have been on ships from Myanmar that are truly ships of fear. The seafarers were not receiving wages and had sold off anything they could. There was no cooking equipment other than a Primus stove and no seating at all in the mess other than an incongruous plastic sun chair which became my seat when I visited the ship.

4. Talking to Union Personnel

If a seafarer is too scared to talk to us about their problems they are not going to follow through on confiding to a union official. They face the same fear of repercussions, loss of job, blacklisting etc. We do not see too many seafarers who are confident enough to proceed with their complaint and those that do are absolutely terrified. We know that the seafarers have reached rock bottom and feel they have nothing to lose if they are open in their discussions with a union official.

5 Loss of Livelihood

Many of the seafarers we see in our centre are not just supporting their wife and children but many other family members too. By law the Philippines have to send 80% of their earnings home but this often is not enough. I know this because I spend a great deal of time at the bank wiring money. If a seafarer loses his job he is not only unable to support his family but often his extended family as well. Some seafarers may even find themselves supporting more than one family as due to the nature of a seafarer's life, marriages and partnerships often break down leaving the seafarer supporting more than one household. Even under the most miserable circumstances a seafarer is often totally tied to their job as they have so many dependants.

They are scared of losing their job and are hostage to their circumstances. Those ship owners who are negligent of their employees take advantage of their need to work.

6. Abuse

We encounter stories of all kinds of abuse at our centre. Occasionally someone is aggravated by an occurrence and is looking for revenge so will claim they have been abused in some way but too often seafarers are really abused by their seniors and even their peers on occasion. I have seen seafarers pushed, shoved, punched and even seen the results of a severe beating one seafarer received trying to fight off the sexual advances of a homosexual chief engineer.

I encounter every winter the sexual abuse bestowed upon the Indonesian crews on the Japanese fishing boats, having even discovered seafarers in sexual situations in our centre. I have seen crew members fondled in a sexual manner by officers and then receive a small amount of money right in front of my face at the counter. These are people absolutely powerless as they are in no position to fight back and are subject to all those fears listed C) apart from their capability because the one thing these people have to show is capability to survive on a working fishing boat in the North Atlantic during the Winter.

The mental abuse in my opinion comes about by separating families for long periods of time. Communication in many cases takes a good proportion of one's salary. After 18 years of marriage to a seafarer I can attest to the emotional turmoil of being "married by phone" and on a financial level we could have bought a second home on what we've spent on phone calls over the years. Many companies do not allow for use of the ship's phone as part of the contract because of the cost, and we find that often only senior officers have access to the Internet. Compassionate leave is unheard of for a lot of seafarers and spouses are left to suffer through births, deaths and major or life threatening illnesses alone (and yes I am speaking from experience.) I think that the emotional turmoil a seafarer goes through in such a situation makes them a ticking time bomb as there is absolutely no way that the job is receiving all the attention it requires.

7) Fear for Life.

Some of the seafarers we have met have stated they feel so threatened on board ship that they fear for their life. Others have been "press-ganged" onto a ship and are powerless to take any action for fear that their family will also face punishment. These guys are literally taken off the street and sent to sea. They have no knowledge of the English language and no safety or job related training. In my worst nightmare I cannot imagine being in an emergency situation with a crew like this. In fact day to day operation of the ship must be a living nightmare for everyone on board.

D) Fear Amongst Related Fields

1) "Time is Money" so everyone in the transport industry is under pressure to perform as fast as possible. Unload containers as fast as possible, pump that oil as fast as possible, discharge those passengers as fast as possible. Agents are under stress to get the ship in and out as fast as possible, truckers are under stress to move the cargo as fast as possible within the constraints imposed. Seafarers come under stress because they do not get adequate time ashore to attend to calling their families, wiring money, never mind relaxing. We see many seafarers trying to make a quick call home with the phone in one ear and the radio squawking in the other. Anyone in this business has seen sub-standard ships, we have also seen ships that are adequate but due to manning deficiencies become sub-standard. We have seen ships that are flagged out or change owners and within months deteriorate beyond recognition. On occasion we have seen non-FOC ships so badly managed that the crew did not even have food (again I'm speaking from experience). There is no one particular person to blame, but everyone is to be educated. If people are not aware of what is happening they are not going to react. Part of our job description in seafarer's mission should be that we have the nerve to be advocates for the seafarers. Because the shipping companies fund us to some degree do we agree to wimp out and not speak up against some of the atrocities we see? I hope not.

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