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Vanishing trust at sea?

New research points to a breakdown of trust between seafarers and shore officials - including those in their own company headquarters. SIRC looks at the points of major concern

Professor Helen Sampson

Seafarers International Research Centre, Cardiff University

In 2016, a team of researchers at the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) completed a four-year study of the interactions between seafarers and shore based staff in ports and in the shore based offices of their own organisations. The findings from the study were disturbing, both in relation to the experiences which seafarers had of port based personnel and also in relation to their experiences of shore based managers employed in the same organisation. They pointed to a breakdown of trust in the industry and signalled important areas where change would be beneficial.

Concerns relating to port-based staff

Seafarers reported a number of unethical practices among the port-based personnel they dealt with. These were most likely to be experienced in the ports of states where per capita GDP was relatively low. They were not commonly encountered in ports located in OECD nations. Unethical practices ranged from demands for sundry items such as cigarettes, alcohol and canned drinks, to cash extortion, fraudulent bunker supply, and theft. Threats of vessel delays and/or detentions underpinned such actions and constrained the possibilities for resistance by seafarers. Our questionnaire indicated that:

- 95% of deck officers had experienced giving 'facilitation gifts' to port personnel;
- 60% of deck officers felt such gift giving was increasing;
- 69% of respondents stated that they had been on a vessel where attempts had been made to extort cash;
- 87% of engineers reported having been on a vessel when less fuel was supplied to the ship than had been paid for;
- 53% of seafarers reported that they had been on a vessel from which items belonging to the company were stolen by port personnel;
- 21% of questionnaire respondents stated that they had been on vessels where items had been stolen from seafarers by port personnel.

Seafarers had mixed feelings about facilitation gifts. On the whole they regarded them as small-scale, and their disbursement was regarded as generally beneficial in terms of the smooth operation of the vessel. Where companies understood and/or supported such practices, seafarers were not unduly bothered by them – although they were invariably a little stressed when dealing with officials whose demands were extravagant and likely to be perceived as excessive by company personnel.

By contrast, seafarers expressed more concern about the other unethical practices they encountered. Many described a high degree of stress in relation to attempts to extort cash and in conjunction with the fraudulent supply of bunkers. Some were anxious about being blamed by companies for theft from their vessel, and felt aggrieved when they personally were targeted by thieves. There was a perception that agents

were implicated in many of the fraudulent dealings of port-based personnel, which added to seafarers' general sense of anxiety when faced with such issues. One seafarer described a relatively common perception when he explained that 'Normally there is connivance between the authorities [...] most of the time, yeah, the agency has something to do with this. This is the ugly truth'.

Concerns relating to shore-based managers

Seafarers' fears of being blamed by company personnel for theft/extortion by port personnel were echoed in more general areas of vessel operation.

Contrary to the message put out by many companies in relation to operational matters, and particularly safety, seafarers considered that they would be blamed by managers in the event of a mishap, genuine mistake, or operational misjudgement, with potentially severe consequences, including demotion or dismissal. Frequently, seafarers felt that they were blamed for things which were not their 'fault'. Such fears generally arose in the context of poor relationships between seafarers and company superintendents, who were not seen as supportive by many seafarers. They also arose where there were poor relationships between seafarers and staff located in shore-based offices (e.g. HR departments, fleet management, technical support).

Many seafarers saw company personnel as lacking a good understanding of the shipboard environment and the demands on sea staff in the course of a voyage. This was understood to be behind a range of behaviours regarded by seafarers as inappropriate, such as repeated requests from shore staff for information that had already been provided, telephone calls in the middle of the night or while

Survey design

The study was comprehensive. It began with eight voyages by members of the research team, over a total of 244 days. In the course of these, team members carried out and recorded 87 formal interviews with seafarers, observed interactions between sea staff and those ashore, and made notes relating to informal conversations with seafarers.

Following these voyages, transcripts and notes were collated and analysed, allowing us to identify common themes. These were used to construct vignettes (short accounts of real events and incidents) which we used in a further 303 interviews with seafarers ashore. These interviews allowed us to identify key issues which needed to be explored further through a broader survey. We designed an interviewer-administered questionnaire and this was completed by 2,500 active seafarers in welfare and training centres in India, Philippines, UK, Singapore, and China. Finally an additional voyage was completed for validation purposes in an area where problems with port-based officials were reported to be particularly prevalent.

manoeuvring, the expectation of immediate response to emails and an overall lack of respect. Responses to our questionnaire indicated that many such practices were relatively common:

- 36% of respondents indicated that they had personal experience of being shouted at by shore personnel from their own organisation;
- 38% of captains reported receiving telephone calls at inappropriate times from staff within their own organisation;
- 54% of captains reported receiving telephone calls from charterers at inappropriate times;
- 39% of respondents felt that shore-based staff did not understand the situation on board very often/ever;
- 76% of respondents reported misunderstandings when using email;
- 29% of respondents indicated that they had been prevented by shore staff in their own organisations from taking action they believed to be in the best interests of the crew;
- 18% of respondents stated that they had been prevented by shore personnel in their own organisations from taking action they believed to be in the best interests of their vessel.

These combined issues led to situations where seafarers felt their lives and their vessels were placed at risk. A variety of examples were provided, including situations where captains were prevented from timely course deviation to avoid typhoons, and where pressure was placed on vessels to remain alongside and continue cargo operations in dangerous sea conditions. Seafarers recognised that captains held technical responsibility for vessel safety in such circumstances, but many felt that this responsibility was now 'in name only'. For example, one told us that "This concept of the captain being the authority on

the ship, it's on the papers, nothing else,' and another indicated that 'Captain's decision making power is almost deprived of (sic). Even if you want to abandon ship you cannot if the company does not give you permission. So this is common'.

Overall the study indicated that there are a range of factors which undermine trust and effective working relationships between seafarers and port personnel and between seafarers and their own shore based managers. This account is inevitably limited in providing a full description of the study and its recommendations. A more comprehensive report is available via the SIRC website: http://www.sirc.cf.ac.uk/SIRC_Free_Online_Reports.aspx

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