

Competent Crews and the Exercise of Due Diligence

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Transporting goods by sea is a venture that entails considerable risk and, consequently, potential loss. One of the most effective ways of reducing risk is to employ competent crews, and have systems in place that manage competence and assure that it is maintained.

No one in their right mind would put a multi-million dollar asset – their ship and its ability to earn (and lose) money – in the care of individuals who were anything other than competent. Yet that is exactly what is happening, and on an ever increasing scale in the shipping industry.

Contracts of affreightment require that:

the carrier shall be bound before and at the beginning of the voyage to exercise due diligence to:
(a) make the ship seaworthy; and
(b) properly man, equip and supply the ship.

They do not necessarily require the ship to be safe to be considered seaworthy.

The ISM Code on the other hand specifically sets out to provide an: *international standard for the safe management and operation of ships to ensure safety at sea, prevention of human injury or loss of life, and avoidance of damage to the environment, in particular to the marine environment and to property.*

It has thus long been established, in common law, by statute and by regulations as well as common sense, that the human element is a fundamental component of what constitutes “a safe ship and a seaworthy ship.”

The STCW Convention has set the standards with which the human element should comply. The great achievement of the 1995 amendments to the STCW Convention was that they changed standards of training from knowledge-based criteria to performance-based criteria. It was the start of the move

towards competency-based training and assessment for the shipping industry.

However, more than 11 years have passed since STCW 95 entered into force on the 1st February 1997, and the reality is that the implementation of competency-based training and assessment still has a long way to go. To understand the reasons for this we need to evaluate prevailing attitudes towards competence in general.

In our industry we seem to have adopted a particular belief:

Once Certificated always Competent

Competence is widely perceived to be an immutable constant, when in fact it is a dynamic variable, with in both companies and individuals.

We do not distinguish between a second officer who has for the last two years been serving on a small product tanker that transits the Singapore Straits every three weeks, and a second officer serving on VLCC that is on a regular run between Ras al Ju'aymah and Europort for the same period.

It is surely reasonable and indeed sensible that competence be periodically verified, by assessment at the individual level, particularly when defined as Safety Critical or Mission Critical, or when there are changes in policy, equipment, or procedures.

However, only a minority ship owners and managers operate competency management systems that would provide even the basic requirement for assessing workplace performance against international standards.

And that is the real issue – **performance in the workplace** – not just in the maritime college or the training centre. Seafarers leave colleges and training centres with what we believe to be newly acquired knowledge and skills, and impressive certificates. But how do we know if the new knowledge and skill is transferred to the workplace. Indeed, is the training and education received even applicable to the new operating conditions that they will be working in. Being able to answer that question is crucial in determining if a ship's crew have the right knowledge, skills and attitudes required for the jobs they have to do.

Optimizing the competence that resides within an organization is an essential factor in maintaining competitive advantage. Individual knowledge, skills and attitudes are the foundations of a company's

success. It is the actions of employees, seafarers in this context, which secures that success.

So why do so few ship owners and managers embrace Competency Management?

There appears to be a number of barriers which are worth highlighting.

One could be caused by the demographics in companies. Many of the senior managers, the decision makers, are ex-seafarers who went through a “traditional” knowledge-based system of Maritime Education and Training during the late 1960’s, 70’s and early 80’s, a time when Vocational Education and Training was not yet “in vogue.” Many of them are simply not familiar with the underlying principles of a competency-based system and consequently find it difficult to deal with the issues of managing competence within their organization.

It is likely that during their own seagoing careers, at no time after they were qualified was their performance in the workplace assessed against performance criteria, so the concept is alien to them.

And some managers fear the outcome. For instance, what if assessment reveals that an individual, let’s say an officer, is not able to meet specific performance criteria. This will mean that the company will be aware of the deficiency and have to take corrective action. Practically speaking the corrective action could amount to no more than a revision and practice of previous training, or an update on new procedures. Either way the deficiency is discovered early within the company, and not by a port state or vetting inspector; or worse it becomes a contributory factor in an incident later on.

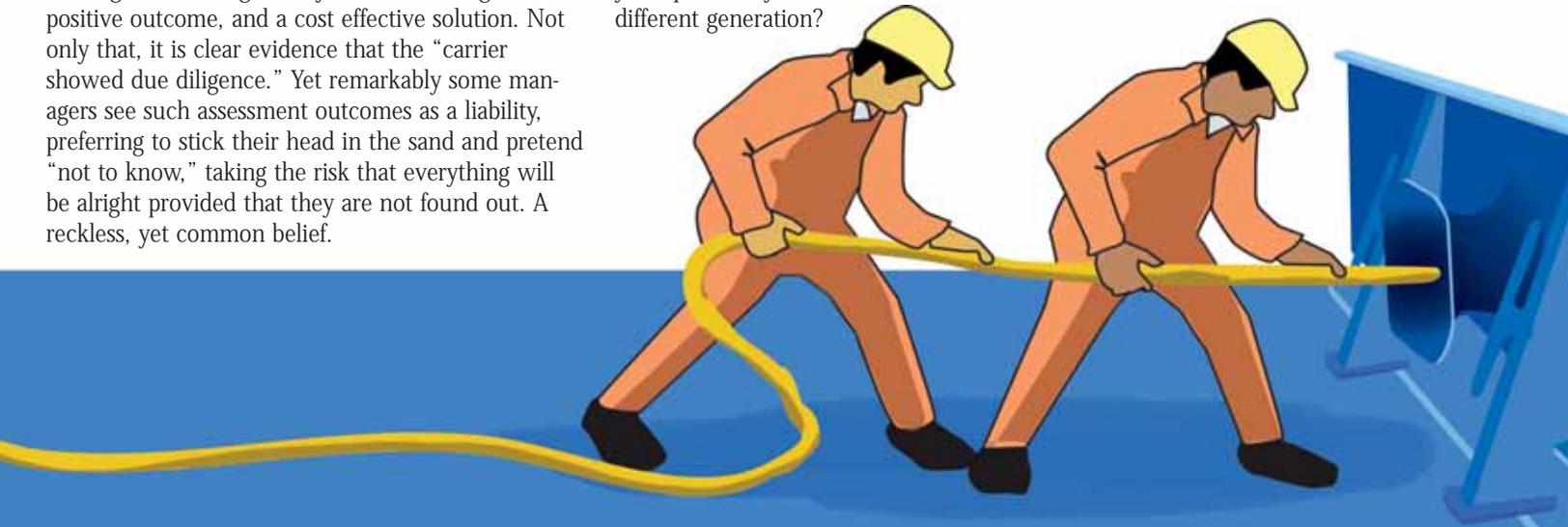
Finding it and fixing it early and in house, gives a positive outcome, and a cost effective solution. Not only that, it is clear evidence that the “carrier showed due diligence.” Yet remarkably some managers see such assessment outcomes as a liability, preferring to stick their head in the sand and pretend “not to know,” taking the risk that everything will be alright provided that they are not found out. A reckless, yet common belief.

It is worth mentioning here that companies need to understand that it is essential that the individual who has responsibility for Managing Competency within a company is properly qualified for the job. A statement of the obvious perhaps, but look into any ship-owning company, ship management company, or manning agency today and in the majority of cases you will find that the person having responsibility for the training and career development of seafarers is invariably an ex-seafarer, with little or no background in HRD or HRM. They know about the job onboard, but rarely are they properly qualified or experienced as Human Resource Developers and/or Managers, or as trainers and assessors.

Depending on the size of the fleet it will also be necessary to employ one or a team of additional staff to carry out the functions of work place assessors. These will be some of the most important people in an organisation, the ones who will ensure that performance onboard meets the standards that underpin the company’s business goals and objectives, measure the effectiveness of training strategies, and determine if the ROI on training expenditure meets expectations.

Another possible barrier is resistance to change.

Competency Assurance does mean that significant changes will have to be made to how training and development is done within an organization. Apart from having the right people to run the system as mentioned earlier, it will require the co-operation of the seafarers, particularly the senior officers, and a change in attitudes towards assessment of individual performance. Other professions do this on a regular basis, most notably airline pilots. Would any one of us be comfortable flying in an aircraft where the pilot has not been checked out since he first qualified, 25 years previously, and then on an aircraft from a different generation?



Currently the shipping industry is struggling with a “manning crisis.” The competition for qualified personnel between companies has resulted in a marked relaxation of standards. Individuals who, a few years back, would normally not be hired because they do not meet the selection criteria of a company, are now being signed on.

This is usually explained away as an unfortunate reality which the industry has to live with for the time being, and is described as a “commercial risk.”

Unfortunately the present manpower climate is exposing weakness in management. Instead of raising standards, the bar is being lowered. Some senior managers are sidestepping the issue by saying that “this is not the right time” to implement new systems that seek to manage and validate human performance, because the seafarers will not accept it. From our experience, if Competence Management is properly explained to the seafarers, they will embrace it. After all it is a tool for the development of their professional skills and career advancement, and personal safety. It is simply a change management issue that requires support and commitment from the top. And now is the time to do it.

A small number of companies in our industry have already started, or are about to start, using competency management systems, and it is no surprise to see who they are. Their names are already synonymous with high operational standards.

High Reliability Organisations, such as aircraft carriers, nuclear power plants, air traffic control, and airlines, all use competency management as one of the defences against loss caused by human error. Through training and development activities, individuals become competent. Gradually their work becomes second nature and they reach a level of almost automatic performance to a high standard. It is an on-going cycle of continual, professional development that will reduce risk and improve the predictability of good performance.

Today we can measure every part of the ship’s operation. We know when machinery and other equipment are not performing according to specification, but how do we measure human performance in the work place? Frankly, not very well, is the answer. And that has to change. The means to assure crew competence exists. Changing our attitude to what we think competence is, acknowledging that it is a dynamic variable, and accepting that we should engage in performance monitoring in the work place will, I am convinced, reduce accidents, improve safety, increase profits and ultimately reduce the frequency and magnitude of claims. [↗](#)

