

Effective Leadership & Assertiveness At Sea

Seafarers, often from different backgrounds and cultures, must live and work together for long periods of time. Functional relationships trust, honesty, communication, and cooperation are paramount to a safe and positive work environment. In order to inspire the crew to come together and function as a team, effective leadership is the key. So let's talk about effective leadership. Leadership goes beyond just managing a team.

It involves resolving conflicts, supporting shipmates, and speaking up with confidence. Assertiveness, the art of stating your position clearly and respectfully is crucial. But it's not always easy, especially in a hierarchy. There are 2 graded assertiveness techniques which come in very handy, PACE and the 5 step assertive statement. PACE stands for probe, alert, challenge, and emergency.

It offers structured steps to challenge a superior if the situation is developing slowly. Pilot, we are at the waypoint. We should turn to starboard, right? Pilot, we need to alter course to starboard. We are heading straight for the reef.

I'm calling the master. Pilot, we should alter course immediately to starboard before we hit the reef. Helm starboard 15. Pace is effective, but it takes time to move through the steps. The 5 step assertive statement is faster and would look like this.

Excuse me, pilot. I'm worried we'll run aground on the reef. We have about 1 cable to reach the wheel over point and are only 5 cables away from the reef. We should turn to starboard immediately. Shall I do that?

I'm calling the master. The 5 step assertive statement is much faster than pace, but pace can sometimes be better at keeping the peace. Effective leaders create an environment of professional respect where everyone feels safe to speak up, especially when you have pilots on board. Pilots generally know their jobs, and they know their team ashore and the tugs, and they know their operating area. They don't know you, your ship, or your crew.

Understanding authority and assertiveness dynamics is crucial.

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It impacts how we communicate, make decisions, and collaborate. Authority is the moral or legal right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.

Assertiveness is calmly, clearly, and respectfully stating your position and limits without denying others wants and needs. It avoids escalating conflicts.

A good captain is one example of a high authority. They need to be assertive when needed. They have the ultimate authority on board and must have clear assertive communication style. The captain must encourage all personnel to express any doubt when they are uncertain or have concerns about the vessel situation. No member of the bridge team should ever be criticized, disciplined, ridiculed, or laughed at for challenging a decision.

Effective leadership encompasses 4 main factors, qualities, characteristics, techniques, and behaviors. Qualities describe who you are even when you're alone. Self awareness, motivation, and integrity are all leadership qualities. Characteristics are visible in your interactions, even outside work. These include things like decisiveness, assertiveness, and emotional intelligence.

Techniques are things that you can do to make you a more effective leader such as active listening, setting expectations, delegating, giving and receiving feedback, and leading by example. For example, There's a light over there. Starboard bow, three points. Okay. Thank you very much.

Please keep a look on it and let me know if you can see any side lights. Behaviors integrate qualities, characteristics, and techniques into actions. Now let's look at feedback because it's a really important component of good leadership as it fuels growth and builds trust. If someone gives you feedback, listen, ask questions to make sure you understand, thank them, then act on any useful feedback. Giving feedback, particularly negative feedback can be uncomfortable.

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There are a few rules to help. Praise in public, criticize in private, focus on results and behavior, not character, identify specific action points, and provide timely feedback. But wait until everyone is calm. A feedback sandwich can be a useful technique in some situations. Provide constructive criticism or negative feedback in a way that is balanced with positive feedback.

Take a look at this example. You're a valuable member of the bridge team, but when you focus on ECDIS during pilotage that makes me concerned and I need you to focus on all navigation aspects. Please make sure that you are cross referencing between navigation equipment and actual environment and report to me. However, your teamwork is very good. Management styles vary and each style has its strengths and weaknesses.

Choosing the right leadership style for the situation is crucial. Autocratic leaders tell people what to do and how and when to do it. Emergencies are perfect for an autocratic style. Democratic leaders are people oriented. In drill debriefs, the democratic style would draw out more observations and insights from your team.

Laissez faire is French for let it be. Accordingly, laissez faire leaders let their team get on with the job. If a captain has an experienced chief or second officer, the captain can use a laissez faire style regarding cargo operations or passage planning. Visionary leaders are achievement oriented, engaged, energetic, and independent. They know what they want to achieve, and they motivate their team to join them.

But leadership is not only about how people on top conduct themselves. Leadership can also be exercised by anyone on board. For example, a third officer is a leader during their watch. Understanding your manager's strengths and weaknesses is key to effective collaboration. Supporting their weaknesses strengthens the whole team.

Autocratic leaders' weaknesses are usually their egos and their reluctance to seek input. With these leaders, stay organized and know the details, identify their values and triggers, avoid routine conflicts, but challenge them when it matters, preferably in private.

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Democratic leaders can struggle with decision making under pressure. With these leaders, speak up, maintain your situational awareness so you can offer a useful perspective, and speak up for minorities. Under laissez faire leaders, jobs and roles can be poorly defined and enforced.

With these leaders, request clarification, learn your job well, then show you can take on more responsibility. Visionary leaders get bored of the details and sometimes jump between ideas. With these leaders, be honest, share their enthusiasm, remind them of the goal and the plan, and ask them to prioritize. Now let's focus on planning because planning is a huge part of being a seafarer and an effective leader. The 5 stages of planning guide us from setting goals to executing them effectively.

A birthing plan could look like this. 1st goal, birth safely. Then appraisal, gather all relevant information such as external forces, the birth number, depth, all our position, working language, and more. Thirdly, planning. Identify the specific steps to birth safely, such as station bills, mooring arrangements, abort parameters, and contingency plans.

4th, execution. Identify factors that can change, such as depths, ETA, other vessels, and weather. Finally, monitoring. Carry out the plan and monitor your progress. If something changes, make sure you review the plan.

There you have it. Lots to take in, but take it from us. Effective leadership or kind leadership makes for a safer, calmer, and happier ship. Always keep it in mind, and take every opportunity to offer help and lift each other up.