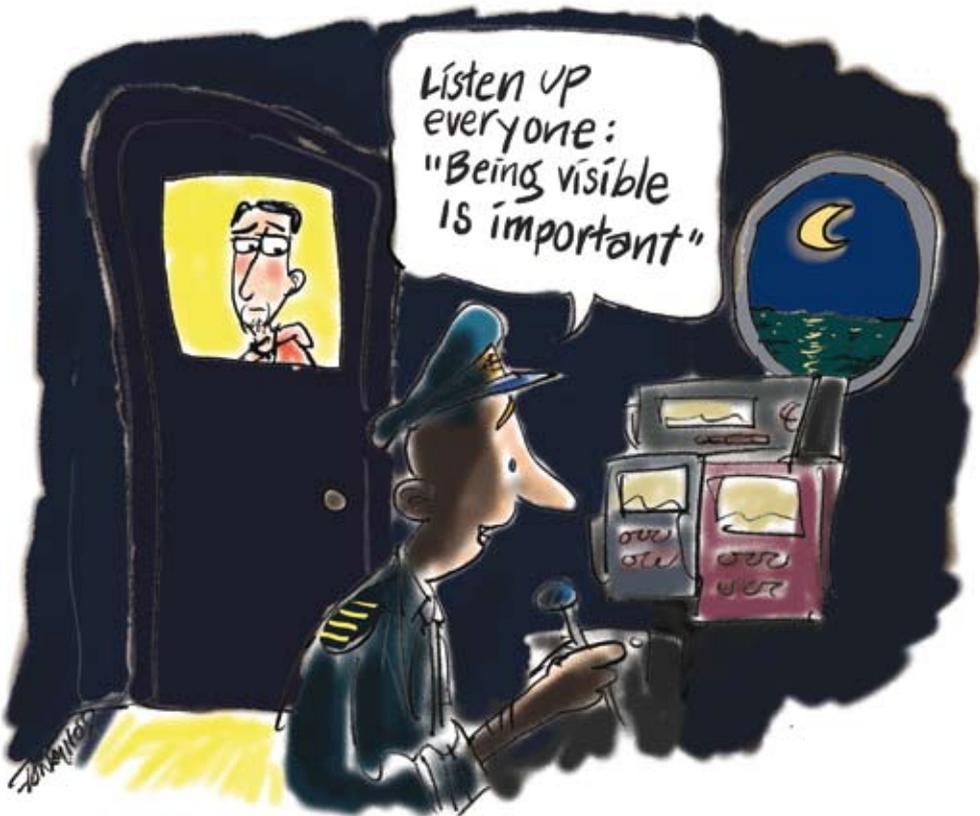


2. Communication and information



Communication and information are both important managerial tasks. Aboard a ship there are some special challenges: rotating crews, several nationalities and a service culture where there is no tradition for holding meetings. But there is an increasing need for communication. More and more managers are becoming aware of it and new media such as e-mail and the internet are becoming more common aboard.

Different ways of communicating and providing information

On Capt. Lars Peter Jensen's ship, they hold operational meetings, formal meetings for ship management and safety meetings where they review the ship's safety and focus on the working environment.

“ Communication aboard is extremely important. Both as regards giving crew information but also for talking together, communicating together so I know what is going on. And I cannot know everything happening in the workplace where I have 25 men who are together 24/7, so the chief officer and chief engineer keep me up to speed on the situation aboard, how far we have got with work and how crew are getting on with each other. ”

Lars Peter Jensen, Captain

Lars Peter also spends a lot of time going round the ship.

“ There is more chance of somebody coming up to me instead of going all the way up to the 12th floor to tell me something or other. It is easier for me to come and ask how things are going. I get to hear more. Visible management is most important for ensuring free communication about daily routines aboard. ”

Lars Peter Jensen, Captain

Capt. Hildur Friis also emphasizes the importance of communication and information.

“ It is about telling the crew as much as possible. ”

Hildur Friis, Captain



A quick meeting can be enough to get things sorted.

Hildur Friis uses e-mail to inform most of the crew. In the Filipinos' mess he posts information about loading, etc on the notice board. A Filipino officer also passes on Hildur's messages to the rest of the Filipino crew.

Steward John Jørgensen says how important he thinks it is that everybody aboard his ship can now view the day's messages between ship and shore.

“ *Why are we here, what time will we arrive and that kind of thing, which many people want to know.* ”

John M. Jørgensen, Steward

Otherwise the mess at teatime when you have a chance to talk to each other is where you often get to hear the more informal information – which prevents various unfounded stories from circulating.

▶ ▶ See part 2: Communication and information/
Worth knowing about meeting leadership ▶ ▶

Meetings can help focus on communication and well-being

Capt. Jens Evald Pedersen says that he has meetings if he thinks there is dissatisfaction aboard.

“ *Recently there was a little mumbling in the corners aboard. After I had spoken to a couple of people, I decided to have a meeting and called them all in. I started the meeting by saying that we should take turns around the room and that everybody would have the opportunity to say something good and something bad about being aboard. They were not to interrupt each other and they all had two minutes each to start with.* ”

Jens Evald Pedersen, Captain

The meeting brought various things that people had on their minds, mostly minor things, out into the open and we were able to discuss them and sort them on the spot. The crew thought it was an excellent way of tackling things because they had had the opportunity to say something and everyone had heard them.

“ *That cleared the air and that way I ensured that it did not escalate. Sometimes tiny things grow out of all proportion.* ”

Jens Evald Pedersen, Captain

▶ ▶ See part 2: Conflict management/
Preventing conflicts ▶ ▶

Misunderstandings and interpretation

Chief Engineer John Agathon has seen that when communications are bad, problems often arise from misunderstandings. We constantly interpret what happens and what is said about us. For example, imagine somebody coming into the mess and every-

body else stops talking. You can interpret that several ways. Does the talking stop because they are gossiping about the person, or is it because it is the guy's birthday in a couple of days and they are talking about the present they are going to give him?

“ There are many factors involved in how we choose to interpret things. If the crew aboard get along and know each other well, the way they interpret things will also be positive. For example, if someone forgets to say good morning when starting work, you might think "He must be busy" instead of, "So what's up with him?" ”

John Agathon, Chief Engineer

John Agathon urges crew aboard to be honest. He might well himself say that he has not slept at night or has just had a bill from the tax man so that the others know that is why he is out of sorts and that it has nothing to do with them.

“ So people can relate to that and know what it is all about. If I say nothing, it quickly becomes: "John is bloody miserable but then he always is. ”

John Agathon, Chief Engineer

Ground rules and communication

Gustav Schmidt Hansen's experience is that conflicts and poor communication between the various departments of the ship can be reduced if management makes clear statements or gives guidelines that people can relate to. On the last ship he sailed aboard, there were problems about what to watch on television. It was a big tug with six men aboard. They could regularly get Danish TV but the problem was who should decide what they should watch.

“ The captain reacted and said: "We'll watch the news at 21.00 and after that, we will take turns in deciding." It was also a matter of some of them feeling that they were more entitled to the remote controller and people failed to communicate clearly. It was up to management to speak out about this minor matter but it could quickly have got worse. There can also be other places where management need to take action and clearly communicate what they think and set guidelines. Then everybody knows where they stand. Not because it is we who should decide but simply to give a clear framework that people can relate to. ”

Gustav Schmidt Hansen, Engineer

▶ ▶ See part 2: Communication and information/
Ground rules for communication ▶ ▶

Linguistic challenges

Steward John Jørgensen thinks the fact that communication is in English can cause problems. He recently had a Filipina girl aboard to train her up in the galley. They spoke English together and both managed well but sometimes he doubted whether she had really heard what he said.

“She was clever and nice but sometimes I would say something and she would do quite the opposite. I thought what I had said was reasonably clear but even so we had misunderstood each other.”

John M. Jørgensen, Steward

One day when John Jørgensen came down to the galley, something had not gone as arranged. His female colleague had tried to sort things out but she could not. He asked why she had not called him and she said that she did not want to disturb him. But if she had called five minutes before, it could all have been sorted and John could have shown her how to do so.

“It is very much about daring to ask again or making it clear if we have not totally understood each other.”

John M. Jørgensen, Steward

John points out that it is at every level that people need to learn that there is nothing wrong in asking if they are not certain that they have understood each other correctly.

Difficult but necessary communication

Once in a while, communication is about passing messages that recipients do not like and will not be pleased to get. This kind of communication is also a management responsibility. Captain Hildur Friis has seen this, for example when criticising people's competencies.

“It is hard to ensure that people take a constructive view of criticism. My starting point is that people do their best but it could be that there are some things they need to work on and they need be told so.”

But it is not just the crew that need to know that they are attending to their duties satisfactorily. The captain also needs feedback on his way of managing the ship but the crew have to overcome some considerable barriers to do so and this calls for good arguments. As Hildur discovered when he asked for feedback from his Croatian first officer who felt he could not give an assessment of his skipper. He felt it was not up to him to do so.

“Then I said: I cannot change anything if I don't know about it.” He could see that and said it was actually a good argument, one he could accept. Communication is very much about daring to address each other the right way if there are things you do not understand or are not satisfied with.”

Hildur Friis, Captain

5 tips

- Focus on your communication. You will immediately see the effect of making just a minor change in the way you communicate.
- If you have to pass on very important information, get hold of the key personnel aboard and be absolutely certain that they have understood your message so they can pass it on.
- Remember that people sometimes only hear what they want to hear. You must ensure that they have understood what you want to happen.
- Use various channels when providing information to the crew – e-mail, notice boards and oral messages.