

7. Multicultural crew management



Having many nationalities aboard has become widespread on many ships. It imposes greater demands on communication and understanding of differences.

"Pretend"

Francisco Caquilala Cuervo is from the Philippines and is a chief engineer on an A.P. Møller vessel.

“ The most important thing I ever learned about management was "Don't pretend – please ask". It was well said. ”

Francisco Caquilala Cuervo, Engineer

Francisco says that many Filipinos pretend to know more than they actually do. They are very concerned about making a good first impression and think that the best way is to pretend they know everything. In the Filipino culture it is not done to show that one does not know things. It can cause a lot of problems aboard because then things are not done properly, they may take too long to do or can be directly dangerous if safety issues are involved for instance.

“ When I was a cadet, there were often situations when I said I could find out for myself or that I already knew how to do them. There are many things that you may have been shown once and then you feel that you can do them. But then it might be a month perhaps before you have to do the same thing again. You feel you have been told how to do it and so you don't ask even though you don't know what to do. ”

Francisco Caquilala Cuervo, Engineer

But at that time on Francisco's ship, you were expected to ask if in the slightest doubt, which he found was a tremendous help. It gave him the opportunity to learn something and what he did learn was that there is nothing wrong in not knowing everything.



Listen, try and ask – until you are sure you have understood each other.

Different reactions to the atmosphere

Capt. Hildur Friis was once aboard a ship with a mixed crew of Filipinos and a Croatian Chief Officer. It caused a lot of trouble.

“On the last tour, we had a Croatian chief officer aboard. Many East Europeans have a very tough way of talking to people, also to each other. But it is best to speak nicely to Filipinos otherwise they take offence.”

Hildur Friis, Captain

But the new chief officer bawled people out in public rather than talking to them individually. One of the consequences was that the Filipinos started to sabotage work by going slow and not getting started by themselves.

Hildur Friis dealt with the problem but if he had not intervened, it could have developed badly. The chief officer had started to talk about firing people because they had not done what they had been asked to do. He also said that the bosun was useless.

So Hildur Friis called the chief officer in for a chat about the problems even though he suspected that it would be difficult to change his way of speaking because Croatian seamen also spoke to each other that way, too.

Hildur drew the chief officer's attention to the fact that the bosun had been there for more than six months and there had never been problems previously. They also talked through some of the consequences for example of not getting the best work out of the Filipino seamen if their expectations for another way of being addressed were not taken into account.

“He really learnt something because the atmosphere was much better after just a short while.”

Hildur Friis, Captain

Francisco says that there are differences between the temperament of Danes and Filipinos. A Dane may be miserable one day but OK the next. But Filipinos can nurse their grudges for a long time and sometimes practically all their lives. So if there is a conflict, it can become very serious.

“So it is specially important to ensure that problems get sorted or otherwise they can suddenly pop up again even a long time afterwards when management perhaps believed that everything was alright.”

Francisco Caquilala Cuerdo, Engineer



Different cultures see things differently. So it is especially important to be aware of communication.

Interpreting the hierarchy differently

Helle Barner Jespersen, chief officer of the sail training vessel Georg Stage, relates another episode illustrating the possible challenges of having several cultures aboard.

This involved a young man from Africa who was aboard as a cadet. He very much wanted to be a seaman and was highly focused on a career in the sector. He had lived in Denmark for many years and spoke good Danish.

He came aboard in a group with lots of surplus social energy. There were many good cadets and they joked a lot with each other. It was all about being one of the group and laughing at the same jokes. But he did not laugh at their jokes and he could not be bothered to sit and chat after meals. He thought it was a waste of time and Helle had complaints about his not wishing to join in.

Some of the other cadets had also told him that there were some jobs he had not done which he was actually required to do. These were cadets who with the best possible intentions took responsibility for everyone and the group.

“ *But he was enormously affronted that someone of his own rank should come and tell him what he should and should not do. It was clear that our Danish upbringing with its flat structure gives some challenges in merchant shipping where there is the more hierarchal structure that also applies in other countries.* **”**

Helle Barner Jespersen, Chief Officer

It can also cause offence if you just go and tell other people of the same rank what they should be doing or whether they are doing it the right or wrong way, even though it is well meant.

The young man then responded rudely and there was trouble. It was a difficult case because Helle could not get him to say what the problem was. The answers he gave reflected her higher rank and were not honest.

“ *It can be difficult when we have rings on our sleeves to accept that he wouldn't say anything to anybody before you almost forced him to. He did not want to bother you with his problem. So if you want to spot a problem, you need to be smart and in any case be proactive in identifying it.* ”

Helle Barner Jespersen, Chief Officer

They found out aboard that it was best to let a male quartermaster talk to the young man. It worked well, probably because he was slightly senior to him in the hierarchy but not so much.

“ *It is about finding what creates trust in the crew. It is also something to do with chemistry and if there are conflicts, especially multicultural ones, you need to look around and ask yourself who can talk to this person, who can start a dialogue. Because everybody can tell you what you want to hear but then you do not necessarily get the problems sorted.* ”

Helle Barner Jespersen, Chief Officer

Accidents, language and cultural differences

Ensuring that you understand what other people mean when you have to work closely together can be a major problem aboard. Especially when it comes to safety.

Steward John Jørgensen tells the story of an accident that occurred in the engine room because someone believed that he had understood the other person. There have been episodes of people dying because of linguistic misunderstandings.

“ *What we Danes may think is logical is not necessarily logical for a Thai or a Filipino. Without its being anybody's fault, this is one of the challenges of different cultures.* ”

An accident occurred during maintenance in the engine room. Someone had lifted some deck plates and most people would think that it would be natural to erect barriers to prevent people falling into the hole. But the Thais had not been told to do so. The First Engineer had just said that the deck plates should be lifted and asked them to ensure that everything was fixed. He thought that his orders also included barriers but the Thais only did what they had been directly ordered. And then someone came walking along and fell four metres. John feels that this happened because of differences in language and culture.

“ *Our culture is that as a Danish officer you expect people to think about safety measures as well but a Thai who comes aboard will have been told to do exactly*

as he is told. They will do it well and quickly and then sometimes compromise on some safety measures or just not think along those lines. There are some major challenges in communicating this kind of thing clearly. ”

John M. Jørgensen, Steward

Food is also part of the culture, so with several cultures aboard it is also a challenge for the stewards. John thinks it is exciting but that sometimes it can lead to some stress.

“ *The first thing I ask when we get new crew aboard is what religion they are. If they are Muslims, I take that into account. I have to make sure that they also naturally get something to eat, such as fish or beef but it is a challenge because I also may have Hindus who don't eat meat.*

I sometimes have Hindus who only eat vegetables but not those that have been in soil, only vegetables that have been hanging such as tomatoes and cucumbers. That makes it difficult to make food but it is an exciting challenge to put them all in the same framework. On the other hand, cake in the afternoon is international. They all want the same thing then. ”

John M. Jørgensen, Steward



Arrange events so everyone can join in.

Taking a structured approach to each other

Helle Barner feels that special efforts should be made to make a good start when there are several cultures aboard.

“ *You can have a small induction course or meeting aboard to introduce everyone, hear a bit about their background, what they are expecting and what they have*

done previously. Then we know who we are working with. You might also discuss what good seamanship means, what makes a good workmate and how to have a good trip together. ”

Helle Barner Jespersen, Chief Officer

Helle emphasizes that the crew must have the questions in advance and they should not have to answer them in writing. It can provide the opportunity for greater common understanding and perhaps also understanding that we look at certain essential things differently.

“ *We have no culture in common and it is easy to misunderstand each other. With a mixed crew, the captain faces this challenge every day. What do they mean by the expressions they use, the things they say and the messages they give? Is there any basis for common understanding? Ensuring this is a colossal task. ”*

Helle Barner Jespersen, Chief Officer

▶ ▶ Se Toolkit section:
Multicultural crew management ▶ ▶

5 tips

- It is important to know how different cultures think and what concerns them.
- With many nationalities aboard and very different skills levels, the competencies of individuals need to be assessed without setting the level too high.
- One of the major challenges aboard is to avoid misunderstandings due to the language and cultural differences. Consider whether there should be people to translate important messages from English to avoid misunderstandings.
- Make crew aware of how you would like to have things aboard – for example that people should ask if they are in doubt about something and not pretend that they know everything. Show in practice that it is important to ask when in doubt.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different cultures aboard and how you can make the best possible use of this.