

Fleet Officer's Seminars as a Part of Lifelong Learning Process

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ABSTRACT: Going back to the beginning of 90-ies of last century before the present STCW-78/95 Convention was established the shipping industry relied on Maritime Education and Training Institutions for well-educated and trained seafarers. Every shipowner simply employed seafarers that his ships needed and the relevant Minimum Safe Manning Certificate required. Generally speaking MET Institutions were the only Institutions responsible for initial and following education and training of seafarers.

The last decade in the shipping industry has been marked by plenty changes and quick development in different directions. One of the directions is improving the quality of seafarer's education and training, knowledge and skills as well. The obligatory competences in STCW-78/95 Convention are not enough for shipowners and they try to extend the education process outside the Convention's requirements and recommendations. It is a well known and more and more spread practice for Shipowners to organize and perform meetings with officers and engineers working on board their vessels. Such meetings get publicity as Fleet Officer's Meetings (FOM) or Fleet Officer's Seminars (FOS). The meetings or seminars are performed at least on a yearly basis but it is the Owner's decision to establish the agenda and the scope of the topics.

The usefulness of the above mentioned events is visible enough and it is easy to understand that the applied efforts are not time wasted. The question is whether the companies can perform such kind of training and whether their lecturers and instructors, who are usually part of the office staff, are ready to deliver their experience at an acceptable level. It has to be highlighted that it is not a rule that good professionals as Masters and Engineers are always good lecturers and trainers.

This article describes the summary results of the authors' experience in participating as a fleet officer and as an assessor in fleet officers' seminars. The article makes a SWAT analysis of such events and shares experience as a conclusion. The author gives his personal collaboration to the lifelong learning process in the shipping industry. The article makes an attempt to open the door to the co-operation between the shipping industry and MET Institutions at a higher level after the seafarers' graduation in their MET Institutions.

1 INTRODUCTION

Seafarer's education and training is based on STCW-78 requirements. The convention is constantly and quickly developing in order to meet the permanent challenges of the shipping industry. The effective shipping companies try to get maximum knowledge

and experience from their officers and engineers applying a lifelong learning system. One of the profitable ways is the performance of Fleet Officers' Meetings sometimes named Fleet Officers' Seminars.

The International Safety Management Code and its implementation in the shipping industry challenge

ship owners all around the World to improve the training and the skills of their seafarers. Paragraphs 6.4 and 6.5 require “the company to ensure all personnel involved in the company’s safety management system have an adequate understanding of relevant rules, regulations, codes and guidelines” and “the company should establish and maintain procedures for identifying any training which may be required in support of the Safety Management System and ensure that such training is provided for all personnel concerned [2].

The realization of the abovementioned requirements is in the form of annual seminars, depending on the Company SMS, with all seafarers’ participations. Of course, the seminars are organized in a different manner for seamen and officers because of the different topics, problems and responsibilities concerned.

Today, more of the companies employ multinational crews on board their vessels. The management strive for a multiple effect – on one hand to use the seminar for education and training of the officers and engineers in the spirit of IMO requirements and on the other hand to apply the company policy in order to implement the company common spirit and standards. Although Fleet Officer’s seminars are not compulsory as per STCW, shipping companies spend money and time to organize such events. In this way the management introduces itself to seafarers, keeps a close quarter cooperation between officers in the company network and it is a good opportunity for exchanging experience between the management and seafarers. A further long-term benefit for all parties is to live and work in a common environment with specific company spirit.

This paper is focused on the way of organizing and performing Fleet Officers’ Seminars and summarizes the advantages and weak points of such events.

2 TOPICS AND LECTURERS

When browsing the Internet everyone can find information regarding Fleet Officers’ Seminars, carried out by many shipping companies. A brief description of the organization, topics, lecturers and venue is also posted, usually in the websites of companies. Plenty of pictures are shown, many of them in the form of slideshows and in this way the webpage seems to be completed. Every visitor of the website of some shipping company, searching for information in this respect, can conclude that the information is confidential. But this is not completely correct.

For many years the seminars have been organized and carried out following the same pattern. The company advertises the time for the performance, considering the schedule and the capacity of a certain local recruitment office. All seafarers, who are signed-off on shore are notified by phone and e-mail about all the details concerning the event.

Usually the Seminars take two or three days. The topics in the agenda are a summary of the company sea practice. The round table deals with:

- Quality, safety, security and environmental matters;
- Recent changes to International Maritime Conventions and Codes;
- Technical Management with special focus on the technical implementation of International conventions [1]
- Leadership’s problems; Mentoring and many others.

Usually the topics are chosen at the last moment, just before the seminars. One of the shipping companies was honest to confess that the Branch Committee had met during the year to discuss the topic at a half-day seminar, wanting to find something new to talk about, something that had not been discussed before [3]. The following conclusions can be drawn from reading it:

- 1 The FOS is not preliminary planned and topics are not in the Company schedule.
- 2 The Company will improvise with invited speakers.
- 3 A risk exists for the prepared materials and presentations to be not fully understandable and interesting for participants.

The most spread practice for determining FOS involves the Company Safety Department. Topics originate from company business. It is a well-known fact that in every shipping company there are many cases of safety violations leading to incidents or accidents. Those company’s management has always something fill up the schedule.

The next step is to engage a speaker, usually from other offices belonging to the Company. They get a task to prepare a suitable topic and a presentation. It is not a good practice for presentations to be prepared by somebody who has different experience out of the Safety Department and especially if he is not a seafarer. Furthermore, presentations are used several consecutive years. Such weak points are always in the focus of the participants and cause discouragement.

Some speakers are boring and speak with inappropriate voice. Thus it is very difficult for the participants to focus their attention and to keep listening to the speaker. Obviously the speaker lacks experience as an instructor or lecturer and does not possess specific techniques for attracting the participants’ attention. In such cases the common rule that a good Master or a good Engineer is not necessarily a good Lecturer is corroborated. In such a gap between high professionalism and teacher’s skills for sharing the experience is the place of Maritime Educational and Training Institutions (MET) which can provide their help and assistance for Global Shipping.

The modern MET Institutions try to attract professional Masters and Engineers, who are ready to change their scene of contribution. Such Lecturers have professional and scientific experience, accumulated during their professional career and are the best choice for solving the abovementioned problems. The close quarter cooperation between Shipping and Education is a step in the right direction

for the recognition of Lifelong Learning as a necessary practice in shipping companies.

3 POSITIVE PRACTICES AND MOST COMMON ERRORS AND WEAKNESSES.

The authors of the present article have experience in participating in FOS, carried out in the companies of their service as Officer of the Watch and Chief Mate. They have shared their experience as FOS assessors at the time of their Professor's career in MET institutions in Bulgaria and Romania.

The following positive practices can be shared and confirm the necessity of LLL during seafarer's sea service.

The hall used for the event has to be in every respect enough for all participants despite their number. Additional equipment has to be used to give a chance to the participants to read the slides of the presentations and to hear the explanations of the lecturers.

It is very important for the time schedule to be followed strictly. Thus the discipline of the auditory remains at a high level, close to the vessel's spirit and the seafarers do not have a feeling of wasting their vacation time.

In order to impose company spirit the tutors have to use a common language of communication with the participants in the seminar based on the regulations and requirements of the company as a whole and to use common criteria for evaluation as well. One of the main goals of FOS is to bring up the seafarers in company safety culture, company values and company belonging.

It is recommended that Deck Officers and Engineers participate in the seminar together. Everybody has to be in charge of and familiar with the company goals. Such a practice also establishes preconditions for team work in the spirit of IMO Manila Assembly 2010.

It is very important for lecturers to present their materials at a very high level. Advance preparation is important and a must for both sides – tutors and participants. Any compromise will bring the seminar to another, lower level as professional event. It is recommended that tutors do not confine to the limit of the presentation but extend the topics with examples from their practice increasing their authority among the participants. Establishing a good communication between tutors and seafarers is very fruitful in order to predispose the participants to be open minded and active during discussions. The tutors shall follow strictly the schedule and shall try to use the time rationally.

During presentations give the participants a chance to share their experience by answering questions. All participants must be provided with the necessary materials as scripts and questionnaires for the workshop.

We have to confess that despite the experience of the Companies' Management some discrepancies were observed.

- Presentations were not prepared by the tutors. Because of this they improvised and read from the slides during the presentation, which left the impression in the participants that tutors were not fully involved in the FOS.
- The instructors did not point at a particular participant for answering the questions asked by them during workshops.
- Some presentations contained information which was not part of the tutors' professional topics. In such cases the tutor was not ready to discuss the information and it was noticed by the participants.
- Sometimes tutors spoke very silently and with unclear pronunciation. It is difficult for the participants at the back to understand what the tutor was talking about.
- The tutors delivered part of the presentations at an academic level which is suitable for students but not for professionals.
- The hall was not suitable for the event and was not suitable for interactive communication. If part of participants are sitting with their backs to the tutors the effect of the discussion decreases.
- Interactive education and communication was not used enough.
- Some presentations contained small print which was not suitable for reading, especially from the participants at the back.
- The tutors work with a small part of the participants during exercises which makes the other participants feel isolated.
- When tutors explain a particular case, no examples from international documents, IMO resolutions and requirements, supporting the theory were used.
- The instructors did not explain clearly to the participants their duties during the discussion of a case and what was expected from them.
- The instructors did not explain clearly the goals in every case and what the expectations from the participants were at the respective workshops.
- The prepared exercises were too long. The instructors did not analyze the results of exercises after them.
- No cases from the Company practice were included in the syllabus of the meeting for analyzing and studying.

The above mentioned and other discrepancies are common problems for many events such as Fleet Officers' Seminars. In such initiatives the close quarter cooperation between education and practice can improve the process of LLL on mutual basis. Such co-operation is very easy to be achieved when a Shipping company asks a MET institution for participation in an event at the same level as FOM and FOS. The teaching staff is well prepared for delivering topics

for beginners, for the intermediate level and for Masters, as well. Some speakers from the maritime business, despite their practical skills and experience, lack teaching skills. Actually this gap can be filled by lecturers from MET institutions.

4 CONCLUSION

The main goal of LLL is to keep trainees up to date by means of continuous studying and participating in events organized by the shipowner. FOS can be studied from at least three perspectives: pedagogical, organizational, and technical. Bearing in mind that organizational and technical aspects are directly dedicated to the person in charge in the Company, we can discuss the pedagogical aspect as a wide area of co-operation between the shipping business and MET institutions with mutual benefit.

Within the context of lifelong learning it is necessary to maintain continuous co-operation at personal level between the Company management and the teaching staff from MET institutions. An

important requirement for lifelong learning is that the results of the common activities and development of both sides have to be filed for later use in the form of a Company - MET institution network. The stakeholders in this endeavor are many and diverse: cadets – new officers, teachers and staff at maritime academies and shipping companies' personnel.

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