

Mentoring & the Transfer of Experiential Knowledge in Today's Merchant Fleets

Introduction – Thank you for the kind introduction. I am André Le Goubin a serving seafarer, I am currently working as a Mooring Master with AET out on the Gulf of Mexico having decided to return to sea last year after 8 years ashore in Houston, Texas working as a Marine Consultant. I am here today as a member of the Nautical Institute and where I am taking part in their project to promote the reintroduction of mentoring at sea, as an essential part of seafarer training, and as a cost effective way of reducing accidents and incidents.

Through this presentation you will see a number of pictures of accidents and incidents, those are in there not only to help you stay awake as I do appreciate the time of day but also as a gentle reminder of how serious lack of knowledge onboard ship can be. You see.....

For many years I harbored the idea that an underlying cause of marine accidents and incidents onboard today's vessels was due to a lack of knowledge that was traditionally passed from one to another, by mentoring. I decided to research this and in 2006 commenced a master's research degree into the subject.

The purpose of my research was to show that a contributory factor to the occurrence of marine accidents, was experiential knowledge (knowledge gained from professional 'on the job' experiences and reflected upon) not being transferred from senior to junior officers onboard modern merchant navy vessels by mentoring; to identify the barriers that are preventing this transfer of knowledge, and then to provide practical suggestions that will help re-establish the flow of knowledge. In addition, it was (and still is) my aim to engage the maritime community in a conversation about mentoring and the transfer of experiential knowledge, for although one may not agree with what I am saying, the very act of disagreeing is engaging and is raising the conceptual profile.

Before we move on let us look at a few definitions I will be using:

Experiential Knowledge—I have defined this as knowledge gained from professional 'on the job' experiences and reflected upon. This knowledge can come from a wide variety of sources or experiences but, in my opinion, it often has the most impact when it comes from an accident,

incident or near miss; however it does need to be reflected upon before it can become experiential learning.

Mentor-The Oxford English Dictionary describes a Mentor as *'an experienced and trusted adviser'* and sources the origin of the word as *'from the name of Mentor, the adviser of the young Telemachus in Homer's Odyssey'*. In the context of this presentation I simply define it as the possessor and distributor of experiential knowledge.

Mentoring-*'Mentoring is a form of knowledge transfer based in part on altruism'* Davenport T. & Prusak L. (1998). I like this definition as, for me, it sums up the unselfish act of knowledge transfer that I myself benefited from in my early days at sea. For the purpose of this presentation, I have followed this theme and defined mentoring as *'the act of sharing knowledge without a designated reward'*, which definition in itself has caused a certain amount of debate, but I believe it suffices.

Reflection – *'A thoughtful (in the sense of deliberative) consideration of your experiences, which leads you to decide what the experience means to you.'* Institute of Work Based Learning. (2008).

And when we put that all together a true moment of experiential learning becomes an *'I remember when moment'* that we are so fond of, (sometimes stemming from an *'Oh **** moment'*) but a moment where we have gained experience, later reflected upon it and are now in a position to pass that experience on. I have benefited from this type of experiential knowledge transfer throughout my career to date, even now I frequently learn from other people's experience

According to Steve Trautman in his book *'Teach What You Know'* *'Up to 70% of skill is learnt from experience'*. It is this maritime skill pool that I believe is not being passed on in the way it used to, by mentoring and this, in some cases, is leading to the accidents and incidents. With this in mind, and having determined, by questionnaire that insufficient experiential knowledge transfer is considered to be contributing to accidents and incidents, I went on to research what is considered to be the most significant elements contributing to this lack of professional knowledge in today's Merchant Marine.

I must be honest; when I began this research I expected to see the now common themes of, application of collision regulations, standard of certification training and reliance on electronics,

to name a few, to be the most prominent response to the question I posed; *'what, in your experience, is the most significant lack of knowledge, that leads to accidents and incidents?'* These expected responses did occur, but not as a significant number, approximately 53% of my responders cited elements that I have collectively grouped as, lack of 'feel', seamanship, intuition, practical knowledge and experience.

But what are these responses actually referring to? As one put it, *'Whilst much can be taught at college about 'seafaring' it has to be complemented by practical advice from senior personnel, however for the advice to be understood the recipient needs to have (for want of a better word) a 'feel' for seafaring.'*

In the sense the verb 'to feel' is synonymous with 'to experience,' I believe that these responders are articulating the same lack of experiential knowledge that I am referring to now in this presentation.

It is not something tangible, nor is it a subject that can be taught in college, although the concept should be addressed and the candidates encouraged to participate in experiential knowledge transfer. It is, as one of my former consultant colleagues so sagely puts it *'those gems of wisdom that are passed on during an operation, and that consolidate theoretical knowledge.'*

So having determined that there is a problem. What can we do about it? Firstly, we need to identify the barriers that are preventing the traditional transfer of experiential knowledge.

I am sure during the course of this evening there will be much discussion on what are the barriers that are preventing mentoring and, in my opinion, there are many. But today I want to just discuss just one, before we turn to what we can do to help the situation.

In my opinion, the greatest barrier is language.

I believe that language barriers are the greatest hurdle that we have to overcome to re-introduce and encourage mentoring on today's merchant ships and something that should be addressed at the highest levels. Everyone is meant to be able to communicate in a common language, usually English, and this is a required standard on board vessel however, in my experience, this is not always the case and little is done to ensure that seafarers can communicate with each other. This is probably the only critical industry that allows this. Can you imagine an aeroplane

where the Captain could not talk to the First Officer as they spoke a different language – inconceivable!

As I have undertaken an ethnographic style of research into this over the years, one thing I have come to realise that the problems seem to be far more prevalent on vessels with two nationalities rather than those with many. This is, in my opinion, due to the necessity to communicate in a common language on a multi-national crewed ship, whereas with those of just two different nationalities, there is a tendency for each nationality to communicate in their mother tongue and to only converse between the two in a common language when necessary, in essence, de-voiding the vessel of any social communication between the nationalities. This can lead to all sorts of problems.

Having accepted that language barriers exist then we need to consider what can be done to overcome those barriers and bear in mind this is primarily about mentoring but I do believe that many problems onboard today's merchant fleet can be overcome by sorting out the language barriers.

The main advice that I can give to vessels is for the staff to practice at every opportunity where it is safe to do so. Yes, there will be times where they need to communicate in their own language to make sure that their instructions are fully understood but they need to try and limit these occasions as much as they can, and certainly try and keep social communications in a common language. Of course, what people do in the sanctity of their cabins is entirely up to them!

If you are in a position to, please encourage your Masters to insist that a common language is spoken in the mess room that everyone understands and be very strict about this. It will probably not be popular at first but in time I am sure that most will see the benefit and you will reap rewards.

The same can be done in the engine control room when everyone meets for a drink or a cool off during the working day. Even if they can't discuss the technical issues of what is taking place they can chat socially. Traditional conversations among seafarers lend themselves so well to a common language whatever your nationality!

I am sure many of you are now thinking, this all sounds great but what are the benefits of reintroducing mentoring on ships, what is in it for me and my company? Especially as I have

already suggested that there is no designated reward! First and foremost, it is free! And believe me I know how important that is in today's economy. It doesn't take up much of a seafarers time, most mentoring can be undertaken during the normal course of onboard duties and should never take more than about 10 minutes extra, the time it takes to smoke a cigarette or drink a cup of coffee. It requires no legislation, formal procedures or paperwork (except for my book!) and did I mention IT'S FREE! and requires no regulation.

Just a caution here to those of you who may be thinking of formally incorporating mentoring into say the ISM. DONT!! Mentoring is a system of knowledge transfer that needs to be encouraged, not mandated. In my experience, insistence on this taking place will lead failure, very rapidly.

Is it too late? A question I am often asked. It certainly is a challenge, especially when it is the most senior officers that lack the experiential knowledge. But on the plus side it is a problem that can be solved and where anyone can instigate change, whatever their position. I respectfully challenge everyone to engage in this conversation, to reflect on the vast amount of knowledge that you have and to take a few minutes out of your busy schedules to pass a piece of it on. It does not have to be much, but it may just be that *'gem of wisdom'* that makes the difference in somebody's life.

Consider also the experiences that you have had in your life to date, some are good and some are bad, but the knowledge that comes from those experiences can only ever be good. I personally believe that, as masters of our various trades, we have a traditional duty to pass on our knowledge through mentoring (or whatever you want to call it) and to put something back into our community of practice that has given us so much.

By re-introducing mentoring onboard modern Merchant Navy vessels we will be introducing a methodology of knowledge transfer that is as old as seafaring itself and this will, in my opinion, sail us in to a far brighter future.