

LONDON BRANCH

Mentoring seminar

A joint evening meeting on board the HMS Wellington introduced three speakers looking at the theme of mentoring, and what it means for those both aboard ship and on shore. David Squire FNI, chairing the discussion, outlined how mentoring has changed, from advice given on an informal basis to the more formalised approach today. Andre Le Goubin, author of the NI's *Mentoring At Sea*, emphasised that anybody can act as a mentor, at any stage in their career. He made a convincing case for the reintroduction of 'snapshot mentoring', which need take no more than ten minutes. Andre said he had relied greatly on this kind of mentoring when returning to sea after several years ashore. However, it is vital that people are aware of the barriers that prevent mentoring;

- Demands on time – solved by seeing mentoring as something which need take no more than 10 minutes
- Rapid promotion
- Language barriers – particularly on ships with crews that have crew who are predominantly of one nationality, excluding those who do not speak the language of the majority group. Mixed crews are more likely to use a common language to communicate.

Kubz Szymanski took a more detailed look at some of these barriers, including the increasing pressure on ship's officers, and related blows to their esteem. In particular, he said, mentoring could be seen as learning from other people's experiences – and mistakes – but this is difficult in a culture where owning up to any mistake is likely to see a Master removed from his post.

The final speaker, Chris Haughton, outlined the differences between mentoring and coaching. While there are no hard and fast definitions of the terms, in general, mentoring is seen as having hand-on knowledge or experience, whereas a coach may have no direct experience of the coachee's job, but can facilitate problem-solving through skills that they already possess. Coaches should be trained and members of a recognised professional body, but anybody can be a mentor – and indeed, it could be seen as a professional duty to do so.

A lively discussion from the floor followed. Members asked how, if mentoring is not to be made mandatory, it can be encouraged in an industry that increasingly under time pressure. Andre again emphasised that mentoring need take no more than 10 minutes, and could be integrated into the daily shipboard routine. This could mean talking anecdotally to the officer of the watch about lookout, for example. Chris Haughton commented that one of the most effective levers to encourage mentoring is seeing the change that results in terms of increased efficiency and enthusiasm.

Members were keen to share their own experience of mentoring, and of being mentored, ranging from learning at four in the morning over a beer, to the more formalised long-term schemes offered by the Honourable Company of Master Mariners (HCMM), to the scheme operated by one of the pilots' associations, which relies on mentoring as the major method

of training for its members, and without which 'we'd be snookered'. The HCMM currently has 150 young people taking part. Mentors are not expected to answer all the apprentice's questions, but to provide support where it is needed, and to refer the mentees to someone who can answer specific questions where necessary.

Trevor Bailey FNI asked whether mentoring was an inherent skill, or whether it is something that can be taught. Andre commented that while some people are probably better at it than others, this is no reason not to try. Chris added that the key quality needed in a mentor is that they have to want to act as a mentor. That given, there are many things that can be done to facilitate the role. While some people may view knowledge as power and be reluctant to share it – and some may be resistant to learning in this way – attitudes can be changed, and there are many people that could, and should be persuaded to try it.

Picking up Andre's point that you can be a mentor at any stage of your career, Glenys Jackson, head of the UK's Merchant Navy Training Board, highlighted the way in which second voyage cadets will pass on their experience at sea for those awaiting their first voyage, including what to expect at sea and how to cope. These cadets are likely to continue acting as mentors throughout their careers, she said, suggesting that training colleges have a major role to play in developing the mentoring ethos.

David Patraiko emphasised that Andre's book is only the start of the conversation, and that all branches should be encouraged to develop this.